**Review of London Scenes: An Interdisciplinary Workshop at the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies**

**A review by Sophie Coulombeau | Saturday 4th December, Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies**

**‘The Metropolis is now before me. POUSSIN never had a more luxuriant, variegated and interesting subject for a landscape; nor had SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS finer characters for his canvas than what have already had a sitting for their likenesses to embellish LIFE IN LONDON.”**

So wrote Pierce Egan in his phenomenally popular nineteenth-century series *Life in London*, which is just as well-known for its vivid illustrations by the Cruikshank brothers as for its hectic, phantasmagoric descriptions of ‘the Highs, Lows, Ins and Outs of Life in London’. Having recently studied Egan for my Popular Romanticisms class, I was interested in the ways in which visual representations of London in the early nineteenth century interact with literary depictions to form contemporary concepts of the capital’s possibilities, innovations and dangers. The London Scenes workshop, run by CECS and held in King’s Manor on Saturday 4th December, came at the perfect time to help this English Literature student plunge into the murky waters of some largely unfamiliar disciplines to develop these ideas in new directions.

The workshop, attended by over 65 staff and students from York and further afield, aimed to blend art history, architecture, literature and cultural geography to provide new perspectives on visual depictions of London from the late seventeenth to the mid nineteenth century. As Dr. Alison O’Byrne, the workshop’s convenor, explained at the beginning of the day, the intention was to explore whether a narrative or tradition could be established in the sequence of disparate images addressed by our speakers. The format of the workshop (ten minute presentations, each followed by twenty minutes of discussion) would allow for significant participation from all staff and students present, and hopefully some helpful feedback for the speakers themselves.

First up was Amy Todman from the University of Glasgow, whose paper was titled *Vivarium Grenovicanum: Francis Place’s Views in and around the Royal Observatory*. The paper placed a series of prints of Greenwich Observatory in context of that site’s chequered history as a site of diverse cultural phenomena from astronomy to necromancy to drainage. Questions from the floor addressed a range of topics, including the relationship between prediction and royal prerogative, the significance of the portraits depicted in some of the interior scenes, and the relation of Greenwich to London in some of the prints with longer perspectives.

York’s Professor Mark Hallett, Head of the History of Art Department, presented a paper titled *Hogarth’s Vision of London*, which focused on the pictorial structure of Hogarth’s Four Times of Day series from the 1730s. He read this sequence in relation to contemporary ‘medley prints’, which are built up of layers of densely overlapping representations that blend ‘high’ and ‘low’ subject matter and challenge a stable vertical pictorial order. Similarly, Hogarth’s images employ a series of overlapping, overlaid human and architectural figures, a cacophony of high and low connotations which upset internal stability and sobriety. Particularly interesting was the discussion of how Hogarth patterns his images with tilted and populated ‘internal frames’ – windows, doorways, archways and signs – that often multiply within one another to ‘puncture facades’ and allow incisive and intrusive views into conventionally private spaces.

Professor Markman Ellis, from Queen Mary at the University of London, spoke about *Samuel Scott’s Thameside River Views, 1746-1764*. His intention was to map the location of Scott’s London paintings along the river to ‘trace the relationships between labour and leisure, delight and vulgarity’. I found his discussion of Thames watermen and the spaces they inhabited as sites of ‘interaction between polite and plebeian culture’ particularly thought-provoking. The audience asked a number of questions around the issue of idealization versus reality – were waterside roads as tranquil as Scott suggests? Were customs inspections so benign and picturesque? And why does a cloud in A Danish Timber-Bark Getting Underway appear so threatening, perhaps connoting arson and destruction?

Idealization was also a strong theme in the paper given by Dr. John Bonehill from the University of Glasgow, *“The centre of pleasure and magnificence”: Paul and Thomas Sandby’s London*. He explored a series of collaborative prints between the Sandby brothers, depicting various London scenes in a blend of classical and Biblical styles that recall the Solomonic notion of kingship often associated with the Stuarts. Some of the audience’s questions focused on how bridges and other structures are presented as appropriate forms for the viewer’s gaze within themselves, rather than being presented as edifying frames for a prospect or view of other, more conventional visual matter.

York’s own John Barrell, Professor of English Literature, presented a paper on *Edward Pugh in Modern London*. In the preface to his book, Modern London, in which Pugh’s prints appear, Richard Phillips undertook to describe ‘the very soul of London in a way which has never before been attempted’. He also promised to present ‘London as it is’ and ‘things as they are’, which terms recall the radical novels of Robert Bage and William Godwin. The presentation explored how depictions of the crowd – rather than the popular contemporary notion of the ‘mob’ – can be seen to work within these images to present the “real” London, with an unusual focus upon the private family unit in a public space. I was particularly interested by the reading of The Entrance to Hyde Park on a Sunday, which seemed to me to highlight a series of subtle interactions between disparate social groups and perhaps even link the crowd together as a community; one could perhaps compare these with the Hogarth images presented by Mark Hallett, in which dynamism seems to be more contained within isolated groups that fracture the attention of the viewer rather than encourage them to link these groups together with any depiction of interaction.

