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Chapter Two

Visionary Media in Edgar Allan Poe and Edogawa Rampo

William O. Gardner

In his essay “The Phantom Lord” (1936), Japanese author Edogawa Rampo (1894–1965) describes the literary author as a lord over of a “land of dreams” and proposes a clear division between the dream world of fiction and the world of actual events. Indeed, Rampo paraphrases the narrator of Poe’s “Berenice” with the following: “for me the daylight world is but an illusion; the dreams of night are real.”¹ Furthermore, regarding Rampo’s detective fiction, he claims that “there is no relationship whatsoever between real events and my detective stories. They occupy completely different worlds” (151). In its privileging of the imagination, Rampo’s essay seems to be a guileless restatement of Romantic aesthetics. His writings as a whole, however, reveal a fascination with the materiality of media that destabilizes the very division between reality and dream, a division that his essay ostensibly supports; this seeming contradiction generates the effects of unease, horror, and thrill that distinguish Rampo’s work. Moreover, the fascination for media expressed in Rampo’s writings provides an intriguing viewpoint from which to reconsider the role of media in the work of his trans-Pacific literary predecessor, Edgar Allan Poe.

The paradoxical role of media is embedded within Rampo’s “Phantom Lord” essay itself, as the author describes his fascination with the material components of the print medium, which impelled him to collect his own set of moveable type as a boy. Yet the fascination of this typeset is two-fold: it excites the young Rampo as a medium or bridge to “the land of dreams,” but it also appeals to him in its very physicality. He expands on this recollection in a later essay:

I accumulated several thousand pieces of #4 type. Not yet stained with ink, their silver color was beautiful to behold. I would play with them one by one like little soldiers made of lead, then carefully put them back . . . in their handmade cases. The secret to reaching the land of dreams was hidden away in those rows of little lead bricks” (“My Love for the Printed Word,” 1937). (164)

Later, he writes of how he and his playmates would hand-press their own literary magazine:

One of the boys rolled the glossy ink over the silvery type, while another carefully laid out the paper. I would carefully grasp the handle of the printing press and firmly apply the press to the paper. It was great fun to slowly peel away the paper and examine the results. . . . In this way I began a relationship with printing type itself. It was a secret pact between us that has continued throughout my life. (164–65)

Whether consciously or unconsciously, in his description of his fascination with the conversion point between the materiality of media and the author’s imagination, Rampo returns to an important theme of his literary predecessor Edgar Allan Poe. Unlike the fascination for the material tools of the print medium expressed by Rampo, however, in the case of Poe, we can often observe a preoccupation with the artifacts of the manuscript-based culture, the continued eclipse of which Poe had occasion to witness in the midst of the quickly developing print industry in antebellum America. As Kevin J. Hayes observes, “Though Edgar Allan Poe recognized print media as the cultural location where he would make his fame, he never forgot the literary traditions attached to manuscript culture.”² Evidence of this recurrent fascination with the *technics* of manuscript culture include the two-part article, “Autography,” published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1836, which consists of commentaries on printed facsimiles of prominent authors’ penned signatures (as well as wittily fictionalized samples of their correspondence); the repeated images of inscription, letters, and manuscripts in his other fictional works; and even the title of the literary magazine that was the culmination of Poe’s ambitions as an editor, the *Stylus*.

In this essay, I will highlight some of the references to print media, visual media, and optic devices in Edogawa Rampo’s work and discuss how they reconfigure, often with baroque excess, important themes in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, suggesting a writerly affinity that transcends the generic interest in mystery and horror that ostensibly links the Japanese master of popular fiction with his nineteenth century namesake. My goal is not to show the “influence” of one writer upon the other but rather to show that a similar

interest in written and visual media links the authors across the temporal and spatial abyss that separates them and to consider how each author addresses his own time and place through an exploration of medial effects.

RAMPO'S "THE HUMAN CHAIR," TACTILITY, AND INSCRIPTION

Edogawa Rampo's fascination with the borders between tactile materiality and the works of the imagination is evident in one of his most famous short stories, "The Human Chair." In this work, a hideously ugly Japanese craftsman designs a plush, Western-style chair in which he is capable of concealing himself. At first, he uses this invention only to infiltrate a luxury hotel and commit theft, but he soon becomes besotted with the illicit thrill of being sat upon by beautiful, and otherwise inaccessible, women. The story, with the exception of a brief framing introduction, takes the form of a letter from the craftsman to Yoshiko, a beautiful and sophisticated female author, who has acquired the chair. After describing the genesis of his invention, the craftsman confesses his mad love for Yoshiko, whom he has "known" through the medium of the chair, and the reader experiences Yoshiko's horror and disgust while reading the confession in the place of the addressee. In a twist ending, Yoshiko then receives a second letter, claiming that the previous letter was just a work of fiction, designed to impress her with the letter-writer's skill and imagination as an author.

