“That Trilby was just a singing-machine—an organ to play upon—an instrument of music—a Stradivarius—a flexible flageolet of flesh and blood—a voice, and nothing more—just the unconscious voice that Svengali sang with—for it takes two to sing like La Svengali, monsieur—the one who has got the voice, and the one who knows what to do with it.”

—George Du Maurier, Trilby

By 1898, Dracula, with its vision of a magical man who enters onto unwelcoming soil through an automatized woman, is reworking the basic outlines of a story already made extremely popular in George Du Maurier’s Trilby (1894). Svengali seems to hail from Austria, yet he is principally ethnically marked (and maligned) as Jewish; his origin is the “mysterious East.”[1] His mesmeric powers allow him to transform the ingénue Trilby into the world-famous La Svengali, who produces harmonies whose intricacies he grasps implicitly but is incapable of vocalizing himself. With her as his instrument, he realizes his fantasy of overpowering even the most exalted figures of Western society. “Svengali will go to London himself. Ha! ha!” he gloats early on, sounding something like Dracula. “Hundreds of beautiful Englännderinnen will see and hear and go mad with love for him—Prinzessen, Comtessen, Serene English Altessen. They will soon lose their Serenity and Highness when they hear Svengali!”[2] His sudden death turns Trilby’s London performance into a fiasco, but before then he succeeds in enrapturing many a “personage” in Paris and elsewhere, compelling their worship through her voice.[2]

Svengali’s accomplice, Gecko, cannot pinpoint the “singing-machine” that Trilby’s “unconscious voice” reminds him of. As the recorder of Svengali’s knowledge, which then plays back that knowledge acoustically, her unconscious resembles none of the apparatus Gecko runs through so much as it does the phonograph.[4] That Du Maurier should think of this machine as female may come as little surprise given the Victorians’ tendency to think of females—typists, operators, séance mediums—as machines. But the gendering of the phonograph in Trilby also has something to do with the operation it allegorizes, hypnotism. In an 1890 essay in the Quarterly Review titled “Mesmerism and Hypnotism,” the author observes, “By placing one hand on the forehead and the other on the neck, the patient is transformed into a ‘veritable phonograph,’ giving back with perfect exactness every sound uttered by the [hypnotist].”[5] Both
hypnotism and the phonograph deal in the recording and reproduction of information; the unconscious mind, tapped by the hypnotist, doubles the phonograph’s retentive wax cylinder. Popular, as well as medical, lore identified women as the better subjects for this process, for about the same reasons as held true in spiritualism: women’s inherent sensitivity and relative lack of personal agency helped them to become unconscious easily and to succumb to the suggestions of the usually male hypnotist, who was often described as imposing his own will on another. Because late Victorians saw women as ideal hypnotic subjects, and hypnotism on the model of the phonograph, it was probably only a short leap to imagining the phonograph as a woman. . . .

In literally delving into the unconscious mind, hypnotism raised numerous questions about our subterranean connections to other people, worlds, and times. This chapter examines repeated images of the recording unconscious in Du Maurier’s novels as they enable him to explore these connections. I am centrally concerned with how the phonographic unconscious becomes a means for his fictions to look ahead to the future.

In Trilby, this translates as an engagement with aspects of the modern. Du Maurier is writing on the threshold of a new century, and his contemplation of modernity through recently invented media is at bottom a contemplation of mediation itself. This author was obviously fascinated by burgeoning media: all three of his novels feature characters who become unconscious channels between distinct periods, places, or individuals, with some progressive communication method offered as the analogue of their accomplishment. Phonographic Trilby becomes a figure for probing new turn-of-the-century criteria for artistic production, especially the popularizing potential of mediation and its effects on capitalistic as well as aesthetic value. The novel can seem remarkably prophetic for the issues it raises about the role of popular media in the modern world. We are still replaying La Svengali’s song and wondering how it resonates with us today. . . .

