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INTRODUCTION TO ROUNDTABLE 5: ANIMATING VICTORIAN SCIENCE

Animating Victorian Science and Technology: Introduction

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The Victorians were devoted to spectacles, from large-scale dioramas to the more modest magic lantern shows which became the staple of the popular lecture circuit. Taking advantage of developments in a whole range of new optical technologies, they offered their audiences both education and entertainment.[1] Playing with illusion and a sense of wonder, they broke down the barriers between stillness and life, absence and presence, opening up new vistas for imaginative participation. This roundtable brings together award-winning creative practitioners who continue in this tradition, working in diverse ways with the latest developments in optical technologies, while also using their respective forms of expertise to explore the legacies of Victorian science and culture, reanimating the past for contemporary audiences. All three articles show how humanities projects can draw on artistic forms to enhance research and to widen public participation.

Sydney Padua, a professional animator for Disney films as well as the author of *The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage*, was the artist in residence for a large-scale research project I ran, "Constructing Scientific Communities: Citizen Science in the 19th and 21st Centuries," funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.[2] Working with the world's largest online citizen science platform, Zooniverse (which now has almost 3 million volunteers worldwide), we ran contemporary citizen science projects, as well as exploring public participation in science in the nineteenth century. One Zooniverse project, "Science Gossip," invited interested "citizens" to uncover the history of citizen science, by analyzing the illustrations of nineteenth-century natural history journals (which were largely produced by non-professionals).[3] It attracted over 10,000 dedicated contributors from 75 countries, most having little previous experience or interest in the field. As part of her work with us, Sydney Padua created magical animations of some of these illustrations, so they literally seem to fly off the page and into our lives. At large-scale events co-organized by the project with the Natural History Museum, and the National Science and Media Museum in Bradford,

[1] See Altick 1978; Kember and Plunkett 2025; Kember, Plunkett, and Sullivan 2012; Willis 2011.

[2] Padua 2015. For details of the project see Constructing Scientific Communities 2014–19. The project was based at the Universities of Oxford and Leicester, and run in partnership with the Museum of Natural History, London, The Royal Society, and the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

[3] Science Gossip 2014–19. For the archive of images from the project, see Science Gossip Data Archive 2023.

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she also taught children how to create their own animations, thus passing on her craft to the next generation. Padua's previous work, in which she used her skill in animation to create for the first time a model of Charles Babbage's Analytic Engine, demonstrates how artistic prowess and understanding can contribute in major ways to scientific understanding, past and present, resolving one of the unsolved mysteries of computing history (she was awarded the Neumann Prize for mathematics for her work).

Ross Ashton and Karen Monid, the team behind the Projection Studio, are world leaders in the new art of projection mapping, creating large-scale sound and light projections onto heritage buildings (including Buckingham Palace for the Queen's Jubilee, and the Houses of Parliament for the London Olympics). As inheritors of the Victorian arts of the diorama and magic lantern, they have drawn on the very latest developments in projection technology to bring these two fields together, with a precision and flair beyond their predecessors' wildest dreams. I was privileged to work with Ross and Karen for another research project I led, "Diseases of Modern Life: Nineteenth-Century Perspectives" (European Research Council funded).[4] The project focused on the perceived diseases in the nineteenth-century of stress, and overwork, resulting from the new technologies of industrial Britain, from trains to telegraphs, as well as the health impacts of environmental pollution. The challenge for Ross and Karen was to transform five years of research by a large team into a five-minute projection, designed to capture the public's imagination. They succeeded brilliantly. The shifts in pace enact the increasing speed of life under industrialization, with the attendant blizzards of advertising, the deafening noise, smog and pollution of the industrial city, followed by desperate quests for health in newly created resorts. As they note in their article, the projection (onto the old Radcliffe Infirmary building in the center of Oxford), formed part of the city's light festival, and attracted 2,500 viewers on the night, their experience enhanced by short talks, games and activities run by the research team, appealing to all ages. In preparation for the event we had given classes in local schools and run competitions for projection designs from school pupils (the winners were projected onto the Infirmary during the night), and other artworks. The winner of the latter had produced a magnificent version of a Victorian zoetrope, suggesting he had been motivated by our own work to study this lost art in depth.

Our final article is by Eric Dyer, an animator and artist, who draws on nineteenth-century optical technologies, including the zoetrope, to create immersive and multimedia artworks. His work is a perfect complement to that of Padua, Ashton and Monid: looking to the past, he draws out the unrealized potential of the zoetrope as an artform. Offering a perfect antidote to the culture of our screen-obsessed age, he creates pictures that move, and images generated without screens that are more vivid than those in the cinema, whilst the patterns of everyday objects, from bicycles to drain covers, are turned into projections of entrancing beauty. His art is immersive and participatory, and in one example, those engaging with the art witness the imagined micro-agents of repair for his own degenerative retinal disorder, thus marrying the playfulness of art with the world of medical discovery.

In their different ways, all of these articles open our eyes to the modes in which artistic reinterpretations of the past can reconfigure both our understandings of earlier history, and our responses to the demands of the present. Magic lanterns evolved into the ubiquitous form of film, flattening out experience into two dimensions. In their creative uses of current technologies, and reimaginings of participatory art forms, Padua, Ashton, Monid, and Dyer

[4] Diseases of Modern Life 2014–19.

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all generate a sense of wonder which quickly transforms into a new critical engagement with the Victorian past, and with the problems posed by the scientific and cultural revolutions of our own times.

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