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Virtual environments in the nineteenth century: the spectacle of old London

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the appeal of immersive recreations of old London for nineteenth-century audiences. When discussed by scholars now, they are most often presented as conduits of official ideology engaged in promoting a triumphalist narrative of bourgeois ascendance. Here, I explore their appeal to popular audiences, arguing that they presented a more ambivalent set of meanings than is generally recognised and highlighting instances in which the beholders' experience departed from the stated intentions of the makers or organisers. The article draws out the pervasiveness of the riverside motif, which I argue carried a subtext of yearning for a lost harmony between urban and natural environments in the modern metropolis. The immersive illusionism of these reconstructions has been associated with the idea of "passive" spectatorship in which the viewer is enthralled and their critical faculties dulled or immobilised. I argue against this that the immediacy of old London attractions allowed them to become part of the dream geography of modern spectators severed from their own past. As "mind's eye" images, they functioned as phantasmagoric interstitial spaces that could be called upon to inform and transform the real urban environment, and in which emotions such as loss, trauma and desire could be worked out through the free play of the imagination.

KEYWORDS

Historical reconstructions; spectacle; nineteenth-century theatre; popular spectatorship; visual culture

Introduction

In recent years, virtual reality environments have become increasingly popular as a way to communicate aspects of history and heritage to a broad public.¹ The roots of this type of attraction are arguably traceable to the nineteenth century, a period in which historical spaces were resurrected in a range of innovative media. Old London was a particularly popular subject, recreated throughout the century in the form of theatrical set designs, stand-alone spectacles, tourist attractions such as the Tower of London, and, at the International Health Exhibition in 1888, as a life-sized model of an "Old

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London Street” with buildings that visitors could enter. This article considers the appeal of these immersive reconstructions for nineteenth-century audiences. When discussed by scholars now, they are most often presented as conduits of official ideology engaged in promoting a triumphalist narrative of bourgeois ascendance. As the cultural historian Billie Melman has noted, approaches to the visual representation of history during the nineteenth century identify it as

mainly an aid to, or instrument of and for, rule, cohesion, or mobilization in the assumption that history’s uses, especially in their popular forms, are conservative, sometimes with a capital C, supporting a certain rule, group, or system and often mobilised by it. (2006, 9)

Melman’s resistance to this approach remains unusual. More familiar is the view expressed by Christine Roth in a recent article on the French equivalent of the “Old London Street,” Albert Robida’s “Vieux Paris” attraction at the Exposition Universelle of 1900, that it “turned both the visitors and ‘Paris’ into one continuous, triumphant story of the French middle-class” (Roth 2016, 119). However, by exploring some lesser-known examples from theatre and exhibition culture, this article uncovers a set of meanings embedded in this type of experience that until now have been overlooked owing to the almost exclusive focus on the triumphalist narrative outlined above.

I also highlight the broad popular appeal of such attractions by touching on the case of the “Old House on West Street” (Smyth 2021). This seventeenth-century house became a sensation in the 1840s, attracting thousands of visitors, their interest piqued by rumours and news reports of its impending demolition. The spontaneous nature of public enthusiasm for this relic of old London argues for the agency of nineteenth-century spectators and resists the sort of “top-down” interpretation that has become almost universal in scholarship, while its particular features shed light on those aspects of the historical environment that appealed strongly to popular audiences. Through these two strategies, I explore the openness of these attractions to multiple readings and reveal their potential for “against the grain” interpretations. The immersive qualities of these entertainments were, I argue, central to the creative engagement of the beholder. This goes against the dominant view that nineteenth-century spectacle worked to “discipline” audiences, an evaluation that rests on the sinister connotations of Guy Debord’s conception of the spectacle (1967) or what Jean Baudrillard (1981) refers to as the “hyperreal” qualities of the simulacra, the fully convincing mimetic illusion, which supposedly has taken the place of reality in modernity. Drawing on a range of visual evidence, from toy theatre prints and book illustration to accounts of large-scale spectacles, I argue for a mode of looking that rested on the viewer’s capacity to retain images in the “mind’s eye” and to imaginatively map these onto their own present-day

environment. To the urban-dweller severed from their own past by the overwhelming pace of modernisation, these simulacra offered an “in-between” space, a “memory” retained in the imagination, informing and transforming perception of the real urban environment.

Public demand for old London attractions coincided with a period of urban demolition and restructuring at the start of the century; as Peter Mandler has written, the 1830s marked “the rise of historical tourism on a completely new scale” (1999, 127). Although carried out in a more piecemeal way than the rebuilding of Paris, the extent and rapidity of the city’s modernisation in this period had a disorienting effect on Londoners (Hofer-Robinson 2018, 127). In the face of this accelerated transformation emerged a popular fascination with history and, more, particularly, with the materiality and textures of the past, its architectural spaces, and artefacts. This article moves between three categories of immersive experience: real historical sites associated with new forms of mass tourism – I discuss the Old House on West Street in this article, but the Tower of London, newly reframed as a tourist attraction for paying visitors in the 1840s, is a more well-known example – stand-alone attractions, and the simulacrum spaces of theatrical settings.

The examples I deal with feature different historical periods, but fall into two broad categories: those representing pre-Fire London and those that reconstructed the eighteenth-century city. These two points in history are, of course, quite distinct, but, as I argue in this article, in the popular imagination the catastrophe of the Great Fire came to be conflated with the demolitions and restructuring of the nineteenth-century, so that representations of the earlier trauma sometimes functioned as proxies for more recent modernisation.

In the theatre, moving panoramas of Tudor London as seen from the Thames regularly featured in productions of Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*. At Covent Garden in 1931, scenery by the Grieve family of stage designers and A.W.N. Pugin represented a journey “commencing at the Palace of Bridewell, and passing the Fleet Ditch – Blackfriars – St Paul’s – London Bridge – The Tower – Limehouse – the Celebrated Man-of-War – ‘The Great Harry’ [...] terminating with the Greenwich Palace, Park, & c,” while Charles Kean’s revival at the Princess’s theatre in 1855 included a “Grand Moving Panorama Representing London in the Reign of Henry the Eighth” (Schoch 1998, 43).² There were also several English adaptations of Victor Hugo’s *Marie Tudor*, which was first performed in Paris in 1833, and which included a panoramic view of London by night as seen from a window in the Tower of London.³ The pre-Fire city was also frequently realised in theatrical adaptations of old London novels, such as Harrison Ainsworth’s *The Tower of London* of 1840; T. P. Taylor’s play, *The Tower of London; or, Queen Mary*, performed in 1840 at the Adelphi theatre, seems to have been an adaptation of both Ainsworth’s and Hugo’s dramas. As with other adaptations of *The Tower of London*, this one had sets that realised George Cruikshank’s illustrations to Ainsworth’s novel, such as the