Automatic Song and the Enamored Crowd

The automatic behavior at the heart of La Svengali’s performance is central to Trilby’s view of art in a rapidly changing social and commercial environment (one contemporaneous with the novel’s publication though not its action). . . . Once recorded, the phonographic woman’s vocalization of her creator’s influence is potentially limitless; hence, it becomes the basis for any number of marketable reproductions. It is through these, Trilby’s many packed shows, that Svengali acquires his pricey furs and the three thousand pounds he leaves unbequeathed at his death. Her song is what Walter Benjamin would have called an artwork susceptible to mechanical reproduction, an industrial-age artwork. Yet importantly, it succeeds by looking each time like an auricular creation. Her audience is touched to see her approach stage front and “put her hand to her heart quite simply and with a most winning natural gesture, an adorable gaucherie—like a graceful and unconscious school-girl, quite innocent of stage deportment.”[6] Trilby behaves in a way that seems momentary, “natural,” off-the-cuff, but Du Maurier’s reference to the “unconscious school-girl” slyly gives the game away. Each of her recitals, though seemingly unique and ephemeral, has actually been carefully fashioned by Svengali to be, automatically, an equally stupendous production every time. The origin of Trilby’s song looks obvious (Trilby herself), but it is really obscured and incidental, as Benjamin affirms to be the case for mechanically reproduced works of art generally. Moreover, to all appearances, Trilby basks in the ardor of her spectators, returning the warmth of their gaze “with her kind wide smile,” but in truth her gaze is sightless.[7] The automaton cannot reciprocate another’s regard and so cannot enter into a dynamic with her audience, a fact that—as with the film actor performing before a camera instead of a live audience—deprives her of the aura that embraces the stage performer: “To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.”[8] Finally, Trilby’s implication in the mechanisms of industrial art becomes most clear when her image, with all its apparent tenderness, is photographically reproduced and sold for the benefit of her devoted audience: “A crowd of people as usual, only bigger, is assembled in front of the windows of the Stereoscopic Company in Regent Street, gazing at presentments of Madame Svengali in all sizes and costumes. She is very beautiful—there is no doubt of that; and the expression of her face is sweet and kind and sad.”[9]

But my aim here is not to affirm Benjamin’s theory
of mechanically reproduced art by supporting it with more evidence. Rather, I want to suggest the historicity of such theories: Du Maurier’s novel fictionalizes developing media in ways that can help us to recognize and analyze how their social milieu conditions suppositions about their impact. That Trilby shares features with Benjamin’s work results from the fact that both are meditating on the effects of modernity, technology, and capitalism on art and artistic reception; absorbing dominant conceptions of gender; and figuratively relating the one to the other. As I will be arguing, Trilby forecasts later assessments—among other respects, in implying the feminine qualities not just of the popular (popular art and social formations) but of popularizing media themselves.

Incidentally, phonographic Trilby is not the only feminine medium in the novel. Her rabid audience is one as well. Their “frantic applause,” “ecstatic delight,” and increasingly “wilder enthusiasm” all signal a class leveling and a generalized hysteria (one renowned composer in the audience is explicitly described as quite “hysterical”). This is, once again, the mass incarnation of the automatic woman that shaped ideas of the crowd—of a social body devoid of personal rationality and governed by emotional response. On one level, this incarnation attests to Andreas Huyssen’s claim that crowd theory exemplified a turn-of-the-century tendency to see mass culture as feminine (and degraded). On another level, it betokens that the crowd was an instrument of communication, in which members shared states of mind, emotion, and sensation. Hence the quasi-telegraphic metaphors that crop up in descriptions continuing into the twentieth century. In his own writings, Benjamin clearly evokes a circuit running through the dense traffic of the urban center: “Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery. Baudelaire speaks of a man who plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy.” Becoming part of the crowd means experiencing a feminine neuro-electrical sensitivity to one’s surroundings.

Critics have often noted Trilby’s intimation of the crowd and Svengali’s representation of the mesmerically persuasive demagogue. But I would emphasize that Svengali’s demagoguery is not direct: it absolutely requires the mediating presence of Trilby. When he fantasizes early on about enthraling the highest strata of English society, he thinks he can achieve this goal by his own devices: “He will be all alone on a platform, and play as nobody else can play.” But as it turns out, Svengali will not be able to succeed alone on a platform. Because he is “absolutely without voice, beyond the harsh, hoarse, weak raven’s croak he used to speak with,” and in order to ingratiate himself with people who snub him as a grimy “blackguard,” he must operate through Trilby, for reasons that have as much to do, as we will see, with her femininity as with his ethnic difference.

