

Modernity, Ephemerality and the Capture of Periodical Time

The programme for today's symposium opens with a suggestive image, taken from one of the NCSE titles, the *Publishers' Circular*. an illustration of a clockface, a timepiece, the product of a company that was trying to sell watches to 'young people'. It was part of the commercial generation of a demand for pocket watches among consumers that led to a rapid growth in their use towards the end of the nineteenth century. Georg Simmel observed 'the universal diffusion of pocket watches' in 1903 and linked the new obsession with temporal precision around the turn of the century, of which the craze for watches was both symptom and cause, to the heightened tempo and, as Simmel puts it, the 'intensification of nervous stimulation' that characterised modern urban life.¹ For film historian Mary Ann Doane, this new sense of the *weight* of time and, further, the problem of its representability, was a context and condition of the development of early film, and is the subject of her wonderfully suggestive 2002 study of the emergence of cinematic time. I was, though, struck by the resonances of her argument for the emergence of *periodical* time, a subject now receiving some critical attention. The call for papers for the upcoming RSVP Conference on Time conveniently lists some of the ways periodicals intersect with the idea of time: periodical rhythms and periodicities; local, national, global time; modernities; technologies and time; memory; presentism then and now; historical pasts and projected futures; historicity; signs of the times; time and space; synchronicity and/or simultaneity; visual culture and time; speed; dailiness, weekliness, monthliness, etc; timeliness; nostalgia; topicality; time and

reading; time warps, gaps, duration; leisure time, work time. My own pre-emptive glimpse into these dizzying vistas of temporality will try to open up the question of the extent to which nineteenth-century journalism participated in the ironic cultural project of archiving the present whereby, as Doane argues in relation to early film, 'what is archived is not so much a material object as an experience – an experience of the present'.² And, further, it will consider how one of the challenges facing contemporary scholars engaged in digitising nineteenth-century journalism is how to devise an archival technology that will adequately represent this Victorian experience of the present.

The periodical press is often seen as an exemplary nineteenth-century cultural form, its fragmentary, contingent and ephemeral characteristics defining it as an intrinsically modern medium suited to the disaggregated experience of individuals within an emergent consumer society. This is how Victorians themselves viewed journalism. Walter Bagehot, for example, himself a journalist of course, found in the press the quintessential modern urban form. The very city of London, he proposes in an article of 1858 for the *National Review* on 'Charles Dickens', 'is like a newspaper':

Everything is there, and everything is disconnected. There is every kind of person in some houses but there is no more connection between the houses than between the neighbours in the lists of "births, marriages, and deaths." As we change from the broad leader to the squalid police report we pass a corner and we are in a changed world.

Dickens' own journalistic experience equips him admirably to represent this modern metropolis in his fiction, according to Bagehot, for '[h]e describes London like a special correspondent for posterity'.³ In Bagehot's phrase,

writing that is definitively live and of the moment, eyewitness news, is envisaged as nonetheless preserved for 'posterity'. Dickens writes the present for the future. The trope of journalism expands to encompass both the Victorian novelist-reporter and the modern reader thumbing, or now scrolling, through the newspaper of the past. In another article of this period, 'The First Edinburgh Reviewers' (1855), Bagehot contrasts early-nineteenth-century models of journalism with the modern style. He identifies 'the review-like essay and the essay-like review' as 'the very model of our modern writing,' and celebrates it as meeting the new needs of the times. He comments on the 'casual character of modern literature,' of which he notes 'everything about it is temporary and fragmentary [...] The race has made up its mind to be fugitive, as well as minute'.⁴ Bagehot's emphasis on the fugitive and the fragmentary is taken up again by Charles Baudelaire, who similarly sees journalism as the key cultural medium of the modern because of its ironic mission to capture the ephemeral. In 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863), he famously identifies the magazine fashion-plate as the art form that most effectively registers the nuances of modernity, by which he means 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent', and he proposes Constantin Guys (1802-92), a graphic artist who was for some years at mid-century on the staff of the *Illustrated London News*, as his representative painter of the elusive and fractured experience of modern life.⁵

For literary and cultural historians today, the periodical press is of interest because it seems such an index of the contemporary; because it seems to bring us closer to an understanding of both the condition of modernity and the everyday lives and preoccupations of ordinary Victorian

people. It does, indeed, seem to offer us an experience of the Victorian present, and of Victorian presentism, what Richard Altick calls the 'presence of the present'.⁶ Periodicals were deeply implicated in the epistemological changes in thinking about temporality and the representation of time associated with Modernity and the emergence of new technologies of representation. There was indeed an urgent awareness of the historical moment of the present but, given the sense of the acceleration of time, also of its contingency; and so alongside the valorisation of instantaneity and the instant there was a contradictory desire to arrest and store ephemera and, effectively, time itself, that was manifested in the development of new kinds of interest in archival processes and technologies in the period. For the nineteenth century was also, of course, the great age of the museum, and as well as being agents and engines of the present-day, periodicals both reflected and participated in the general passion for collecting, preserving, classification and display that characterised Victorian museum culture.

