

# M/C Journal: A Journal of Media and Culture

Volume 7, issue 1, Jan 2004

## 'Magic Bits of Paste-board'

### Texting in the Nineteenth Century

Esther Milne

*To the unrefined or under-bred person, the visiting-card is but a trifling and insignificant piece of paper; but to the cultured disciple of social law it conveys a subtle and unmistakable intelligence. Its texture, style of engraving, and even the hour of leaving it, combine to place the stranger whose name it bears in a pleasant or disagreeable attitude, even before his manners, conversation, and face have been able to explain his social position (1920 etiquette manual quoted in Curtin 138).*

1There's a scene in the '90s TV series *Ab Fab* where Eddy, stumbling from her car, fresh from Harvey Nicks and tipsy on Bolly, shouts into her mobile 'it's ok Bubbles, I'm coming into the office now' as she enters the office. When it first aired this was a wry comment on the vacuous, superfluous nature of new communication technologies. Now, it's like 'so what?' Why not attempt to convey constantly the banal minutiae of the every day? Indeed, what troubles the technological verisimilitude is not that Eddy desires absolute proximity but that she's not texting. In these days of 'intensive propinquity' (Kang 2002), however, it is easy to overlook the fact that telepresence—text's uncanny power to stand in for the corporeal body—has a long history. Indeed, one such precursor to today's technologies of telepresence would undoubtedly appeal to Eddy and Pats. In this paper, I want to consider the extent to which the British eighteenth-century visiting card conceptually, culturally and materially anticipates a range of contemporary technologies of propinquity. Acting as complex cultural avatars, these visiting cards conveyed the desires of class and gender in the construction of identity.

2The British pictorial visiting card of the early eighteenth century developed from the practice of using playing cards as visiting cards, the caller's name being inscribed on the back of the playing card. In the mid eighteenth century the custom of using playing cards as visiting cards was replaced by cards manufactured for the express purpose of notifying those with whom one wished to make contact. At first these cards, printed on 'stout paper or thin

card', were relatively plain, except for 'an ornamental frame of tasteful design' that surrounded the edge thus leaving the centre blank so that the caller could write their name. Soon, however, visiting cards were being printed with illustrations. These cards commonly left room for a short message in addition to the caller's name (Staff 10). By the latter part of the eighteenth century, most visiting cards carried elaborate designs which varied according to the taste, hobbies or professional interests of the intended consumers. For those connected to the military, for example, there were cards illustrated with swords, cannons, flags or a person in uniform was depicted. Cards left by recent callers were commonly displayed in special receptacles on mantelpieces or small tables so that visitors 'had a chance to see whom the family numbered among its social circle and be suitably impressed' (Pool 66).

3At the close of the eighteenth century, the highly illustrated visiting card gave way to an understated and smaller format. No longer pictorial, visiting cards of the nineteenth-century, as Maurice Rickards notes, were 'reticent' in style and 'espoused sobriety' in typography and design. Victorian culture took seriously the materialities of visiting card practice as the exchange and expression of symbolic capital. As Rickards explains:

*In Britain, the etiquette of typographic style and layout was rigorously observed: the wording was engraved; printing was in black, card colour was white. A man's town address appeared in the lower left-hand corner, his club on the right .... Unmarried daughters living at home did not have cards of their own. They appeared compendiously on their mother's cards (351).*

4Visiting cards demonstrate the rich prehistory of contemporary technologies of telepresence in terms of the imaginative, symbolic and rhetorical functions they performed. Telepresence can be defined as the degree to which geographically dispersed agents experience a sense of physical and/or psychological proximity through the use of particular communication technologies. Like many of the media forms they anticipate, visiting cards were used to stand in for the corporeal presence of their author. As a late nineteenth-century etiquette manual explained: 'the stress laid by Society upon the correct usage of these magic bits of paste-board, will not seem unnecessary, when it is remembered that the visiting card ... frequently is made to take the place of one's self' (quoted in Davidoff 42). Visiting cards functioned as avatars of presence and identity, a complex language system which allowed the discursive agents to mediate social relations according to the varying degrees of intimacy that were desired. As long as all parties could read the codes and conventions, the level of acquaintanceship could be increased, maintained or decreased. For example, if one wanted to 'put an end to an unsatisfactory acquaintanceship', help was, literally, at hand. Instead of the 'intolerable' practice of 'cutting' – the procedure of pointedly refusing to recognise a person with whom one formerly had been in close contact – one would slowly reduce the time spent calling to the minimum length required. 'After this', advises an 1897 guide called *Manners for Men*, the gentleman 'may leave cards once more without asking if the ladies of the family are at home. In this way he can gradually and with perfect courtesy break off the intimacy' (quoted in Curtin 144).

5But communication might sometimes break down inadvertently. A participant's failure to interpret the signs correctly could have unpleasant consequences. Because of this, etiquette manuals warned that servants be instructed on how to observe the difference between calling and card leaving. The intricacy inherent in the semiotics of 'speaking by the card' is demonstrated by the role servants were expected to play. Protocol demanded that a call was answered with a call and a card by a card. Returning a call with a card could be interpreted as a snub. In some cases that was the intention of one of the participants; leaving a card instead of calling in person was an easily understood gesture intended to scale down a particular acquaintanceship. However, it might just be a mistake. One of the many complications adhering to the practice of calling and leaving cards was that one could not assume the person to whom a card belonged had, in fact, 'called' upon one. As Michael Curtin explains:

*In practice, cards very often substituted for calls since the person receiving the call was not at home. In this case, a card equalled a call, though there was a complication. Since ... cards were delivered in person, one who meant to leave cards was easily confused with another who called but merely left cards because no one was at home (141).*

6The first problem, then, is how the caller deploys the card and how the receiver interprets this action; to what degree does the card stand for the physical presence of the caller? Even in the pre-Barthesian era, authorial intention was problematic: did the caller intend to see the person on whom they called or did the card stand for a less intimate mode of communication? Further complicating matters were the servants. Unlike Wilkie Collins' depiction of a passive and neutral butler bearing a visiting card—'waiting not like a human being who took an interest in the proceedings but ... like an article of furniture' (85)—many etiquette manuals warned that servants were actively involved in the chain of communication. Servants, as Curtin outlines, often went to call in place of their 'mistresses' and 'therefore should be exactly instructed as to their mistress's wishes, whether to call or to leave a card'. Likewise, 'those servants who answered the door should be made to understand this distinction, to inquire into the caller's intention' and record this in writing (141).