Interestingly, the disavowal of the "human chair" episode as a "harmless" fiction does not decrease the implications of the violation committed by the letter writer. On the contrary, the revelation that the first letter may have been a mere "prank" only intensifies the sense of psychological violence, in part because of an eerie doubling between the letter writer's two roles of furniture maker and amateur author, which are, in turn, doubles for Rampo's role as professional author or literary craftsman. The most salient commonality is the status of the chair, letter, or printed text as medium for the author's illicit imagination. The chair, a marvelous product of craft, is the medium through which the craftsman is able to have physical contact with the woman; it is a point of conversion between the craftsman's pornographic imagination—burning from the start with all sorts of "impudent, luscious, and luxurious 'dreams'"³—and the material realm and the existence of the Other. Similarly, the letter that passes from the craftsman, revealed to be "merely" an amateur author, is a similar point of conversion from the realm of the imagination to the material. As described in the text, the arrival of the second

letter, marked by the familiar and unpleasant “handwritten scrawl” (*fudeguse*) of the sender—the physical traces of the author’s presence—elicits Yoshiko’s horror and disgust.⁴

The uncanny traces of the author in this conversion point of imagination and materiality are what link the chair, the letter, and the printing process as described in Rampo’s aforementioned essays. Although the printed text seemingly no longer contains the traces of the author’s bodily presence, Rampo’s essays on his fascination with the printed word reestablish this direct link (or “secret pact” in his own words) between the body of the author and the materiality of the medium, which has been obscured by mass manufacturing and impersonal systems of distribution. Rampo’s essays call the reader’s attention to the materiality of the “lead bricks” of printer’s type and the glossy ink applied to paper, which are capable of converting the author’s private realm of imagination into a seductively material artifact. Similarly, the reader of Rampo’s “Human Chair,” rhetorically placed into the position of the addressee of the two letters, is compelled to share the horror of psychological violence directed at Yoshiko—in the form of the handwritten letter for Yoshiko, or the printed text for Rampo’s readers—at the ambiguous conversion point between imagination and materiality. That is, although the reader of Rampo’s text does not actually witness the unnerving “handwritten scrawl” of the letter/fiction writer (nor do they experience the tactile sensation of sitting on the furniture master’s “human chair”), still they are placed in the uncomfortable parallel position with Yoshiko as the recipient of his messages, through the craft of the *printed word* rather than the chair or the handwritten letter.

RAMPO, POE, AND LENS MANIA

The conversion point between dream and materiality is also what seems to fascinate Rampo with lenses and other visual media.⁵ For example, in the essay “A Passion for Lenses” (1937), he describes the experience of holing himself up in his darkened upstairs room as a boy when light through an aperture turned the darkened room into a camera obscura; he then takes a magnifying glass to project a ray of light bouncing off the tatami mats onto the ceiling.

The woven strands of rushes that formed the surface of the tatami appeared as wide as the boards in the ceiling. . . . They were projected all too clearly like a terrible nightmare or the drug-induced visions of an opium fiend. Even though I knew it was a play of the lens, I felt particularly upset. I suppose most people

would feel it odd to feel frightened. But I was overwhelmed by its reality. It was so shocking that from that day onward, my view of things changed completely. It was a turning point in my life. (149)

Similarly, in his essay “The Horrors of Film” (1926), Rampo describes with wonder and terror the sensation of seeing close-ups (or *outsushi*, “large projections,” in Japanese) of silent film stars’ faces, transformed through magnification into strange lunar landscapes. “Even a face as smooth as a newborn’s appears distorted and bizarre: the kind of thing you might spy through a telescope on the surface of the moon” (137). Most terrifying is when a strip of celluloid first becomes stuck and then catches fire in the projector, consuming the frozen face of an actress with black spots and red flames (138–39). Here, as with the gigantic tatami fibers appearing on the ceiling in his essay on lenses, the terror seems to arise in large part from the mixing of different ontological layers. The flames engulfing the physical medium of the celluloid film seem to consume the fictional “content” of the film, which, itself, bears an uncanny indexical relationship to the physical world: projected out of scale and the natural time-space continuum to become an alien landscape, at once fantastic and bearing a searing reality.