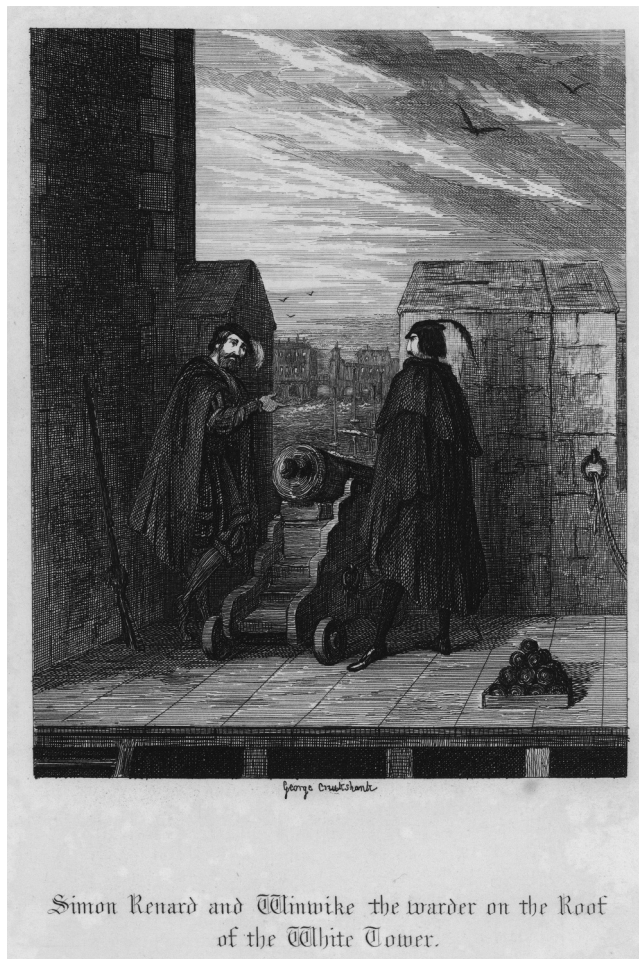


Figure 1. George Cruikshank, Simon Renard and Winwike the Warder on the Roof of the White Tower, illustration in Harrison Ainsworth, *The Tower of London*, 1840, © look and learn.

representation of the Roof of the White Tower, which includes a silhouette of old London Bridge at dawn (Figure 1), as well as a final scene based on the panoramic view at the close of Hugo's play.

Stand-alone attractions, too, focussed on the Tudor and Stuart periods. One of the earliest examples, Clarkson Stanfield's "Poecilorama," has been largely overlooked by scholars. This was a type of cosmorama, created by the artist and theatrical scenic designer in 1826 and exhibited at the Egyptian Hall. Although the pictures were small-scale, Stanfield's attraction was designed to compete with Daguerre's Diorama, which had opened in London two years previously.⁴ It consisted of a series of views seen through a small aperture, one of which was a representation of London in 1590. As the publicity stated, this comprised "its Old Bridge covered with Houses, Old St. Paul's and many other objects equally curious" ("Poecilorama" 1826).

The eighteenth-century city did not feature in stand-alone spectacles, but was frequently evoked on stage as the setting for dramas. Examples include Edward Fitzball's adaptation of *Paul Clifford*, set at the time of the French Revolution, and adaptations of Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard*, set during the 1730s, and which in the Adelphi version included a moving "diorama" of Jack's final journey from the Old Bailey to the gallows at Tyburn (Meisel 1983, 237). Plays featuring old Wapping also sought to recreate the eighteenth-century city. These included Henry Holl's *Wapping Old Stairs* (1834), John Faucit Saville's *Wapping Old Stairs* (1837), and Henry Pettitt's *A Sailor's Knot* (1891).

All of these examples may be classed as *lieux de mémoire* as defined by the French historian Pierre Nora. In a modernity irretrievably severed from the living traditions of true memory, sites in which the past is perceived to persist acquire a special significance or sacrosanct quality. As he writes, "there are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory" (Nora 1989, 7). Embedded in Nora's definition is a conception of such sites as inauthentic, offering artificial fabrications in place of "true memory" and, in this sense, the inherent "theatricality" of wood and canvas constructions arguably take the idea to its logical conclusion. Recent scholarship has tended to build on the sense of artifice that is threaded through Nora's conception of the *lieu de mémoire*, with heritage attractions frequently called to account for promoting hegemonic definitions of nationhood, while whitewashing alternative or marginalised narratives (Roth 2016, 119).

While fully accepting Nora's view of the constructed nature of *lieux de mémoire*, I want to push back against the assumption that the meanings embedded in them necessarily correspond to the sort of "top-down" narratives with which they are generally associated. This is not to dismiss that type of reading out of hand. To refer back to Stanfield's Poecilorama attraction, mentioned above, a contemporary review described this scene as exhibiting

the present opulent and magnificent metropolis, as it appeared to the eyes of Raleigh, and Essex, and Elizabeth, of Shakespeare, and Jonson, and Massinger. It is a very clever composition, and interesting, of course, from a thousand historical and classical associations. The lofty "Carrack" lying in the river – the strange bridge of London, with its guard-house and towers – are very striking objects; and the neighbouring hills of Highgate, Holloway, Hampstead, &c., exhibit, in their bald and barren features, a singular contrast to their present state of ornamental cultivation. ("Poecilorama" 1827)

For this author, the literary, military and seafaring prowess of the past provides the foundation for the opulence of the present metropolis, suggesting a triumphalist view specifically designed to address a middle-class subject. Together with the prominence in the scene of Old St Paul's, it is easy to see how this vision of "Merrie Old England" could be understood as part of a conservative agenda. Indeed, a review in the *Morning Post* described it as

particularly appealing to “those whose minds are peculiarly susceptible of the moral influence arising from national feeling” (“The Paecilorama” 1826).

This type of interpretation finds consonances in recent scholarship on the heritage industry. In *Uses of Heritage*, Laurajane Smith describes the development of what she identifies as the “Authorized Heritage Discourse” or “AHD,” the process by which certain buildings or monuments are chosen for their use in promoting “social consensus and nation building,” the roots of which she situates in the late nineteenth century (Smith 2006, 11). As she writes, “heritage is about the promotion of a consensus version of history by state-sanctioned cultural institutions and elites to regulate cultural and social tensions in the present” (4). In other words, it is seen as an aspect of official ideology imposed on the public. In this view, the allure of the past represents a conservative backlash against social and economic change. Even when the old city is represented in negative terms as violent or disease-ridden, it is still deemed to serve the interests of the present, by throwing into relief the achievements of modernity. As Roth suggests, such cases functioned as “cautionary tales and foils against which to highlight others who demonstrated the archetypal character and *esprit*” of the bourgeoisie (2016, 126). However, while immersive historical attractions in this period could not but reflect contemporary concerns, their proliferation attests to popular demand for history conveyed via the senses as opposed to through the arguments of the historian. Appealing to a broad public, their meanings were more open to interpretation than is generally recognised.