It is not unusual, of course, for particular cultural obsessions to derive from their opposites, and theorists of vision have identified other, and related, contradictory dynamics that are characteristic of this moment of modernity. Writing of the mid-late 1800s, Jonathan Crary, for example, observes that, at the very moment when perception seems to be 'characterized by experiences of fragmentation, shock, and dispersal', to be defined in short by distraction, reciprocally and paradoxically, a disciplinary regime of attentiveness was inaugurated.⁷ Similarly, Mary Ann Doane considers how the new sense of the divisibility of time that emerged in the late nineteenth century posed a challenge to traditional ideas of time as the ultimate continuum, and identifies

the 'dilemma of discontinuity and continuity' as the 'epistemological conundrum that structures the debates about the representability of time at the turn of the century'.⁸

Such binaried categories can help frame our thinking about the Victorian press, which notably exemplifies, in relation to both its form and its content, at once distraction and attention, continuity and, equally, discontinuity – for example, in the juxtaposition of diachronic narration and synchronic images, or the contiguity of attention-grabbing headlines and advertisements with discursive text. Furthermore, these are paradoxical properties that are replicated in digital form, in the indexical 'snapshots' and 'segmentation' of material, for example, as opposed to the illusion of a substantive 'page-turning' experience of reading a periodical – like the isolated and static frames of a film which when projected produce the illusion of continuous time and movement.⁹

But it is to the particular conundrum of archiving the present that I want to return; to the periodical's ineluctable association with the temporal and how that squares with its archival function; to the question how far the paradoxical desire to record the present may be said to have defined the nineteenth-century periodical project and in turn how far this impacts, both conceptually and in practice, upon its modern digitisation. The contradictory imperatives of currency and storage are enshrined in the very titles of some nineteenth-century serials, from the early *Lady's Monthly Museum* to later journals such as the NCSE's own *Monthly Repository*. Interestingly, both aspects of periodicalism, its presentism as well as its archival recording function, intensified in the later part of the century. The sense of journalistic immediacy

was vastly enhanced, for example, by the use of illustration, and publications such as the *Illustrated London News* and the *Penny Illustrated Paper* led the way in featuring large numbers of sometimes crude yet often vividly effective pictures that powerfully evoke the immediacy of newsworthy contemporary events. As periodical illustration became more and more lavish from the mid-1880s, with the development of new reproductive technologies and the dedication of more space to pictures and illustrated advertisements and supplements, and as, increasingly, woodcut engravings were superseded by photographic images, the press's capacity to capture the moment of the present became ever more convincing. The world becomes, in such illustrated news periodicals, and in the more ephemeral fashion magazines that proliferated at the turn of the century, in Siegfried Kracauer's phrase, a 'photographable present'.¹⁰ But this is precisely where the dilemma of the drive to capture the ephemeral present is most evident. Roland Barthes memorably finds in the photograph a curious conjunction of the 'here' and 'then',¹¹ and this formulation seems particularly apt when we think about the early use of photographs in news stories; for example, of the pictures of the intact Titanic, the indexical sign of its unsinkability, on the front pages of the press immediately following the disaster, and the headlines reporting 'Everyone safe' (the *Daily Mirror*), 'No lives lost' (the *Daily Mail*).¹² Such stories became, immediately, a part of the Titanic archive.

This last example reminds us that of course we experience time in a different way now than it was experienced a hundred years ago and more. (We can even experience the Victorian and Edwardian experiences of time in different ways, by calling up dusty volumes in a library and turning the pages

with white gloves on, or accessing them virtually, with the click of a mouse, on the British Library website.). But of course, as Doane points out, 'The ideologies of instantaneity, of temporal compression, of the lure of the present moment that emerge in this period have not disappeared; they confront us now in the form of digital technologies',¹³ so-called 'time-based' media not least. And if we think about the reportage of recent disasters, such as 9/11 or the London bombings, and the use of new electronic technologies such as amateur eye-witness video and mobile phone footage, the double question of instantaneity (this is what is happening here and now, and it's terrifying) and the archivability of time (endless replays of the moment of horror, until it becomes iconic) remain relevant. The reportage of disaster provides an extreme and especially legible example of the problem of how to capture, record and enact the contemporary moment that is fundamental to the periodical generically because of its crucial role in the mediation of modern experience. And of course such questions are absolutely germane to the modern project of making an electronic archive of that monumental nineteenth-century archive of the present, the periodical press.