In his introduction to *The Edogawa Rampo Reader*, Seth Jacobowitz notes the similarity between the cinematic terrors described in “The Horror of Film” and the surreal world of Rampo’s prose-poem-like story, “The Martian Canals” (1927). In this visionary tale, the narrator describes himself wandering lost in a dark wood, until he encounters a clear pool of water in the middle of the forest. The narrator then finds his own body transformed into that of his voluptuous female lover, and, as if compelled by a mysterious outside force, s/he swims to a rock at the center of the pool, and performs a wild erotic dance, climaxed by tearing at her own body with her fingernails, until her skin is furrowed with red channels like the canals of Mars named in the story’s title. Jacobowitz reasonably proposes a cinematic interpretation to this story, in which the pool is the “silver screen upon which the man’s subconscious desires are violently and inexplicably projected.”⁶

While I agree with the connection between this story and visual media, I would argue that the pool should rather be viewed as a lens at the center of the forest, which gathers the desire of the forest and the entire cosmos of the tale, as a lens gathers light, onto a focal point, the rock, where the protagonist is reconstituted as an image. The comparison with the protagonist’s skin to the canals of Mars, the marks of a fantastical extraterrestrial civilization extrapolated through nineteenth-century observations of Mars through telescopes, further connects the reconstituted protagonist’s existence to optic regimes or at least the ambiguous interface between human desire and imagination and technologically aided observation.⁷ It is fascinating that this story does not figure the landscape as a fantastic “projection” of the individual

subject's imagination, as would the more common Romantic trope of the lamp as discussed by M. H. Abrams,⁸ but, rather, the subject him/herself is constituted or focalized out of the landscape, which has already been thoroughly permeated with the subject's psychology.

The sense in which the cosmos of Rampo's story is infused with a powerful, sexualized life force, which reconstitutes the subject in a process of focalization, suggests that this story could be read as a kitschy parody or perverse homage to Edgar Allan Poe's 1841 prose-poem-like short story, "The Island of the Fay," originally designed to accompany an engraving by the same name in *Graham's Magazine*.⁹ The prologue to Poe's story proposes that the earth's "dark valleys," "grey rocks," waters, forests, and mountains, are "themselves but the colossal members of one vast and animate and sentient whole."¹⁰ The general scheme of the two stories is similar, in that they involve a narrator-protagonist in the midst of "lonely journeying" through a dismal forest before encountering an enchanted pool or rivulet and island therein. In Poe's story, it is the apparitional Fay who seems to embody the life-force of the "animate and sentient" cosmos and whose circuits around the island in a canoe mirror those of the heavenly bodies, whose "cycle within cycle without end," revealed by man's "telescopes" and "mathematical investigations," are described in the prologue (601). Thus, Rampo's "Canals of Mars" exhumes the half-buried metaphor of a telescopic lens formed by the "mirror-like" and "glassy" rivulet in Poe's earlier tale (602), while substituting Rampo's signature "erotic grotesque" elements for Poe's transcendent (or, perhaps, sardonically faux-transcendent) vision.¹¹

An examination of Poe's works reveals both a fascination with optical perception and effects as well as a fundamental ambivalence regarding telescopes and other optical instruments, which is connected with the author's constant troubling of the boundary between scientific, rationalist discourse and empirical evidence at one extreme, and the Romantic imagination and madness on the other. For example, even without introducing a more complicated optical instrument than a study window, Poe's short story, "The Sphinx," plays with issues of perspective and the relationship between optical "evidence" and the imagination and mental state of the individual subject. In this story, the protagonist, fleeing a cholera epidemic in New York, takes refuge in the home of a cultured friend on the banks of the Hudson. Fearing the epidemic and his own death, he immerses himself in his host's books and fevered meditations on the subject of omens and portents, only to be treated to a vision, upon looking up from his volume, of a huge monster descending a distant hill by the river banks. At the end of this story, however, his host reveals to him that the "monster" is, in fact, a death-head's moth suspended from a spider web in front of the study's window.

A similar play on perspective, connected by the shared motif of the death-head's insect, is found in the popular story "The Gold Bug," in which a telescope, commonly a device for observing large and distant heavenly objects, is employed in a certain fixed position to find a minute object: a skull in a tree, one of whose eye-sockets will reveal the position of a buried treasure. Indeed, "The Gold Bug" and "The Sphinx" could be seen as paired stories: while the former's central character, William Legrand, appears at first to be merely an eccentric and possibly mad recluse, his mastery over the set of optical inversions and decodings necessary to uncover the buried treasure reveals him to be a genius of ratiocination comparable to Poe's famous detective C. Auguste Dupin. The lack of mastery or comprehension of optical proportions and effects, on the other hand, leads the protagonist of "The Sphinx" to comically mistake the death-head's moth for a distant monster, unlike his more rationally masterful host. However, if the interpretation of William S. Marks is correct, in fact, the story may have an ironic twist: the confidently rational host may be equally unperceiving as the protagonist of "The Sphinx" for failing to realize that all is actually not well—that the monstrous "bug" of the cholera epidemic has in fact appeared in his home through the person of the protagonist, whose apprehension of the "death's-head" monster may be at least poetically true.¹²