There has been a certain amount of resistance to the AHD school of thought from scholars such as Mandler, who writes, for instance, of the “Cockneyfication” of tourism marketed to the lower-middle and working classes in this period, drawing attention to the emphasis on nationhood over narratives of monarchy and aristocracy. As he argues, “historical consciousness in this period was a nationalist consciousness – it was the prime means of expressing a sense of Englishness. That in itself was a populist sense, for elite opinion disliked the democratic, homogenising implications of nationality” (1999, 129–130). In *The Culture of History: English Uses of the Past, 1800–1953*, Billie Melman goes further by opposing what she refers to as “indirect control” interpretations that involve the “disregard, or bypassing, of the agency of individuals and their interventions in the production of versions of history” (2006, 10). Focussing on the allure of horror, she argues that popular audiences were drawn to “the attraction of the dangerous in the past,” and, in particular, to the image of the subterranean dungeon. She cites, for instance, the Tower of London, presented to nineteenth-century visitors as “an emblem of the monarchy and government in general,” reminding them of the violence and injustice that continued beneath the surface in the modern city (143). As she writes, “the idea of progress and an optimistic, ameliorative view of history is rejected” in attractions that dissolve the difference between the past and present (103).

However, while the disorder and arbitrary violence of the past are certainly recurring themes in immersive attractions, as will become apparent, horror is not a universal element, featuring not at all, for instance, in Stanfield's Poecilorama. While concurring with Melman's insistence on the agency of spectators, I want to propose another set of meanings available to nineteenth-century viewers that moves past questions of whether the past should be seen as a golden age or as a locus of irrationality and violence. In what follows, I argue that visualisations of the old city as an organic space in harmony with the natural topography offered a clear critique of a "decorporealised" modern metropolis, designed for the circulation of capital rather than for the needs of its human inhabitants. I consider how the image of the riverside offered consolation to spectators unmoored and bewildered by the rapidity of urban restructuring in this period. The loving recreations of old Wapping, which appeared on stage throughout the century, speak of yearning for a lost locality that had been more or less wiped from the map. Stage recreations of Wapping evoked a village-like community, suggesting nostalgia for a traditional way of life, but they particularly focus on the connection between the urban and natural environment, between the city and the river, a relationship that was destroyed during the nineteenth century, first with the building of the docks in the 1820s and finally with the development of the London Embankment in the 1870s. The representation of the river as a conduit rather than as a barrier operates as a subtext in the mythology of old London, one that tends to go unnoticed if we focus too narrowly on the question of class interest. The author of the Poecilorama review in the *New Times*, cited above, was certainly keen to remind readers of the cultural and military glories of the past, but their fascination with the surprisingly rustic aspect of Holloway, Highgate and Hampstead is also in evidence, as is the river and its connection with the city, encapsulated in the "strange" old London Bridge with its houses still intact. My final case study, the "Old London Street," a large-scale model with houses that people could enter that featured as part of the International Health Exhibition in 1884, speaks to the openness of old London attractions to multiple interpretations. Surrounded as it was by examples of the latest innovations in plumbing and water supply, its narrow spaces and timber dwellings were intended to strike a contrast with these comforts of modernity, calling to mind associations of overcrowding and disease; however, its organic construction strongly appealed to visitors, making it the most popular feature and subverting the intentions of its makers.

"London in the Olden Time" at the Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens, 1844

My first main case study is the recreation of the seventeenth-century pre-Fire city in the "London in the Olden Time" entertainment presented in 1844 at the



Figure 2. London in the Olden Time, lithograph, 1844, Bill Douglas collection.

Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens in South London (Figure 2). For one shilling, spectators could witness a scene of London before the Great Fire, seen from the far bank of an artificial lake, mocked up to recreate the Thames. The scene was described as “showing according to the best authorities Old London Bridge with its chapel and tower and peculiarly constructed houses, Old St. Paul’s, the Globe theatre, with all the surrounding churches, public buildings, & c.”⁵ The publicity also cited Baynard’s Castle, which can be seen to the far left, a medieval riverside palace that had also been destroyed in the fire of 1666, although fragments of it reportedly survived into the nineteenth century before being pulled down to make way for an ironworks (Timbs 1972, 55). The gardens opened at nine in the morning; feeding of the animals, “displayed in a novel and interesting manner,” according to a publicity poster, was at half-past four, followed by the orchestral entertainment at half past five.⁶ Tom Thumb, the “celebrated American Dwarf,” is also known to have performed as part of the bill – another version of the lithograph in the Bill Douglas collection reproduced here shows him hovering incongruously above the scene of seventeenth-century London and waving to the crowd from a balloon.⁷ However, the highpoint of the entertainment occurred at dusk each day when the Great Fire of London was staged “under the direction of Mr. Southby, the unrivalled pyrotechnist.” So, after having enjoyed the spectacle of old London, the gathered spectators could watch fire destroy the whole thing, or rather appear to do so, since, of course, it remained intact for the next day’s performance (Figures 3 and 4).

According to reviews, the scene was created over five acres using three hundred and three thousand feet of canvas by the artists George Danson and William Telbin, who were both well-known theatrical scenic designers and



Figure 3. "Fire of London, at the Surrey Zoological Gardens," *Guide to Life*, 8 June 1844, public domain.

panorama painters. It was modelled in three dimensions, but was referred to in publicity announcements variously as a "model," a "picture," and a "pictorial model" (Foster 1844). The review of it in the *Illustrated London News* stated that

[t]he day and twilight view of this set piece of art is extremely imposing – the perspectives being managed with consummate skill. The outlines or edges of the buildings are 'softened away to nothingness,' and are lost in a blended harmony



Figure 4. George Cruikshank, 'Stirring up the Great Fire of London', *Comic Almanack*, 1844, author collection.

with the sky beyond, while the more prominent parts and foregrounds stand out in bold relief, with all the truth of reality. ("Picture Model" 1844)

Parts of it were certainly three-dimensional, then, but the description seems to refer to the use of aerial perspective, by which the more distant parts of the scene were rendered less substantial. It appears that, like some Panoramas and Dioramas, "London in the Olden Time" was a combination of painting with three-dimensional objects in the foreground.