With the expansive reach of her song—which expands the scope of Svengali’s self-publicity and cultural invasion—Trilby is effectively a broadcast or mass medium, combining the power to record information with the power to disseminate it. As an instrument for amusement, the phonograph itself would thrive as a mass medium. But in its early years, when it could not only reproduce but also record, and when it exhibited a certain functional “plasticity”—its principal communicative modes not yet solidified through habituating social and institutional practices—the context for its usage was envisioned quite differently. Edison and other designers mainly saw it as an alternative to the stenographer’s shorthand—a Victorian synonym for which, phonography, sums up its historical link to the phonograph’s method of inscribing sound (in the case of shorthand, the human voice). As a trade journal editor observed, a particular value of using the phonograph as a dictating machine was that it would “becom[e] a confidential agent whenever secrecy may be required.” No need to worry about how mechanically the stenographer did her work when an actual machine could replace her. However, the market for office phonographs never took off. Instead, the success of publicly installed coin-operated machines that replayed songs and other diversionary bits gradually revealed that people most appreciated the phonograph as a source of entertainment. One noteworthy facet of Trilby’s phonographic performance is that it combines the technology’s originally intended use with its eventual one: Svengali’s medium takes dictation and also reproduces it for others’ recreation.

Seen in another light, it is not just music that Trilby...
communicates but the mesmeric state itself. By her enchanting song, she passes on her own fascination to her audience.\[21\] And through the audience’s response, Du Maurier’s novel theorizes, if obliquely, the natural affinity between mesmerism and capitalism.\[22\] In the first place, as the scene before the Stereoscopic Company in Regent Street implies, La Svengali—her mesmeric song and, metonymically, her self—is a product that can be bought and sold.\[23\] Her first onstage appearance to Little Billee and his friends is as a long-haired beauty “like those ladies in hairdressers’ shops who sit with their backs to the plate-glass window to advertise the merits of some particular hairwash.”\[24\] From her redolence here and at the Stereoscopic Company of commodity culture, to Svengali’s riches and the house conductor’s promise to the audience just after her disastrous London performance that all “the money would be returned at the doors,” Du Maurier never lets us forget the commercial stakes of Trilby’s performance.\[25\] In the second place, the consumer appeal of that performance is inversely dramatized as a kind of mesmerism. When they encounter La Svengali, even her most lofty fans are prostrated and, as Sarah Gracombe aptly puts it, “feel spontaneously compelled to hand over their wealth,” surrendering the very jewels off their necks.\[26\]

Even though we rarely articulate them as such, the conceptual links Trilby offers still shape our considerations of our buying habits. We are essentially debating just how mesmeric popular commercial practices are when we enter into lawsuits about the effects of tobacco advertisements and fast-food menus: exactly what degree of control does one have over his or her own will in the face of such allures? In a related manner, Trilby’s broadcast performance prefigures and exaggerates the modern tendency to link mass communication to mesmeric domination.\[27\] Many marketers frankly capitalize on the notion that mass media promise an escapist loss of self. Mesmerizing and hypnotic are surely some of the most commonly used adjectives for promoting a new film or book.

Exploiting the Friendly Medium

What is particularly intriguing about Trilby and has yet to be examined is its implicit presentation of mediation as a crucial factor in creating popularity, in entrancing mass consumers. The medium, Marshall McLuhan famously declared, is never merely neutral. Similarly, it is the way art is transmitted that Du Maurier’s work reflects as an up-and-coming and powerfully enthralling force. This is a novel intensely conscious of popularity and its mechanisms—hence perhaps its own extraordinary success first in the United States, where it was originally published, and then in England. Hence also the spate of products, adaptations, and parodies that came after it, inspiring what is becoming a critical commonplace about Trilby, that “the story reflects, disturbs, interacts with, its own overblown reception.”\[28\] American psychologist Boris Sidis wrote of the public’s fascination with the book in language that recapitulates its own sinister mesmeric events: “Who can tell of all the crazes and manias—such, for instance, as . . . the Trilby craze . . . —that have taken possession of the American social self?”\[29\]

