

'Scrambled Messages' Panel Proposal

Persistent but Resistant

The transatlantic telegraph, its materials, its processes, and its cultural conceptualisation by the public, developed rhythmically, repeating but adapting over time. Between 1857 and 1866 the public's attention was caught by the drama of the repeated attempts to lay a submarine cable across the Atlantic for the transmission of telegraphic messages. Over subsequent decades, a range of technical constraints led to concerted scientific endeavour to overcome obstacles in the sending of messages electronically. 'Scrambled Messages: The Telegraphic Imaginary 1857-1900' is an AHRC funded project based at King's College, London, the Courtauld Institute of Art, and UCL's Institute of Making which commenced in September 2013. As we move between material objects and conceptual ideas, the project seeks to establish why it is that the scrambling of messages was as significant for Victorian culture at large as the sending of flawless messages.

Our panel's three papers arise particularly out of our project discussions surrounding repetition. As Henri Lefebvre expounds, 'there is no identical absolute repetition, indefinitely'. In the fields of archeology, literature, and art history, we consider problems of reproducibility that occur as repetition sustains ideas. Persistent discourses, be they narratives of materials, ideas of nation, or traditions, necessarily adapt both with and against the proliferating and competing temporalities generated by technological innovation during the nineteenth century. The driven yet stuttering passage of times serves to emphasise the relationship between past and future and make this a concern. Our panel discusses the different ways in which both materials and ideas could be made to sustain in their re-imagining and reiteration over time and the disruption their rhythms provoke.

Anne Chapman, King's College London
anne.chapman@kcl.ac.uk

Natalie Hume, Courtauld Institute of Art
Natalie.Hume@courtauld.ac.uk

Dr. Cassie Newland, King's College London
cassienewland@yahoo.co.uk

Writing a Wonderstuff: Gutta-percha and the telegraph

Dr. Cassie Newland

Gutta-percha was arguably the Wonderstuff of the Nineteenth Century. It made its troubled journey from an exotic Jungle Product in the 1840s, to an essential hi-tech material by 1860, to an over-exploited obsolescence by 1900.

The sap of an undomesticatable rainforest tree, gutta-percha was ‘discovered’ by the nascent electrical engineering industry in the early 1840s. Malleable and inert in sea-water, gutta-percha was the perfect insulator that made all international telecommunications possible. It soon enmeshed the globe, invaded the deep seas and sheathed the nerves at the heart of both international politics and domestic doings. As telecommunications became increasingly important to world affairs, gutta-percha became the dangerous substance to which Imperial governments were ruthlessly addicted.

Almost as soon as its miracle properties were discovered it was recognised that the tree in the wild was at threat from unfettered exploitation. By the cable boom years of the 1860s demand had far outstripped supply, the price had rocketed and there were histrionic concerns being voiced for the future of wild sources. Attempts at economic botany, political wranglings and indeed wholesale land grabbing marked gutta-percha’s progress for sixty years. Powerful narratives were born, writhed and died around it.

Caught up with issues of sustainability from the outset, ideas about Gutta-percha revolve around discovery, scarceness, sovereignty, economics and slander. To be associated with its discovery was to be guaranteed a place in history. To engineer it was to forward the Empire. But to harvest the tree in the jungle was to be destructive and barbarous. Contemporary and revisionist papers appear in periodicals and pamphlets throughout the Victorian period, making claims and counter claims for its discovery, material properties and for its seemingly unsustainable future. This paper will look at this process of historiography, how contemporaneous ideas of environmental and economic sustainability intersect with the sustaining of popular narrative about this most wondrous of materials.

‘I’ll go back instead of going on’: taking one’s time in *Mugby Junction*

Anne Chapman

In its snowballing of print, Victorian Christmas exemplifies the overwhelming experience of proliferating temporalities. This paper argues that Dickens’s contributions to *Mugby Junction*, the 1866 Christmas number of *All the Year Round*, offer a model of sustaining a personal rhythm within the proliferating and often conflicting rhythms of modern life, in which sustainability is predicated upon processes of adaption. Always concerned with time, at least nominally, examinations and representations of temporality often featured in *All the Year Round*’s weekly pages, and thus it is perhaps unsurprising that experience of coexisting, competing temporalities so concern *Mugby Junction*. Dickens produced the extra Christmas numbers of *All the Year Round* throughout most of its life under his editorship, operating within rhythms of Christmas publishing and advertising. At the same time, *Mugby Junction* itself produces Christmas, ideas of which Dickens adapted from those in *A Christmas Carol*, so forcefully persistent over more than twenty years, and thus highlighting conflict between past, present and future, central to notions of what is personally sustainable.

Mugby Junction operates as an analysis of modern experience of conflicted times. This paper explores Dickens’s representation of those who ‘take their time’. It considers how Dickens presents this as possible within the rhythms that he suggests are sustainable and those he suggests are disruptable and unenduring. It examines his portrayal of the tensions between what one might think of natural and industrial rhythms. It then moves to argue that, in his contributions to this Christmas number and his conducting of the number as a whole, Dickens explores the problems of both adapting rhythms and adapting to rhythms. Finally I suggest that *Mugby Junction* complicates any linear conception of the transition between the past and the future associated with Christmas.

Valentine Walter Bromley: Sustaining a Transatlantic Myth

Natalie Hume

Ideas of sustainability have traditionally been bound up with United States history, both in the environmental sense and in other ways. For Europeans in particular, the ‘noble savage’ version of the American Indian stereotype was bound up with the idea of disappearance and loss, along with deforestation and the extinction of wild buffalo. These images of atrophy stood in for nostalgia about the disappearance of an idealised pastoral way of life in Europe, accompanied by anxiety about changes in the social and economic order, industrialisation and urbanisation. Such portrayals of America’s losses also fed into English anxieties about the vigour and global significance of the newly unified country in the postbellum era.

Valentine Walter Bromley was an English painter who travelled through the wilds of north-west America in 1874, as illustrator to the Earl of Dunraven. The visit took place amidst fighting between Sioux and US troops, which was to culminate in the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876. Dunraven was leading a hunting party, but Bromley declined to depict either the hunting or the geological detail that his employer wrote about. Instead he portrayed the people around him: not only the inhabitants of a Crow settlement, who entertained the party for several days, but also the travellers themselves.

Bromley offers a fascinating sense of the travellers’ anxieties and perceptions regarding real and imagined encounters with American Indians. Bromley’s insistence on issues of distance and visibility evoke Europeans’ inability to grasp the reality of American Indians given their attachment to a romantic idea. They also resonate with the notorious shortfalls in communication during disastrous negotiations between the US government and the Indian nations. Bromley’s work on the subject of America in various media kept up an interrogatory focus on confrontation between groups and may be understood as a contemplation on the fragility and sustainability of myths about identity and nationhood.