Interpretive approaches to nineteenth-century spectacle tend in general to draw on theories of ideology. The comments of Dana Arnold in relation to Thomas Hornor's 360-degree panorama shown at the Colosseum in Regent's Park in 1829 are typical (Figure 5). As she writes,

[t]he passive reception of this re-presentation of London empowered the viewer with a feeling of mastery over the constraints of space and time and fulfilled the social desire for understanding and control. (Arnold 2009, 332–350)

Spectacular representations of the old city are discussed much less frequently, but when they are considered, the tendency is to assume that they serve a similar ideological purpose. In her discussion of what she refers to as the "obsessive discourse with the past" in this period, Lynda Nead posits that such attractions were an attempt to assimilate history and co-opt it into the same triumphalist agenda. As she writes, "[b]y the end of the century London's past



Figure 5. Thomas Hornor's Panorama of London, 1829, lithograph, © look and learn.

had been reduced to little more than fairground scenery in the ongoing staging of metropolitan improvement" (Nead 2000, 34). As in Smith's analysis of AHD, the otherness of the past is negated and the whole is reduced to pure spectacle, an anodyne entertainment designed to express the interests of elites.

If the "London in the Olden Time" spectacle were to be considered through the lens of AHD, one could argue that the prominence of Old St Paul's and the many church spires of the pre-Fire city suggest an idealised evocation of "Merrie Old England" as a more cohesive community, as compared with the modern city. The more negative aspects of old London – poor sanitation, disease, and disorder – are perhaps not so much in evidence here as they are in some other instances, but the vulnerability to fire, which is here foregrounded, can certainly be co-opted into the same progressivist narrative, since it serves to highlight the relative safety of modernity. Melman's approach is different since she holds that the image of the dungeon, again, not particularly salient in this case but nevertheless present in the prominently positioned Tower of London, reminded

lower-middle or working-class spectators that arbitrary violence and injustice continued in the modern city, albeit below the surface. Melman's arguments correspond in some degree to the work of the cultural historian David Pike, who has explored how the shadowy "underworld" evocations of the city function as a dark mirror to an ostensibly rational and ordered modernity. Pike's discussion (2007, 2), which draws on Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory (1991), is useful in its identification of "underworld" spaces as operating according to an oneiric logic in which the problems of the present are played out in coded form in the manner of a dream or nightmare. Taking this approach, we could argue that in contrast to the rational daylight representation of the metropolis in Hornor's *Panorama*, which, at least in Arnold's account, offered the spectator a sense of mastery and control, the scenes of old London with which I am concerned functioned as sites for the projection of latent or unconscious emotions. Melman identifies horror as the dominant affect associated with historical sites in this period, but I want to argue for a more nuanced set of meanings, reflecting some correspondingly more ambivalent attitudes towards the past.

The fascination with the Fire of 1666 that is so in evidence in many nineteenth-century recreations may be interpreted as a way of playing out contemporary anxieties about the more recent destruction of ancient sites and landmarks, the loss and sense of violation experienced by contemporary Londoners projected onto the spectacle of the city on fire. While heritage is often defined as the material aspects of a given society that are considered worthy of preservation, it is important to note that the "London in the Olden Time" attraction involved the resurrection of a city that was by this point long gone. The review of this show in the *Illustrated London News* gives an idea of the intense emotions that would surely have been prompted by the spectacle of London's medieval heritage burning to ashes night after night in the suggestion that the reflection of the blaze in the water suggested an image of "Old Father Thames weeping" ("Picture Model" 1844). The view as seen from the far bank of the "Thames" would have been similar to the opening scene of Samuel Atkyns's play *The Fire of London; or, the Baker's Daughter*, performed at the Britannia theatre in 1849. The performance began with a view of "London Before the Great Fire from the Southwarke side of the River Thames" (sic). The action was drawn partly from Harrison Ainsworth's novel *Old St Paul's*, in which Protestant zealots deliberately set fire to the city. The first scene of Atkyns's play has them admiring the view of the riverside from the Southbank. One of the plotters observes the panorama of the city, declaring "The sun shines full upon London for the last time," but one of his co-conspirators replies:

And yet I would fain see it once more as I beheld it this morn when day arose upon it for the last time – It looked so beautiful that my heart smote me, and tears started to my eyes – to think that those goodly habitations, those towers, temples halls and palaces, should so soon be levelled with the dust – But away with thoughts like these – we have received our commission from heaven . . . Yes, London shall fall! (Atkyns 1849)

The conspirators are intent on razing to the ground what they see as a corrupt city, yet Atkyns attributes to them a complex and ambivalent set of emotions involving nostalgia and regret as well as fanatical hatred. The speech of this conspirator invites the largely working-class audience of the *Britannia* to meditate on the beauty of the riverside on the very eve of its destruction, and arguably reflects the feelings of this public towards the alterations and “improvements” carried out in their own time.

The fascination of nineteenth-century publics with dungeons and other subterranean spaces certainly reflects a taste for horror, but these sites, too, offered consolation to a dislocated population, since the excavations carried out in the course of various modernisation projects revealed that, even if the city that was known and familiar was in the process of being effaced, the past continued to exist beneath the surface, as evidenced by the unearthed vestiges of medieval and Roman London (Flint 2000, 139). The identification of the underworld as a repository of memory also rested on the fact that below ground level the city’s original topography could still be detected. This was, as I have argued elsewhere, an important, although not directly discussed, part of the appeal of the “Old House on West Street,” also known as the “Thieves” House,” a dilapidated structure situated in the notorious slum of West Smithfield that became a sensation in 1844, attracting thousands of visitors in the same year as the “London in the Olden Time” spectacle (Smyth 2021) (Figure 6). It first came to public attention when plans for its demolition for the building of Farringdon Road became known. Although post-dating the Great Fire, having been built in the 1680s, the house became associated in the popular imagination with the Tudor period. Contemporary reports were quick to spin gruesome stories around it of kidnappings and murders, while connecting it to celebrity criminals of the previous century such as Jack Sheppard and Jonathan Wild. These narratives played into the familiar trope of the violent and disorderly eighteenth-century city, but it was the situation of the house on the banks of the River Fleet that made it unique. This feature has been overlooked in treatments that focus on its dark associations, but was, I want to argue, central to its popular appeal.

By the 1840s, the Fleet ran underground for most of its course as the Fleet Ditch sewer, but the few yards of it that traversed West Street were as yet above ground, as can be seen in a drawing made in the days prior to the demolition of the house, which shows its position in relation to the river (Figure 7). A trap in the cellar of the house was said to open directly onto the Fleet Ditch. Sensationalised reports claimed that this was used to facilitate the disposal of murder victims, but this link to the lost river was also a source of consolation. The redevelopment of the area entailed the disappearance not only of the house but also of this remaining stretch of the river, so that Farringdon Road now runs directly along its course, twenty-five feet above it. Here, in this short stretch of the Fleet Ditch, was a connection to the past of



Figure 6. Robert Blemmel Schnebbelie, *Jonathan Wild's, the Red Lion Inn, and Tavern opposite*, 1844, © London Metropolitan archives.

the city, an orientation point that lay hidden and in a somewhat fallen state, but nonetheless still there. The underground portion of the Fleet exerted a similar fascination and there are several accounts of people visiting it. An article that appeared in *Punch* in 1849 imagined pleasure seekers embarking on a “Smithfieldite Excursion” from Fleet Ditch and proceeding along the sewer (Figure 8). While the *Punch* article aimed at comic effect, the idea that one might take a Smithfieldite excursion was not altogether fanciful: in the course of researching his history of the Fleet, the amateur historian Anthony Crosby left records of his own visit to the underground portion of the river where he noted the medieval bridge that had once spanned what had then been a navigable river, still intact.⁸



Figure 7. Thomas Hosmer Shepherd, Back of the House in West St showing the connection with Fleet Ditch, c. 1844, © London Metropolitan archives.