One significant way in which Trilby induced the love of the public had to do, as holds true within the novel itself, with the mediatory presence between artist-creator and audience. This achievement in mediation is legible in the context of turn-of-the-century developments in author-reader relations. As Barbara Hochman has argued, throughout most of the century, readers had essentially equated novels with the authors themselves, as if sitting down to read were like chatting with a friend, and authors had cultivated this perception through warm “I” narrators and direct addresses. But by the late 1800s, the rise of a large, diverse reading populace encouraged authors’ retreat from the narrative and, by extension, from readers about whose identities and motives they had become more uncomfortable. Contributing to this sense of distance were new copyright laws that separated the text from its author as a possessable property, along with the increasing intermediary participation of editors and agents. Under all of these circumstances, Henry James and others began to formalize an impersonal, “objective” mode of realist narration in which characters and situations speak for themselves, and to rebuff as aesthetically inferior fictions that suggest the author’s hovering presence. At the same time, many readers were turned off by Jamesian diffidence and perpetuated a wide demand for close author-reader relations within the text.
Consequently, the late nineteenth century produced—alongside the development of highbrow realist fiction—numerous popular fictions, often romances, that continued to imply the author’s immanent personality. Hochman’s account of the fortunes of the “friendly” narrator revolves around the American scene, but we can track similar shifts in British-authored texts. These also, of course, tended toward chummy narration during the nineteenth century. According to Patrick Brantlinger, though, the growth of literacy in Victorian Britain, coupled with the “capitalization and industrialization of publishing,” bred a lack of confidence in the reportedly indiscriminate, pleasure-seeking novel-consumer, making novelists throughout the period apprehensive about their audience. This, too, Garrett Stewart asserts the contortion and eventual fading, especially in Modernist texts, of the Victorians’ familial direct address due to authors’ increasingly uneasy attitude toward their audience. By the late 1800s, industrial and democratizing forces were exerting a decisive pressure on literary forms, and high art was progressively cordoned off from the low.

Hochman points to Trilby, which had its first big success in the United States as a serial in Harper’s Monthly, as an example of a work that maintained the trope of friendly narration and thereby offered a popular alternative to more off-putting literary styles. The degree of intrusiveness of the book’s narrator is extraordinary, as she observes, generating a sense of community between Du Maurier and the reader. However, she sees a very different type of interaction with one’s audience in the character of Trilby: because the heroine’s mesmerism means she is never self-present while performing, her audience experiences nothing like the intimacy implied in the book’s own figure of the “friendly author-narrator.” But I think the apparent contrast between Trilby the novel and Trilby the performer disappears once we view certain elements of the situation more closely. For one thing, to compare Trilby’s performance to Du Maurier’s authorship is misleading because Trilby is not really analogous to an author—is not herself a creator. Rather, she serves merely as a creator’s (Svengali’s) medium. For another thing, although Hochman’s hyphen conflates them, an author is not necessarily identical with his or her omniscient narrator, even when the author uses the first person to give the appearance that this identity exists. Instead, Trilby and the friendly narrator are both mediating figures that produce a certain artistic effect—both instruments that transmit, like the phonograph or typewriter, but also crucially construct the “message”—and that effect is a sense of emotional togetherness that facilitates a popular reception.