7Visiting cards reproduced divisions of class by regulating the public and the private. The finely nuanced signifying system of these cards addressed only middle-class and aristocratic participants. For the middle classes and the aristocracy, privacy was the inherited right which visiting cards sought to protect. Those of the working class, as Davidoff argues, had to accept that their homes could be entered at any time by members of the 'superior' class, who would walk in and 'at once become involved in the life of the family by asking questions, dispensing charity or giving orders' (46).

8If the visiting card was significant as a medium of telepresence, enabling subjects to imagine, desire, fear or forestall each other's presence, in 1854 this function was enhanced with the addition of a photographic image. The carte-de-visite reworked and conflated the technical, formal and social uses of

both portraiture and the visiting card. Distinguished from the older types of visiting card by being smaller in dimension, usually measuring 4½ x 2½ inches, the *carte-de-visite* also carried a photographic print which was affixed to the cardboard of which it was made. Mediating the performance of identity in new ways, cards now visually depicted their bearers:

*Thus for a ceremonial visit, the print would represent the visitor with his hands imprisoned in spotless gloves, his head slightly inclined, as for a greeting, his hat resting graciously on his right thigh. According to etiquette, if the weather were bad, an umbrella faithfully reproduced under the arm of a visitor would eloquently declare the merit of his walk* (quoted in McCauley 28).

9The role played by the *carte-de-visite* in the performance of gender is emphasised by an 1862 article on 'flirting' which warned that a woman would be so branded 'if she be lavish in the distribution of her *carte-de-visite*' ('Flirts' 163).

10The *carte-de-visite* was also an important element in the production of celebrity and the emerging commodity culture. While functioning as a visiting card, the particular topics and scenes represented on the *carte-de-visite* meant that it became a popular object to collect and display. Often depicting royalty, politicians or military leaders, this new mode of portraiture, as an 1862 newspaper put it, made 'the public thoroughly acquainted with all its remarkable men' to the extent that 'we know their personality long before we see them' (Wynter 673). The *carte-de-visite* familiarised the famous and made famous the familiar:

*The commercial value of the human face was never tested to such an extent as it is at the present moment in these handy photographs. No man, or woman either knows but that some accident may elevate them to the position of the hero of the hour* (Wynter 673).

11Although invented to modernise the existing visiting card, the *carte-de-visite* neither replaced the older version nor was it used solely for calling. For the bourgeoisie, argues McCauley, the *carte-de-visite* album became a 'faddish parlour amusement' (48). As an enabler of telepresence, the *carte-de-visite* seemed to promise future generations an intimate knowledge of their distant ancestors. It would collapse time, bringing history into the present. As one nineteenth century journalist remarked, 'it is very pleasing to have one's relatives and acquaintances reunited in an album ... you converse with them, it seems as if they were there beside you' (quoted in McCauley 48).

12In general, the literature on presence, virtual presence and telepresence limits its historiography to an examination of electronic media (for example, Goldberg, Sconce, and Sobchack). As this paper has suggested, what's needed is research that focuses on those forms of analogue textual culture that, functioning as avatars of corporeality and presence, might be regarded as fabulous.

## Works Cited

- Kang, Kathy. 'Intensive Propinquity and Style', paper delivered at the Fibreculture Conference, November 22 - 24, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2002.
- Collins, Wilkie. *The New Magdalen*. 1873. Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton, 1995.
- Curtin, Michael. *Propriety and Position: A Study of Victorian Manners*, London: Garland, 1987.
- Davidoff, Leonore. *The Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season*, London: Croom, 1973.
- 'Flirts,' *The Living Age*. 74 (1862).
- Goldberg, Ken, ed. *The Robot in the Garden: Telerobotics and Telepistemology in the Age of the Internet*, Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2000.
- McCauley, Elizabeth Anne, A. A. E. Disderi and the Carte de Visite Portrait Photograph, New Haven: Yale U P, 1985.
- Pool, Daniel. *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist: The Facts of Daily Life in Nineteenth-Century*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.
- Rickards, Maurice. *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian*, ed. Michael Twyman, New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Sconce, Jeffrey. *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- Sobchack, Vivian. 'The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic "Presence"'. *Materialities of Communication*. Ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, trans. William Whobrey. Stanford: Stanford U P. 83 - 106.
- Staff, Frank. *The Picture Postcard and its Origins*, London: Lutterworth, 1979.
- Wynter A. 'Cartes De Visite,' *The Living Age*. 72 (1862).

## Citation reference for this article

### MLA Style

- Milne, Esther. "'Magic Bits of Paste-board'" *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* <<http://www.media-culture.org.au/0401/02-milne.php>>.

### APA Style

- Milne, E. (2004, Jan 12). 'Magic Bits of Paste-board'. *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture*, 7, <<http://www.media-culture.org.au/0401/02-milne.php>>