The “London in the Olden Time” attraction reveals a similar preoccupation with the relationship of the old city to the river. The past is indeed presented as a period of community and shared religious belief, but the illustration of it in the *Illustrated London News* also draws the viewer’s attention to Old London Bridge, its shops and houses, which had been removed in the 1760s, intact (Figure 9).



Figure 8. "A Smithfieldite Excursion," *Punch*, vol. 17, 1849 © London Metropolitan archives.



Figure 9. "Picture-model of Old London, at the Surrey Zoological Gardens," *Illustrated London News*, 1 June 1844, © Mary Evans Picture Library.

With its buildings opening directly onto the water, this is an urban environment still in harmony with the natural topography. This relationship was gradually eroded over the course of the nineteenth century. Here, however, the connection between urban and natural environments is intact. We see, for instance, that Baynard's castle has a moat bridge, and we also see figures in boats – whether these are actors employed to populate the scene or staffage imagined by the artist is not known. In any case, they add to the idyllic representation of a harmony that was at that very moment in the process of being destroyed.

Old wapping

This fascination with the riverside was equally a feature of plays set in old Wapping. In the building of the new docks in the 1820s, homes and businesses

within the planning area had been subject to compulsory purchase and demolished. The development involved the complete destruction of the community, since instead of local tradespeople catering for shipping, the area was now made up of a population of migrant workers, primarily from Ireland, whom Henry Mayhew described as “*thousands of men struggling for only one day’s hire*” (Mayhew 1849, 303–4). Despite the fall in population, there was increased overcrowding as those made homeless by the docks crammed into the remaining residential buildings, so that by mid-century Wapping was described as “one of the most degraded parts of London” (Darby 1988, 67). Something of the sense of loss and dispossession involved in this process may be inferred from the response to the proposal to build adjacent docks in the neighbouring area of St Katherine’s. The developers’ plan was to move all the people out, demolish the twelfth-century church, and also the many old houses in the area. This prompted violent protests from locals who presented a petition to Parliament in which they described the proposed destruction of the church, and also the cemetery where their ancestors had been buried for generations, as a prospect that went against “every principle of propriety and decency.” The complaint also cited not only the loss of their homes, but also their livelihoods, which were dependent on proximity to the waterfront, access to which would, of course, be cut off by the warehouses as it had been at Wapping. The petition emphasised the social networks within the community as the means by which small businesses were able to function, in one place stating that many of the inhabitants “rest their future prospects in life upon the connexions which themselves and ancestors have formed in the neighbourhood” and that these “will be wholly destroyed” by the building of the docks (Darby 1988, 62). The petitioners were initially successful. The plans to build the docks were withdrawn in 1824 but the bill went through a year later; in 1825, water covered the site of the old church and surrounding precincts.

In some of the plays about Wapping the historical setting is made explicit. For instance, stage instructions for Henry Holl’s *Wapping Old Stairs*, first performed in 1837, include “a view of Wapping Old Stairs, as in 1760.” *A Sailor’s Knot*, by Henry Pettitt, performed at Drury Lane in 1891 was set during the Napoleonic wars.⁹ The reviewer of the *Morning Post*, writing about a performance of this last play described the on-stage Wapping as “not the grimy place we see in these days, but quaint and picturesque with its old boat-building yards, adorned with figure heads or ancient men-of-war, and bright with cheerful, sunny life on the river” (“Drury Lane Theatre” 1891). Yet even those supposedly set in the present day show Wapping as it had once been rather than as it was. John Faucit Saville’s play, *Wapping Old Stairs*, first performed in 1837 is set in the 1830s, but toy theatre illustrations show that it, too, invited audiences to compare the stage evocation of a lost environment with the present-day reality (Figure 10). The fascination exercised by old Wapping was not merely owing to its rusticity. With the building of the docks, the locality had been effectively cut



Figure 10. Toy theatre image of the last scene of *Wapping Old Stairs*, n.d., Clive Hicks-Jenkins collection.

off from the rest of the city, hemmed in by the high, blank walls of the wharves on one side and the security walls of the docks on the other. All of the Wapping plays focused on Wapping Old Stairs, one of the stairs which led down to the river where sailors traditionally left on long voyages and also where people would take boats across the river. The new warehouses formed a continuous, unbroken wall, several stories high, that cut off pedestrian access to the water, blocking communication with the river. The remaining stairs down to the water were, and continue to be, a relic of eighteenth-century Wapping and, as such, a *lieu de mémoire*, defined by Pierre Nora as a fragment within a modernity cut off from the past in which memory has been allowed to accrue (Nora 1996). The appeal to modern audiences of both the Stairs itself and of the plays that lovingly reconstructed Old Wapping as it once had been is suggested in Claude Lévi-Strauss's remarks about Joseph Vernet's seascapes:

the scenes they depict become more real for me than those of real life. For me, their value lies in the fact that they allow me to relive the relationship between sea and land which still existed at that time; a port was a human settlement which did not completely destroy, but rather gave a pattern to, the natural relationships between geology, geography and vegetation, and thus offered an exceptional kind of reality, a dream-world in which we can find refuge. (Lévi-Strauss 1970, 97)

Faucit Saville's play revolves around a lost will, ownership of the land next to the shore, and Wapping Old Stairs itself. In the final scene, a character called Old Adams makes a speech that reflects the concerns of the St Katherine's protesters. He has, we understand, lost his mind owing to a crime which he believes he committed before the play starts. He is convinced that, many years ago, he murdered the true heir of Wapping Old Stairs on the orders of his villainous uncle; in fact, the heir survived and has come back to claim the will and his birth right. Up until this point, Old Adam's mind had been completely unravelled and he has been unaware of, and disengaged from, his surroundings, knowing neither where nor who he is. During the last scene, with the possibility of redemption for his supposed crime, he begins to recover his senses. Suddenly he recognises his surroundings and begins to describe them. As the staging instructions inform us, "[f]ixing a steadfast gaze on the objects around, and appearing to recognise them," he notices first "[t]he church tower," then "the wharfs, my neighbours craft!" He says, "I read their names upon the sterns! Yes, I remember everything . . . These steps – Wapping Old Stairs! Well do I remember them!" (Faucit Saville 1837). The scene ends with a fight for possession of the will which takes place on the Stairs, the document having been buried under one of its wooden steps. The true heir manages to gain possession of it and, as a wedding present he grants the shoreline part of the estate with the stairs to the sailor hero of the piece – who is also Old Adams's future son in law. The play thus ends with a local family regaining ownership of land which had in real life thirty years previously been subject to a traumatic process of modernisation in which a whole community had been displaced. As toy theatre depictions demonstrate, this denouement was performed before a backdrop showing "Wapping Old Stairs by Moonlight," with a panoramic expanse of the river and shipping visible between timber-framed buildings, a view that was, of course, no longer possible (see [Figure 10](#)).