Importantly, even if Trilby lacks self-presence while performing, her audience cannot perceive this; for them she really is looking back at them with her hand to her heart, reaching out to them through her song, and it is in large part this intimacy that enters them. Like other writers of his day, Du Maurier underscores the mediating woman as a carrier of sympathy: “But her voice was so immense in its softness, richness, freshness . . . and the seduction, the novelty of it, the strangely sympathetic quality!” Once she has “saddened and veiled and darkened her voice,” even an “absurd old nursery rhyme” becomes for her listeners “the most terrible and pathetic of all possible human tragedies, but expressed . . . by mere tone, slight, subtle changes in the quality of the sound—to too quick and elusive to be taken count of, but to be felt with, oh, what poignant sympathy!” Much of the account of Trilby’s Parisian concert dwells on the various states of breathless compassion she inspires in her listeners en masse, often for the characters about whom she sings. Her rendition of “Malbrouck s’en va-t’en guerre,” for instance, contains a “note of anxiety . . . so poignant, so acutely natural and human, that it became a personal anxiety of one’s own, causing the heart to beat, and one’s breath was short.” The pathos of Trilby’s song and of her “dove-like eyes” is so potent that it suddenly cures Little Billee of his strange affliction of emotional indifference: “something melted in his brain, and all his long-lost power of loving came back with a rush.” But the pathos itself has a spurious source. Hardhearted as the novel shows him to be, Svengali certainly does not share his audience’s sentiments, even while engineering his medium’s affect to produce the greatest commercial impact.

Something similar is going on in Du Maurier’s relation to his readers, although that situation may not have fully manifested itself until after the fact of the book’s success. On the one hand, his friends remarked with pleasure on the resemblance of Trilby’s narrative voice to his own manner of talk, a resemblance that gave the book an “easy
“It is a lingering question of how much Du Maurier himself understood the lucrative potential of and deliberately fabricated, as Svengali does, an open-hearted mediating voice. Of relevance here are James’s memories of attending a lecture by Du Maurier on Punch illustrators, part of a tour Du Maurier began in the early 1890s, just before his drafting of Trilby. What most impresses James about this lecture in retrospect is that Du Maurier seems to have “lighted on” just the right manner for “addressing the many-headed monster” that was his audience:

“He had just simply found his tone, and his tone was what was to resound over the globe; yet we none of us faintly knew it . . . As this tone, I repeat, was essentially what the lecture gave, the best description of it is the familiar carried to a point to which, for nous autres, the printed page had never yet carried it. The printed page was actually there, but the question was to be supremely settled by another application of it. It is the particular application of the force that, in any case, most makes the mass (as we know the mass,) to vibrate; and Trilby still lurked unseen behind . . . Ibbetson . . . The note of prophecy, all the same, had been sounded . . . The game had really begun, and in the lecture the ball took the bound that I imperfectly indicate. Yet it was not till the first installment of Trilby appeared that we really sat up.”

James accentuates Du Maurier’s “familiar” “tone” in the lecture as a “prophecy” of the style that would later ensure Trilby’s ability (figured in a way reminiscent of the mesmeric rapport) to make “the mass . . . vibrate.” But noteworthy in this context is the revelation that this seeming affability could coexist with basically mercenary motives: prior to the passage quoted above, James has said that the lecture tour was primarily a money-making venture that Du Maurier undertook for the support of his family and “loved . . . as little as possible.” James claims in the course of his anecdote that Du Maurier was unaware of the particular aptness of his tone, but would this really have been the case? After all, Du Maurier had by this time shown himself in his cartoon work for Punch to be sharply perceptive of social desires, whims, and conventions, and it is also worth recalling his penchant for lampooning them. At the limit, we can conjecture that his mechanically smiling diva mocks the reality that entertainment with mass appeal requires not so much a genuine community between artist and audience as the performance through some convincing medium of such a consensus. Trilby’s image of the frenetic reception of the singer’s audience already implies this parodic take on the popular.

So does the note of self-consciousness that begins the narrator’s account of Trilby’s free-loving past:

“She had all the virtues but one; but the virtue she lacked . . . was of such a kind that I have found it impossible so to tell her history as to make it quite fit and proper reading for the ubiquitous young person so dear to us all.

Most deeply to my regret. For I had fondly hoped it might one day be said of me that whatever my other literary shortcomings might be, I at least had never penned a line which a pure-minded young British mother might not read aloud to her little
blue-eyed babe as it lies sucking its little bottle in its little bassinette.

Fate has willed it otherwise.

Would indeed that I could duly express poor Trilby’s one shortcoming in some not too familiar medium—in Latin or Greek, let us say—lest the Young Person (in this ubiquity of hers, for which Heaven be praised) should happen to pry into these pages when her mother is looking another way.