Professor Stephen Daniels from the University of Nottingham presented a paper called *The New Meridian: Turner and Greenwich*. This paper performed a close reading of an unusually satirical Turner painting that portrays contemporary architects Sir Frederick Trench and John Flaxman surveying the Thames and making plans for London. The texts and maps in the detailed foreground of the picture came under particularly careful scrutiny, not least a surprising detail painted very faintly into the sandy ground at the very front of the picture. This is a rough map of the river’s course, depicted in a ‘serpentine’ manner that resonates with the name of Elizabeth I on one of the bolder and more obvious maps held up for Flaxman’s inspection. Much discussion of the paper focused on this puzzling image, particularly on how it invites the viewer, like Flaxman, to look closely and to value the opticality of the painting, and how the way in which legibility is deliberately scrambled may indicate that this is a private rather than a public image.

Up next was Professor Jon Mee from the University of Warwick, who spoke about *“Mutual intercourse” and “licentious discussion” in The Microcosm of London 1808-1811*. This paper examined several prints from the colour-plate book published in three volumes by Rudolf Ackermann. The depictions of social interaction within these prints were explored in light of the notion of conversation as a harbinger of anxiety about the full flow of information and its political ramifications. Again, there was substantial discussion around the interactions between subjects within the images – can they be seen as attempts to represent numerous distinct groups as part of a greater social flow? It was noted in particular that the representation of the ‘Debating Society, Piccadilly’ is perhaps unexpectedly well-ordered – no irrelevant detail in an era that was so concerned with who had a right to voice political opinions in public, and how far such license could stretch without danger.

Dr. Alison O’Byrne from York’s Department of English and Related Literature presented on *George Scharf’s London*. She wanted to ask two broad questions: What is Scharf doing in his images of London’s shops? And is he developing a narrative – if so, what kind of narrative – about change in the city? Discussion focused on the images of decline and improvement within Scharf’s scenes; shops burning or being demolished but sometimes also thriving in the midst of decay. Some members of the audience read a certain melancholy into these depictions; others thought they represented a more neutral or perhaps even hopeful sense of transformation. Attention was also paid to differences between national shopping conventions at this time such as browsing and window shopping.

Closing the conference was Dr. Elizabeth Grant, Curator of Education at the British Architectural Library of the Royal Institution of British Architecture. She presented a paper on *John Tallis’s London Street Views*, which explored what Tallis’s Street Views show about how he and his contemporaries viewed and conceived London. The formal, static drawings of houses, shop-fronts and public buildings contrast with the scenes of dynamism, change and popular motion in Scharf’s images. Tallis’s London is a London made for strangers, but hauntingly devoid of people or of organic matter. The audience was interested in the question of what Tallis’s images were used for – as an actual map, they appear alienating and disconcerting to the modern viewer. Were they largely symbolic or aesthetic? Or more a practical tool for identifying the appropriate shop or service, a sort of early Yellow Pages? The commercial element of the images, by which businesses could buy a depiction, or even splash out to have their name inscribed above it, seems to support this latter approach.

Largely due to the enthusiasm within the audience for asking questions of the speakers, there was unfortunately no time at the end of the day for a broad overview of the themes that linked these presentations. I found the workshop a rich and thought-provoking experience on a wide disciplinary level, as well as with regard to its specific content. For an English Literature student without any training in art history, it’s illuminating to observe how colleagues from different disciplines parse their texts for meaning. For example, I had never considered the fact that one artist could ‘quote’ from another with a derivative image, just in the same way that one writer can recall another with a direct or indirect verbal quote.

Understanding the parallels between visual and verbal culture is essential for anybody working in the 18th-19th century period, when words and images, in works by writers so diverse as Burney, Blake, Egan and Dickens were inseparably tangled in their meaning. The workshop was a great opportunity for students at CECS to develop that understanding.

Is it an accident that so many of these writers, who conflate their words with imagery, set both types of text in London? Perhaps the form lends itself particularly well to that hub of cacophonic sights and sounds; maybe one could argue that it was felt you could not properly experience the burgeoning, multisensory chaos of London properly unless the reader/viewer was engaged in multiple ways. For me, the most interesting themes to emerge from the day were the issue of interaction between individuals or discrete groups within these images (is London – that microcosm of the nation – a city of isolated egotists or a community of fellow men and women?) and the idea of how ‘internal frames’ and family units both modify our understanding of the relationship between public and private spaces. It’s probably no coincidence that these themes are the ones that most directly touch upon my own research interests. Other attendees will doubtless have taken different interests and conclusions away, but certainly won’t have left without food for thought.