Interpretive approaches to immersive spectacle and the question of 'passive' spectatorship

My discussion has so far sought to uncover an alternative set of meanings embedded in the iconography of a range of sites, performances, and stand-alone entertainments, but it is the immersive realism of all of these attractions that lies behind their identification with a particular notion of audience passivity in this period. In *The Spectacular Past: Popular History and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century France*, Maurice Samuels cites the "unimagined degree of specificity" (Samuels 2004, 8) in historical recreations, which he argues had a paralysing effect on the viewer, who was rendered helpless against what he identifies as a "covert form of ideological manipulation" (89). Samuels' account draws on a tradition of anti-visual theory, a tendency that, as Michael E. Gardiner observes, associates modern visuality with a problematic reduction of human

experience to pure image and thus with “false-consciousness, quasi-knowledge and non-participation” (Gardiner 2011, 357).

The examples dealt with in this article, although they took different forms, are prime material for such readings since they all in their own way aimed at immediacy; in other words, they sought to create the sensation of no medium at all between the viewer and the image. The 360-degree panorama was, of course, an image without a frame and, while the spectator could move freely around the viewing platform, it was positioned in such a way that there was no external point of reference that would signal the artifice of the image. Stage decors portraying specific urban locations were presented as replicas of those sites and aimed at topographical accuracy, while the moving panoramas included in theatrical productions immersed the viewer in such a way that they were invited to imagine themselves on a journey through the city. The “London in the Olden Time” show at the Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens does not correspond to any of the better-known media, but evidently aimed to create a similar sense of immediacy. It was created by stage painters, who would have drawn on their skills as theatrical scenic designers, but at the same time it was a stand-alone entertainment constructed in the open air, and referred to as both a “picture” and a “model.” The *Illustrated London News* review is particularly instructive in that the author notes the manner in which the edges of the model are “softened away to nothingness,” while also remarking on the “bold relief” of the foreground elements. While the former quality blurred the boundary between real and fictive space, the illusion of solidity and three-dimensionality was also powerfully effective. However, I want to push back against approaches that insist upon the hegemonic nature of modern visuality by highlighting the creativity inherent to popular viewing practices and also, in my final section, by identifying the potential for spectators’ experience to deviate from the stated aims of the makers of a given attraction.

There have been some recent attempts to problematise the idea of “passive” spectatorship, but these have tended to do so by stressing the haptic aspect of certain immersive entertainments, presumably in an effort to avoid the negative connotations of “ocularcentrism.” I want to reclaim spectacle from that type of interpretation, not by insisting upon the involvement of senses other than sight, but rather by exploring the creative imaginative engagement that took place in the “mind’s eye” of the spectator. I noted above the edges of the “London in the Olden Time” model, which appeared to dissolve into nothingness, while the foreground elements appeared convincingly three-dimensional. While certainly part of the “reality effect” of the scene, this description also calls to mind a vision or hallucination. Indeed, both the souvenir lithograph and the illustration in the *Illustrated London Press* take the form of vignettes, images that are sharp in the centre, while dissolving around the edges, and which were often used in the nineteenth century to denote a vision or dream image (see [Figures 2 and 9](#)). The spectacle of “London in the Olden Time” thus evoked an image seen in the

mind's eye, a memory or dream, which the viewer could retain and call upon as a comparison when confronted with the prosaic present.

My reading rests on a mode of looking that invited comparisons between the present moment and the historical past. As I mentioned at the start of this article, Victor Hugo had an indirect influence on visualisations of old London through unauthorised adaptations of his play *Marie Tudor*. But we may also find it instructive to look to his comments in *Notre Dame de Paris* of 1831, which enjoyed popularity in Britain both as a novel and through stage adaptations. In the chapter entitled "A Bird's Eye View of Paris [*Paris à vol d'oiseau*]," Hugo describes the view of old Paris from the top of Notre Dame. The reader is invited to "reconstruct it in your mind . . . And then, compare." Where the Paris of the late Middle Ages is suggested through organic and natural metaphors – "a forest," "a beehive," "the waves of a sea" – the city of the 1830s, writes Hugo, possesses "that richness of line, that opulence of detail, that diversity of aspect, that *je ne sais quoi* of the grandiose in the simple, the unexpected in the beautiful, that characterises a draughts board."¹⁰ Dilapidated and disorganised though it may seem from the vantage point of Notre Dame, the medieval city is humane and legible compared with the charmless utilitarian grid of the modern metropolis.

This mode of comparison is also a feature of Harrison Ainsworth's serialised novel *The Tower of London* of 1840, in which the artist George Cruikshank juxtaposed paired illustrations of the same site within the Tower in the present and in 1553 (Figures 11 and 12). The former, in informal, loosely-hatched wood-engravings, the print-maker's marks clearly visible, presented empty rooms and corners of the Tower in prosaic daylight. The latter showed the same spaces in steel engravings that use the atmospheric potential of that medium to full effect. These are, despite their more conventional portrait format, much more immersive since the signs of mediation are less in evidence, acquiring a phantasmagoric quality as the figures of history emerge from the inky shadows of Cruikshank's dense hatching. Having seen Cruikshank's illustrations, visitors to the Tower were thus primed to retain in their mind's eye his evocation of the sixteenth century and could therefore imagine the space in which they stood as it had been in the time of the Tudors. They could note, for instance, the ghost of gothic arches in *The Brick Tower* and imagine the chamber as it once had been, its original proportions and pointed windows intact.¹¹

The "Old London Street" at the International Health Exhibition, 1884

My final case study, the "Old London Street," featured as part of the International Health Exhibition in South Kensington in 1884, an event designed to celebrate modern advances in drainage, plumbing and sanitation (Figure 13). It appeared much later than the examples already discussed, but clearly relates to those earlier attractions. Consisting of reduced-scale houses that the visitor



Figure 11. George Cruikshank, The Brick Tower illustration for Harrison Ainsworth, *The Tower of London*, 1840, © look and learn.

could actually enter, it was advertised as “no painted and paste board delusions, but honest structures” (*Official Catalogue* 1884). It would seem, then, that it was presented to the public as an improvement on shows like “London in the Olden Time,” but in accordance with the logic of remediation, the earlier technology remained as a reference point that served to anchor the reality claim of the newer one (Bolter and Grusin 1999). Publicity images for both attractions followed the same pattern of remediation; the 1844 spectacle had been publicised in wood-engraved vignettes, while a series of stereoscopic photographs were produced to commemorate the “Old London Street.”