Latin and Greek are languages the Young Person should not be taught to understand—seeing that they are highly improper languages, deservedly dead—in which pagan bards who should have known better have sung the filthy loves of their gods and goddesses.”

The readership is assumed here to be feminine (daughters or young British mothers), menacingly widespread (characterized by “ubiquity”), and ignorant of high culture (immune to Latin and Greek), and the narrator’s exaggerated wish to satisfy them gives the passage all its irony. As Du Maurier implies, one must sometimes go to ridiculous lengths, such as writing in a dead language, to find a “medium” for telling the story that will cater to the straitened sensibilities of a bourgeois audience. The ironic tone likely would not have escaped his readers, who may have even found it amusing, but that effect would have only redoubled the satirical paradox. The narrator exhibits not only sensitivity but also charm, all the while deriding the necessity for doing so.

Du Maurier’s use of narrative voice and style as an affective common ground with the reader recalls Marie Corelli’s self-identification with A Romance of Two World’s first-person narrator, which she uses to speak more directly to her audience and thereby to cultivate a “sympathetic union.” In these two authors, we see applications of the narrator’s position as a medial one, as a means for an emotional extension connecting author to reader and a way to craft reader response. We also see that authors can implement this tool more or less opportunistically. It is noteworthy that two writers whose careers begin to carve out modern notions of the bestseller depict mediating acts within their works that remind us of the linguistic mediation of the works themselves, a mediation helpful to their popularity. And that the narrator’s channeling role is doubled and personified within both writers’ stories by female characters points up the perception that communicating feeling and intention between parties is best reserved for women.

False Womanhood and the Popular Medium

Whereas Corelli focuses on the sensitive channel as an authentic moral agent, Du Maurier focuses on her manufacture: his portrait of La Svengali highlights the gap between what she seems to feel for her audience and the secret dishonesty of that feeling. This fraud—another instance of the automatizing villain’s defilement of his victim’s capacity for sympathy—translates as a perverted femininity. From her audience’s perspective, the singer embodies femininity in what is reputedly its most caring state: her voice is like “a broad heavenly smile of universal motherhood turned into sound.” But what they do not know is that at bottom this motherhood is a horrific parody: the only thing phonographic La Svengali really reproduces is Svengali. Du Maurier drives the point home in one of his final illustrations for the novel. Trilby has just received Svengali’s photograph in the mail, and though he has already died, his image propels her into a trance, complete with a rendition of Chopin’s Impromptu in A flat. The theme of reproducing Svengali, already implied in the plot detail of his photograph, is reinforced by Du Maurier’s caption, which renders Trilby’s reiterative trance utterance: “Svengali! . . . Svengali! . . . Svengali!” That Trilby, not the camera, has been the principal recording and reproducing instrument of Svengali is stressed by her facial expression and physical position: while these presumably depict her mesmeric rapture, they also call to mind a woman in the agonies of childbirth. Her clustering friends are powerless to stop the debilitating song generated by Svengali’s psychic rape.
La Svengali’s make-up also indicates the mendacity of her feeling. Even as her voice explodes with maternity, her reddened lips and cheeks hint at a merely “artificial freshness.” Later, when Little Billee spies her on the street, she is “rouged and pearl-powdered, and her eyes . . . blackened beneath, and thus made to look twice their size.” She wears sables, yet cuts him with a “little high-pitched flippant snigger worthy of a London barmaid.” Like the comparison to the barmaid (which James’s In the Cage also exploits), the clash between La Svengali’s finery and her coarse laugh conveys the meretriciousness of the prostitute, and in turn her empty affections. As opposed to the original Trilby—who loves if too bodily and freely, at least “for love’s sake only” and with an honest “gaiety of heart and genial good-fellowship”—automatized Trilby only imitates love, for a price.