OPTICS, SPECTACLE, AND POPULAR CULTURE

Numerous scholars of media and visual culture have pointed out how optical instruments, developed as the tools of rational, precise scientific observation from the Renaissance and Enlightenment onward, have been quickly adopted into popular media spectacles that indulge the fantastic, the erotic, and the irrational. For example, in *The Female Thermometer: 18th Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny*, Terry Castle explores how the phantasmagorical magic lantern shows featuring ghosts and demons conjured by means of the latest optical tricks in eighteenth-century Europe contributed at once to the demystification of ghosts and the spectralization of human psychology. Furthermore, she argues that in the following century, "Edgar Allan Poe . . . in his supernatural tales, used the phantasmagoria figure precisely as a way of destabilizing the ordinary boundaries between inside and outside, mind and world, illusion and reality."¹³

Similarly, in his study *The Lens Within the Heart: The Western Scientific Gaze and Popular Imagery in Later Edo Japan*, Timon Screech shows how, even before Japan's full opening to the West in the Meiji Period, tools of enhanced visual observation and visualization were seen as defining aspects of Western science and culture, on the one hand, and quickly incorporated

into the carnivalesque and erotic popular culture of the Japanese “floating world,” on the other. As is made clear in Rampo’s nostalgic essay on the *utsushi-e* or Japanese-style magic lantern shows of his boyhood, the connection between optical technology and fantastic, dream-like fictional realms has its own roots in Japanese entertainment culture as well as its precedents in the West.¹⁴ Yet while it may be rooted in the premodern, Rampo’s media consciousness is also thoroughly connected to his Modernist generation of Japanese authors, who actively responded to the rise of a new popular culture, which included both cinema and mass-produced, mass-marketed print literature.¹⁵

In diverse writings from his tales and reportage to his quasi-scientific extended essay *Eureka*, Poe was constantly questioning and renegotiating the role of imagination, rationality, and empirical science in an age of scientific discovery and the popularization of both literature and scientific knowledge. The ambivalent and often ironic appearance of media of inscription and observation in his tales, from the stylus to the telescope, is emblematic of this tension between imagination and empiricism. Arguably, the ultimate expression of his ambivalence was his investment in the literary and journalistic phenomenon of the *hoax* and its debunking. As Linda Walsh summarizes, “scientifically educated beyond many of his peers and a pioneer in at least two genres that showcase scientific epistemologies—science fiction and detective fiction—he [Poe] embodies the tensions between the arts and sciences in the Jacksonian era. His hoaxes were public acts meant to call attention to these tensions, as they were written on science-related topics and carefully crafted and presented in popular news media for particular reading audiences”¹⁶

A century later, Edogawa Rampo reworked these preoccupations of Poe through visually excessive imaginative works that at times approached a campy pastiche of the American writer, while simultaneously exploring his personal obsessions with media: obsessions which coincidentally placed Rampo at the cutting edge of the visual, multimedia turn in modern Japanese culture during the 1920s and 1930s. During these decades, Rampo undoubtedly found Poe’s ambivalent fascination with the technics of inscription and observation, empiricism and imagination, to be a compelling precedent to his own situation in a cosmopolitan but culturally anxious Japan, which in the span of a single generation had assimilated both the technology of the movie projector and the transnational dream-world of the cinema. Nevertheless, despite their shared preoccupations, we can detect a relative, if not absolute, difference in the two authors’ employment of the trope of media within their works. Poe’s works featuring media of inscription and observation tend to pivot on the ironic reversibility or indecipherability between imagination/madness and empiricism/rationality. In extending this trope in his own works, however, Rampo draws attention not merely to the reversibility or

ambiguity between the fictional and real, but to the very *traces of materiality* discovered within overtly imaginative and fictional worlds. It is these traces of the real, or traces of mediation itself, which lend Rampo's works their particularly timely and disturbing appeal.

NOTES

1. Edogawa Rampo, *The Edogawa Rampo Reader*, ed. and trans. Seth Jacobowitz (Fukuroka: Kurodahan Press, 2008), 152, 232. Further references will be from this edition and noted parenthetically.