The designers considered recreating an actual old London street – Cheapside was apparently mooted – but owing to the incomplete availability of documentary evidence for any one location the organisers decided on a sort of composite fantasy street that brought together smaller-scale replicas of famous or exemplary buildings, most of which had been destroyed in the Fire of London (*Official Catalogue* 1884). The makers chose structures that they considered as typical of the old city, such as churches and guild houses, but many of the buildings were included for their association with famous figures or historical events, such as the house in which the Gunpowder Plot had been planned in 1605. The

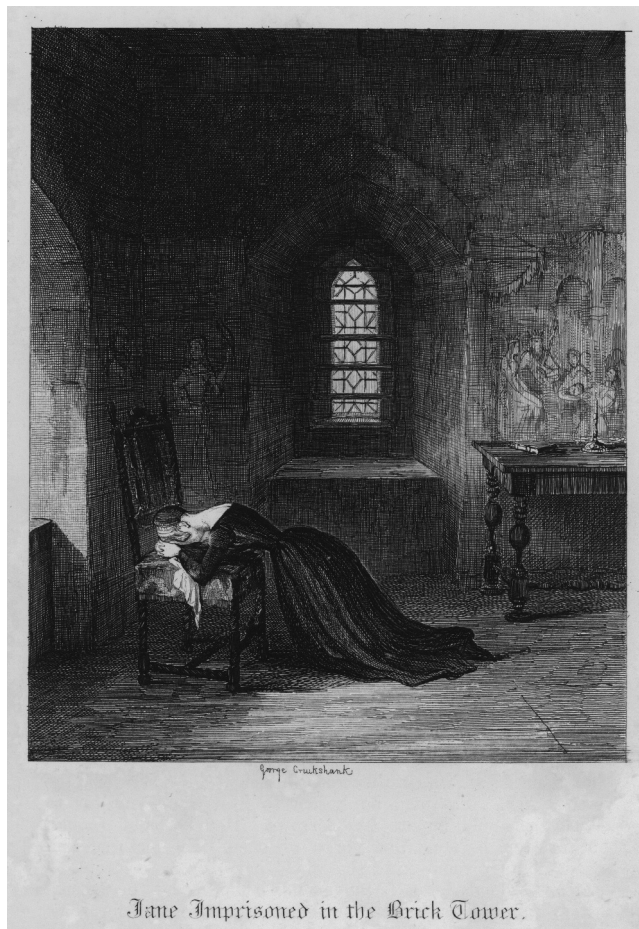


Figure 12. George Cruikshank, *Jane Imprisoned in the Brick Tower*, illustration for Harrison Ainsworth, *The Tower of London*, 1840, © look and learn.

attraction included a group of houses that had famously been spared by the fire as they were at the very edge of the burned portion of the city. Having survived the fire of 1666, they had been removed in 1800, suggesting a further linkage between the Great Fire and the sense of loss associated with the more recent programme of demolitions.

As Wilson Smith relates in a recent chapter on this construction, some of its financial backing came from the London Livery Companies. As he writes, having “outlived their origins as medieval craft guilds and survived as wealthy, self-perpetuating charitable foundations” (Smith 2015, 209), they hoped to gain self-promotion in the face of increasing attacks on their wealth and privilege and calls for reform. According to Smith, the “moving spirit behind Old London was George Shaw, Master of the Plumbers’ Company and the projector of a new role for his guild in overseeing a scheme for the registration of plumbers” (209). The ostensible objective was thus to celebrate modern achievements in health and

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SIXPENCE.
WITH TWO SUPPLEMENTS BY POST.



1. All-Hallows Staining, and Butchers' Row. 2. Isaac Walton's House in Fleet-street. 3. Old English Gateway.

THE INTERNATIONAL HEALTH EXHIBITION AT SOUTH KENSINGTON: "REPRODUCTION OF LONDON IN THE OLDEN TIME."

Figure 13. The Old London Street at the International Health Exhibition, *Illustrated London News*, 10 May 1884, © London Metropolitan Archive.

safety, and so the problems of the old city were deliberately emphasised in the Old London Street. Although the Great Fire was not represented directly, visitors were invited to think about it while they walked around. The pamphlet that accompanied the attraction referred to it as a recreation of the city “before that swift furnace of flame of 1666 swept it forever from off the face of the earth” (*Official Catalogue* 1884). There were references to the evidently inadequate fire-fighting technology of the time as well as to the flammable building materials, while the narrow staircases and tight spaces of the interiors suggested overcrowding. Since it was known that the Great Fire had purged London of plague, the official narrative was concerned with presenting the old city as a plague trap, but the enthusiastic response of visitors suggests that it brought to mind more positive associations of the community and social life of the past. The street was narrow and twisting, its picturesque irregularity in sharp contrast to the wide perspectives of the modern metropolis; it seemed designed for social interaction as opposed to circulation. Many of the buildings seem to have been chosen to showcase traditional skills and workmanship and the organisers employed actors in historical dress to engage in various traditional crafts.

In an article on this attraction, Kate Hill argues for the “embodied, performative and haptic” dimension of the “Old London Street” – the fact that visitors could walk down the street, witness at close quarters actors practising traditional crafts, and even enter the houses – as representing a point of resistance to the hegemonic meanings associated with AHD (Hill 2018, 308). She invokes Michel de Certeau’s “insistence on the way that moving through a space – ‘the act of passing by’ – constitutes an interpretation of that space,” so that meaning is not “determined in advance,” but rather emerges from the individual encounter (314). In the case of the “London in the Olden Time” attraction of 1844, the audience witnessed the burning of London from a comfortable distance on the opposite bank of an artificial lake. It is thus definable as pure spectacle without any haptic dimension and exemplifies the kind of decorporalised ocularcentrism that is generally understood as a conduit for official ideology. Indeed, on the face of it, the two attractions, forty years apart, seem quite different, yet both aspired to the common aim of immediacy, each drawing on the most advanced technology available at the time, be that the canvas construction of 1844 or the reduced-scale model of 1884, wood-engraved illustrations or stereoscopic photographs. In any case, it is arguably in the nature of all images to allow for a certain freedom of interpretation. As Jacques Rancière observes in his essay “*Le Spectateur émancipé*,” spectating is never passive and contemplation, although it takes place in the mind of the beholder, is a creative act.¹² Moreover, both attractions depended on the creative potential of the spectator’s visual imagination. While the staffage in the vignette of “London in the Olden Time” in the *Illustrated London News* prepared visitors to imagine seventeenth-century Londoners peopling the scene, the houses of the “Old London Street” were glazed with historically appropriate thick glass so that, while in

publicity images participants appear incongruous in their modern dress, from within, one's fellows would have appeared blurred enough that one could imagine that they were in fact sixteenth-century Londoners.