Mesmerized Trilby’s deceptive shows of love make her, symbolically, the most stigmatized of Victorian women—a sham mother; a whore—with the tendentiousness of the symbolism registering how much loving sympathy was revered as a feminine trait. But that kind of gendering does not stop with the Victorians, and by extension, we can hear the strains of Trilby’s suspicious representation of mass media echoed in later writing. There is something suggestive of a reified intimacy or sympathy in Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura, an idea of a community of the viewer with the artwork and, through it, with humanity and tradition across the ages. (And this is true whether that affirmation of tradition is valued positively or negatively.) This is presumably what Benjamin means when he states that auracual artwork seems to gaze back: the gaze is really the viewer’s seeming access by means of the work to a responsive human impulse from the past. By contrast, photographic art erodes the experience of seeming mutual recognition due to the interposition of a lifeless instrument: “What was inevitably felt to be inhuman, one might even say deadly, in daguerrotypy was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze.” For Benjamin as for Du Maurier, the failure of sympathy inherent in the process of mechanically reproduced art becomes a sexually loose but emotionally inaccessible woman. Benjamin insinuates that idea analogically through his explication of the poetry of Baudelaire, who reportedly dwells on the difference between, on the one hand, an intimate gaze and, on the other, an only empty stare:

“In eyes that look at us with a mirrorlike blankness the remoteness remains complete. Baudelaire incorporated the smoothness of their stare in a subtle couplet:

Plonge tes yeux dans des yeux fixes
Des Satyresses ou des Nixes.
[Let your eyes look deeply into the fixed stare
Of Satyresses or of Nymphs.]

Female satyrs and nymphs are no longer members of the family of man. Theirs is a world apart. ...[The poet] has lost himself to the spell of eyes which do not return his glance and submits to their sway without illusions.”

The “sway” of the satyresses and nymphs is, of course, their sexual allure—a poor substitute for authentic sympathy (a place within the “family of man”). The utter “remoteness” of their eyes whets desire while precluding the possibility of genuine affective fulfillment. The only time the deadened eyes of these women “come alive, it is with the self-protective wariness of a wild animal hunting for prey. (Thus the eye of the prostitute scrutinizing the passers-by is at the same time on its guard against the police.)”

In such a context, it is not enough to say that mass culture is a woman. Mass culture is a false woman: one whose demonstrations of love are superficial and sordid. By definition, popular art unifies,
producing a state resembling sympathy among its audience. Yet the feelings generated in this experience need not refer back to a sincere human origin but are rather a potentially rootless, illusory effect produced by modern media themselves—their powers of imitation, manipulation, and dissemination. Furthermore, the unification of the audience through the work is likely to be ephemeral, as much so as a harlot’s tryst, giving way easily to other sources of gratification, for instance, the next bestseller. One could point to any number of ingredients in the production of mass art as they contribute to this situation, but Benjamin’s and Du Maurier’s writings both play up the specious charm of the medium it-/herself.

Yet finally it is worth emphasizing that Trilby is also particular to its historical moment. Even if the novel’s depiction of reproductive media resembles Benjamin’s, the two perspectives also fundamentally differ for the basic reason that Du Maurier is writing some forty years earlier, when these technologies were less common and, moreover, easily yoked to interests in the occult, which obviously color the major drama of his novel. Trilby is caught between, on the one hand, a prescient sensitivity to how a medium like the camera underwrites worldly commercial ventures (like those of the Stereoscopic Company) and, on the other hand, an awe at its seemingly phantasmal creations. Recall in this light the episode in which Trilby receives Svengali’s photograph. As the narrator tells us, the mesmerist seems to be “looking straight out of the picture, straight at you,” with his “big black eyes . . . full of stern command.” Is this another case, as with Trilby onstage, of a medium whose fake gaze only seems true? Or has this photograph somehow really attained to the status of auracular art? Probably neither is quite accurate. I think it is most likely that the camera has simply managed to transcend the boundary between life and death. In shifting in this scene from Trilby’s phonographic reproduction of Svengali to a photographic one, Du Maurier takes advantage of the camera’s Victorian reputation for capturing the departed. Just as “spirit photographs” when developed suddenly seemed to exhibit ghostly contours, this picture renders Svengali’s gaze so compellingly because he himself really is occultly present in this artifact, entrancing Trilby from beyond the grave.