2. Kevin J. Hayes, *Poe and the Printed Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 29. On the subject of Poe, the print industry, and manuscript culture, see also Jonathan Elmer, *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 37–47; and Meredith L. McGill, *American Lecture and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 141–86.

3. Edogawa Rampo, *Edogawa Rampo zenshū [Collected works of Edogawa Rampo]*, Vol. 1 (Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 2004), 609.

4. Edogawa, *Edogawa Rampo zenshū*, 630; for an English translation, see *Japanese Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, trans. James B. Harris (Boston: Tuttle, 1956), 22–23. Matsuyama Iwao discusses tactility and the privileging of the haptic over the optic in “The Human Chair” in his study *Rampo to Tōkyō [Rampo and Tokyo]* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1994), 36–43.

5. Visual media and optical devices feature prominently in many Rampo stories such as “The Hell of Mirrors,” “The Traveler With the Pasted Rag Picture,” and “The Strange Tale of Panorama Island,” and have been the subjects of fascinating studies by Hirano, Igarashi, and Looser. See Yoshihiko Hirano, *Hofuman to Rampo: Ningyō to kōgaku kikai no eros [Hoffman and Rampo: The Eros of Dolls and Optical Devices]* (Tokyo: Misuzu shobō, 2007); Yoshikuni Igarashi, “Edogawa Rampo and the Excess of Vision: An Ocular Critique of Modernity in 1920s Japan,” *Positions* 13.2 (Fall 2005): 299–327; Thomas Looser, “From Edogawa to Miyazaki: Cinematic and Anime-ic Architectures of Early and Late Twentieth-century Japan,” *Japan Forum* 14.2 (September 2002): 297–331.

6. Seth Jacobowitz, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *The Edogawa Rampo Reader* (Fukuroka: Kurodahan Press, 2008), xxxiv.

7. The map of Mars’s surface published by Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli (1835–1910) in 1878 identified “canali” or channels across the surface, which were mistranslated as “canals” and touched off decades of speculation about a canal-building alien civilization on Mars, led by such figures as Camille Flammarion (1842–1925) and Percival Lowell (1855–1916). For further discussion, see Robert Markley, *Dying Planet: Mars in Science and the Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Eric S. Rabkin, *Mars: A Tour of the Human Imagination* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2005); and William Sheehan, *The Planet Mars: A History of Observation and Discovery* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996).

8. See M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and The Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 52–67.

9. For a discussion of the origins of this short story, see F. DeWolfe Miller, “The Basis for Poe’s ‘The Island of the Fay,’” *American Literature* 14.2 (May 1942): 135–40.

10. Edgar Allan Poe, *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Volume II*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 600. Further references to Poe’s stories will be from this edition and noted parenthetically.

11. Kent Ljungquist interprets Poe's story as a "parody of certain attitudes and literary conventions found in Romantic nature poetry" and "an arch adaptation of the Romantic prospect piece" (151). Kent Ljungquist, "Poe's 'The Island of the Fay': The Passing of Fairyland," in *The Naiad Voice: Essays on Poe's Satiric Hoaxing*, ed. Dennis W. Eddings (Port Washington: Associated Faculty Press, 1983), 151.

12. William S. Marks III, "The Art of Corrective Vision in Poe's 'The Sphinx,'" *Pacific Coast Philology* 22.1/2 (Nov. 1987): 46–50. For discussions of the questions of perception and optics in Poe's work, see also James W. Gargano, "The Distorted Perception of Poe's Comic Narrators," *Topic* 16 (1976): 23–34, and William J. Scheick, "An Intrinsic Luminosity: Poe's Use of Platonic and Newtonian Optics," *The Southern Literary Journal* 24.2 (Spring 1992): 90–105.

13. Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: 18th Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 160.

14. Edogawa Rampo, *Edogawa Rampo zuihitsuusen [A Selection from the Essays of Edogawa Rampo]*, ed. Kida Junichirô (Tokyo: Chikuma shobô, 1994): 197–200.

15. For a discussion of Modernist and avant-garde writers' responses to the growth of mass-marketed literature and visual media, see William O. Gardner, *Advertising Tower: Japanese Modernism and Modernity in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center Publications, 2007); for a look at detective fiction, including the work of Edogawa Rampo with regard to 1920s- and 1930s-era discourses of modernity in Japan, see Sari Kawana, *Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction and Japanese Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

16. Lynda Walsh, *Sins Against Science: The Scientific Media Hoaxes of Poe, Twain, and Others* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 51. The hoax stories that Walsh discusses include "Hans Phaall—A Tale" (1835), "The Balloon Hoax" (1844), "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845), and "Von Kempelen and His Discovery" (1849).

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