Indeed, the mind's eye image provides a way to think about the spectator's creative participation in immersive spectacles of Old London. Through this process, the inhabitants of a bewildering and disorienting metropolis could be reminded that beneath the surface, the past was still there, not just the past of arbitrary violence that Melman identifies, but a past in which the city was in harmony with nature and with the needs of its human inhabitants. This meaning was embedded in all of the immersive entertainments discussed here, from the riverside view of "London in the Olden Time" to the organic forms of the "Old London Street." In *Notre Dame de Paris* Hugo invited his readers in to contemplate medieval Paris and then compare it to the city of the present. In a similar way, the spectacle of old London, once witnessed in one of these simulations, could be retained in the mind's eye of the spectator and imaginatively mapped onto the modern metropolis. For instance, Baynard's Castle the moated structure in the foreground of "London in the Olden Time," described as a sort of twin to the Tower of London in the east, had been almost entirely destroyed in the Great Fire, and the area was later used for warehouses. But on a post-Fire map of London we see "Castle Street," just where it had been (Figure 14). Having seen it in all its glory and then burned to the ground at the Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens, one could, the next time one was in that locality, imaginatively reconstruct it in the mind's eye. Today the area is unrecognisable, except that there is a Castle Baynard Street that now runs east west where the castle once stood.

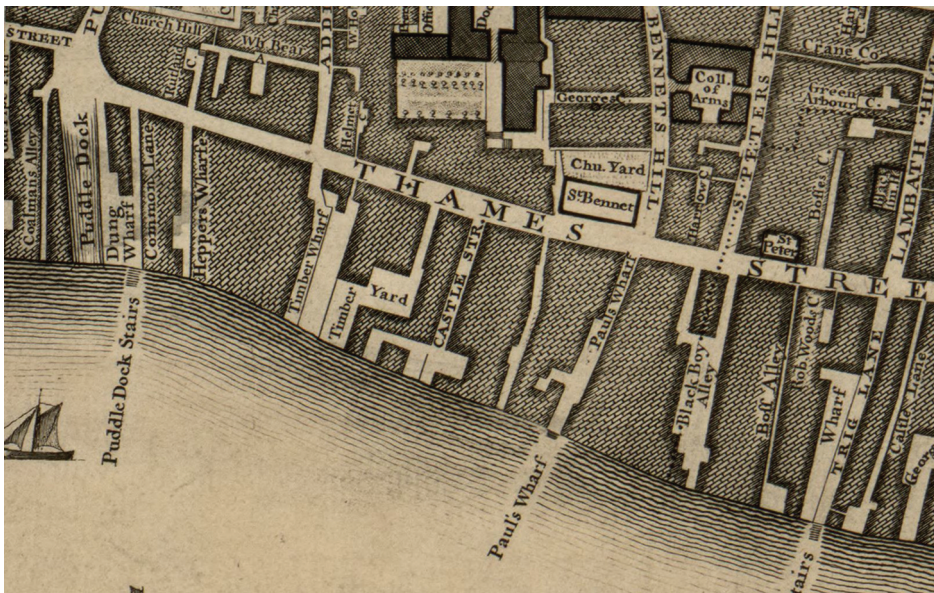


Figure 14. John Rocque's map of London showing Castle Street, 1746, Wikimedia Commons.

Pierre Nora defines *lieux de mémoire* as amputated fragments of the past, “the rituals of a ritual-less society; fleeting incursions of the sacred into the disenchanting world” (Nora 1992, 7). Seen in this way, spectacular reconstructions of lost sites were ersatz simulacra that replaced a genuine connection to the past. The examples discussed here were certainly synthesised inventions appealing to a modern sensibility, but the experiences they offered were far more open to interpretation than is generally recognised. The immersive illusionism of these reconstructions allowed them to become part of the dream geography of spectators, interstitial spaces in which emotions such as loss, trauma and desire could be worked out through the free play of the imagination.

Notes

1. The 350th anniversary of the Great Fire of London in (2016) was the occasion for several spectacular and immersive recreations of the pre-fire city, ranging from the interactive attraction “Great Fire 1666” by the gaming company Minecraft hosted by the Museum of London to a three-dimensional 120 ft wooden model by the artist David Best, assembled on the river Thames and set ablaze. I have not sought to connect the spectacle of the Great Fire in the nineteenth-century attractions discussed here to these twenty-first century projects as the latter seem to deliberately resist the immersive qualities of their predecessors. Virtual reality reconstructions such as those by the German company TimeRide and a virtual reality experience of the assassination of the Duc de Guise presented at the Chateau of Blois in 2017 are more in the spirit of the entertainments discussed here and demonstrate the ongoing appeal of immersive historical entertainments.
2. Drawings of the moving panorama for the 1855 Princess’s Theatre production designed by W. Gordon and others are in the Prints & Drawings dept. V&A. Hawes Craven also designed a moving panorama for Henry Irving’s production of *Henry VIII* at the Lyceum Theatre in 1892. Drawings relating to it are held in the Prints and Drawings dept. V&A, box DT35A.
3. For example, William James Lucas’ *The Traitor’s Gate; or the Tower of London in 1553*, performed at the Royal Pavilion theatre in 1834, which included the panoramic view of the sixteenth-century city.
4. Reviews compared the Poecilorama to Daguerre’s invention, which had opened its London branch in Regent’s Park in 1823 (“Poecilorama” 1827).
5. Publicity poster, British Library, Evan. 2722.
6. Publicity poster, British Library, Evan. 2722; time of feeding of the animals given in *Morning Advertiser*, 20 August 1844.
7. Lithograph published by Webb, 1844. See Warwick Wroth (1907).
8. Crosby’s notes and drawings recording this expedition are in the London Metropolitan Archive, Special Collections, SC/GL/CRO.
9. Henry Holl, *Wapping Old Stairs!; or the Child of a Tar*, first performance 7 July 1834, R.P. M.; Henry Pettitt, *A Sailor’s Knot*, first performance, Drury Lane, 5 September (1891).
10. “[R]econstruisez-le dans votre pensée ... Et puis, comparez;” “une forêt,” “les alvéoles dans la ruche,” “des vagues d’une mer” “cette richesse de lignes, cette opulence de détails, cette diversité d’aspects, ce je ne sais quoi de grandiose

dans le simple et d'inattendu dans le beau qui caractérise un damier" (Hugo 1831).

11. This invitation to imaginatively compare the same location is also in evidence in old London plays; for instance, Act I, Scene 2 of Fitzball's highwayman drama *Paul Clifford* is set "Outside Covent Garden Theatre, at Night," so that spectators could see on stage the theatre in which they were seated as it would have been 50 years previously.
12. "The spectator also acts . . . She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way . . . They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them" (Ranci re 2009, 13).

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