Importantly, he is able to do here what—postmortem then as well—he failed to do during Trilby’s last debacle of a concert. There, although seated in a box directly in front of her and staring back at her, he could not induce her to sing one good note. But here in the photograph, he achieves all the glory of her Chopin’s Impromptu. The difference in effects conveys, in the first place, Svengali’s preference, as a cultural outsider who repels in person, for mediated acts of captivation: he has always worked most spectacularly by working through—in this case through the photograph. But there is, further, the implication of some special power in the camera itself to lay hold of personality in a way the mortal body cannot. At the turn of the century, reproductive media facilitated theories that defied a mundane understanding of humans’ existential and perceptual limits.

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[3] Ibid, 188.

notes Trilby’s phonographic demeanor; she implies that Du Maurier is a kind of automatic writer whose mechanistic production of pulp melodrama, like Trilby’s performance, confounds attempts to pinpoint authorial agency; Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 212–13.


[10] Ibid, (194–95)


[18] On phonography/stenography as a means of sound recording, see Gitelman, Scripts, Grooves, chap. 1.


[23] Trilby thus bears a remarkable resemblance to a slightly earlier novelist heroine, Verena Tarrant in Henry James’s Bostonians (1886). Verena is billed by her father, who styles himself a mesmerist, as an inspirational speaker; as Richard Salmon has shown, moreover, different characters wrangle over her as a celebrity-commodity and vacant channel of seemingly intimate speech. Henry James and the Culture of Publicity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), chap. 1. In 1889, Du Maurier offered the plot of Trilby to Henry James before penning it himself (Ormond, George Du Maurier, 413), yet it is arguable that James had already written his own version of the story.


[32] “Given the philistinism and hypocrisie of the mass lecteur, it came to seem beneath literature’s dignity to enter into even the pretense of dialogue
with such a constituency. The insistence on literature’s inherently closed form can thus . . . be construed as a retreat from the mass contamination into art’s impregnable fortress”; Garrett Stewart, Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 150 –51. For Stewart’s later analysis of Trilby as a staging of feminine emotional absorption in the act of reading, see 352–56.

[33] Hochman, Getting at the Author, 68.

[34] Thus the quick-selling stereoscopic photographs of Trilby become a metaphor for her onstage demeanor: just as the stereoscope—a viewer through which an image appears to take on three-dimensional form—creates the illusion of depth out of flatness, so does her mesmeric performance.


[37] Ibid, 196.

[38] Ibid, 192-193.


[40] Quoted in Purcell, “Trilby and Trilby-Mania,” 68.


[43] From the preface to Trilbyana.


[46] This secret of the novel brings to mind a tension Ivan Kreilkamp notices within Victorian fiction, between a mythically authentic, humane storytelling voice and the modern developments (including the invention of the phonograph) that threatened to erode this voice. See Voice and the Victorian Storyteller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).


[50] Ibid, 189.

[51] Ibid, 213.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid, 33.

[54] For a discussion of aura as an agent of human empathy and community, and of Benjamin’s alternate longing for it and welcome of its loss in the face of less fascistically traditional forms of art, see Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds., The Essential Frankfurt School Reader (New York: Continuum, 1982), 209, and generally 208–12.

Ibid., 190; translation in original.

It is worth clarifying that Benjamin seems to use the term “distance” differently. The auricular artwork exhibits a distance from the viewer by virtue of its “ceremonial” aspect—its association with the sacred and the traditional—yet Benjamin implies that that distance is in some sense bridgeable by sympathetic interconnection. Total “remoteness” is, by contrast, unbridgeable. See ibid., 188–90.

Ibid., 190–91.

I mean to describe the seeming harlotry of mass media or communication in particular, rather than of modern technology in general. For the latter argument, see Huyssen, who claims that Fritz Lang’s Metropolis figures technology as a vamp in order to convey men’s anxieties about their ability to control it; After the Great Divide, chap. 4. See my reading of Rudyard Kipling’s “Wireless” in chap. 5 of The Sympathetic Medium for a related exploration of eroticized electricity and male responses to it.

Du Maurier, 259.

Interestingly, Benjamin’s theory allows for this possibility, in his mention of early portrait applications of photography: “The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face” (“Work of Art,” 226). But the aura of photography dwindled, he says, as portrait photography lost ground to other uses of the medium.

On spirit photography, see the photographic history in Clément Chéroux et al., The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).