Which brings me to the archive. As I understand it, IT practitioners have a specialized meaning for the term 'archive'. It is what happens to data that nobody is likely to want to access any more, and is erased from the main database and put into storage. And so, by this definition, it is the very opposite of, and incompatible with, the current. In the context of digitisation projects in the humanities, though, I assume we share a common understanding of the archive as a place that houses and manages a particular collection of primary material; and of the digital archive as a virtual location for a historical

collection that is either located in an actual place, or which is geographically dispersed and brought together electronically; or indeed as an assemblage that has an entirely virtual life as an constructed narrative. By contrast with the idea of an archive as a storage place for material that noone wants to access any more, in fact, it is precisely to enhance access to rare materials, to make them readily available to as wide a range of researchers as possible, that they are digitally archived. And it is also, of course, to preserve them, to save them from time's ravages, and in this respect it replicates the Victorians' own archival impulse. Our modern concerns about the fragility and vulnerability of our periodical history recall, for example, the anxieties of nineteenth-century English visitors to Italy about the rapid deterioration and imminent loss of its frescos and statuary and palazzi, which seemed to be fading and crumbling before their very eyes. The recent volume on *Periodicals of Queen Victoria's Empire* makes it clear that in the case of many imperial journals the fundamental task of preservation and compilation remains to be carried out. 'The sooner it is done, the better', Brahma Chaudhuri declares in the chapter on India ; 'these journals and newspapers are deteriorating so quickly that after a few years, there will be nothing left but piles of crumbled dust'.¹⁴ Time, in this respect, is the enemy, and the necessity for its arrest a matter for urgent practical action.

That this might be the fate of such a crucial component of the imperial archive is deeply regrettable, and surely preventable; it gives pause for thought in relation to the selection of material to be rescued and digitally archived. Within the humanities, the concept of the archive has received considerable critical attention of late, mainly around Foucault's discussion of it

in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and Derrida's various forays into the subject, from *The Post Card* (1987) to his 1995 publication *Archive Fever* (the occasion for which was a conference held at and about the Freud archives). For Foucault, the term archive describes '*the general system of the formation and transformation of statements*',¹⁵ while Derrida analyses the archive specifically as a site of power, but is also interested in the relationship between technologies of inscription and inner processes, between the archive as a public resource and as the repository of the unconscious. What their writing on the subject has highlighted is the work of the archive as a powerful mediating agent, the organising principles of which significantly affect the content that is presented.

My own focus today has been quite specifically on how the nineteenth-century periodical, as an archive of the present, mediates time, with a view to thinking about how the modern enterprise of digitising the nineteenth-century periodical must therefore engage in a kind of double mediation of the temporal. Because it functions as a record of the daily, weekly, monthly historical moment, because within its pages images and headlines capturing that moment are preserved, and furthermore because its very form reproduces and displays the fast pace and fractured, disaggregated experience of modern life from which it emerges and by which it is produced, the periodical itself seems at once to enact and to store up, to archive time. The driving motivations for the digital archiving of nineteenth-century journalism today are preservation and access. One of the great intellectual and technical challenges for those engaged in this enterprise, I suggest, is to enlist modern digital technologies in the cause of preserving and providing

access to the press's essential contingency, indexicality and instantaneity, to the very temporality, in short, it has been charged to arrest.

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¹ Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff. London: Collier Macmillan, 1950, 409-24, pp. 412, 410. Quoted in Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*. Cambridge Mass. And London: Harvard University Press, 2002, p.4.

² Doane, p.82.

³ [Walter Bagehot, 'Charles Dickens' (1858), *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, ed. Norman St John-Stevan. 15 vol. London: The Economist, 1965-86, vol. 2, pp.76-107, p.87.

⁴ Walter Bagehot, 'The First Edinburgh Reviewers' (1855), *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, vol. 1, pp. 310-12.

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon, 1964, pp.13, 6.

⁶ Richard D. Altick, *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991.

⁷ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2000, p.1.

⁸ Doane, p.9.

⁹ Doane, p.9.

¹⁰ Siegfried Kracauer, 'Photography'. *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y Levin (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1995, p.59. Quoted in Doane, p.103.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, ed. and trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, p.77. Quoted in Doane, p.103.

¹² 16 April, 1912.

¹³ Doane, p.20.

¹⁴ Brahma Chaudhuri, 'India'. *Periodicals of Queen Victoria's Empire: An Exploration*, ed. J. Don Vann and Rosemary T VanArsdel. London: Mansell, 1996, pp.175-200, p.184.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M.Sheridan Smith. London: Routledge Classics, 2002, p.146.