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James Buzard, Joseph W. Childers, Eileen Gillooly, eds. *Victorian Prism: Refractions of the Crystal Palace*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2007. Plates. xii + 327 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2603-2.

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Oblique Angles: New Perspectives on the Crystal Palace

In his landmark monograph about the Great Exhibition published in 1999, historian Jeffrey Auerbach wrote against the grain of the existing orthodoxy, as he argued that the first world's fair was a protean event and a cultural battlefield. The sophisticated and interesting essays in *Victorian Prism*, which came out of two self-consciously revisionist conferences held to mark the sesquicentennial of the Exhibition in 2001, take this understanding a step further as they frame the event as a definitive contest of meanings (p. 1). In the process, the thirteen literary critics and two historians who are contributors to this volume bring scholarship on the Exhibition to a new level of sophistication. They use the tools of literary criticism and textual analysis, while deploying an arsenal of cultural theory, to build on a growing body of scholarship that emphasizes multiple modernities, qualified Enlightenments, and discrepant cosmopolitanism (p. 2). By so doing, they seek to disabuse readers of any lingering suspicions that the Exhibition was the uncomplicated signifier of a confident, coherent modernity. Instead, the five sections of the text call into question the notion that the Exhibition marked the triumph—or even the unproblematic arrival—of progress, spectacle, stability, empire, and modernity itself.

Editors Eileen Gillooly and James Buzard set the agenda for the volume in part 1, which takes on the Exhibition's master tropes and master texts. They reconsider the Exhibition's *Catalogue*, its classificatory sys-

tem, and its layout to challenge the sense of confidence that surrounded the guiding narrative of progress at the great show. Through her assessment of the *Catalogue*, its rhetoric, and its grammar, Gillooly offers up a counter-narrative of anxious competition, fear, denial, envy and revenge in contradistinction to the received allegory of progress (p. 36). Buzard makes a similar intervention in the grand narrative by examining the problematic relationship between the Exhibition's two discrepant master tropes: the taxonomic metaphor, which guided the classificatory practices, and the cartographic principles that ultimately dictated the arrangements (p. 45). Like Gillooly, he seeks to challenge notions of the Exhibition as a univocal, confident affair.

The second portion of the book addresses the textual construction of visual effect at the Great Exhibition, which contributor Rachel Teukolsky reminds us was one of the defining moments of visual culture in the modern era (p. 84). Isobel Armstrong's nuanced examination of glass marshals an impressive range of texts to denaturalize any simple link between commodities and things as it sustains the preoccupation with anxiety that the volume's editors emphasize in part 1. Teukolsky considers a similarly broad range of texts, both high and low, to understand the classed politics of viewing as they played out around the display of sculpture—and especially nude sculpture—at the Crystal Palace. In the process, she identifies the Exhibition as a key moment for

the development of a Ruskinian understanding of objects as inseparable from their moral history and the material circumstances of their production (p. 96). If Armstrong is concerned with the artifact and Teukolsky with the spectator, Richard L. Stein is interested in the encounter of spectator and artifact at mid-century (p. 107). As he brings us beyond the Crystal Palace and into the National Portrait Gallery, he sustains Armstrong's interest in how things signify. He also extends Teukolsky's concern with morality, concluding that, as a professedly moral nation, Britain required moral symbols in the form of commodities and portraiture in 1851 (p. 105).

Students of the Exhibition have recognized it as a transformational moment not only for visual culture but also for class relations. The Exhibition has long been understood as the marker of a new moment of stability, with 1851 as a foil to 1848. As they take us beyond the remit of the aristocrats and industrialists who fused interests to plan the Exhibition, the contributors to part 3, "Exhibiting Publics," bring a new level of nuance to this understanding. Their important essays render the Exhibition as a precarious balance that sought gingerly to stabilize the social order as it gestured both to the past and the future. To this end, Karen Chase and Michael Levenson analyze Henry Mayhew's *Great Exhibition novel, 1851* (1851), to illuminate the tableau of London, rendered so well in *London Labor and the London Poor*, which lay beyond Hyde Park. They note 1851 to be an uncanny moment, marking the strange divisions not only within Mayhew but within the Exhibition year (p. 127). If *London Labor* provided a full frontal portrait of the poor, *1851* approached them from an oblique angle as it incorporated them into the spectacle as part of its effort to join in a broader sense of consensus (p. 131). Andrea Hibbard pays similar attention to the life of the street as she considers the theme of rational recreation, that middle-class tool for the social reproduction of seriousness (p. 165). While some historians have shown the Exhibition to be the apotheosis of rational recreation, Hibbard argues that its moment was, in truth, a battlefield when it came to charting a new relationship between social power and spectacle (p. 165). We see a similar line of argument in the chapter by Peter Gurney, which situates the Exhibition on an important cusp in the making of mass consumption. On the one hand, Gurney recognizes some of the merits of an orthodoxy that has framed the Exhibition as the beginning of a consumer regime that incorporated the working classes; on the other hand, he notes the enduring strength of working-class associations, which critiqued the marketplace. Ultimately, he

argues that the triumph of a specifically capitalist culture was neither given nor inevitable in 1851 (p. 140).

The fourth portion of this volume takes up the theme of colonialism, as it follows existing literature in situating the Exhibition as a turning point in the making of imperial spectacle. Refreshingly, as they build on these themes, the authors take us beyond well-known discussions of the displays from India, China, and France, and beyond the Exhibition year. In keeping with the spirit of this volume, Kate Flint characterizes the American court as a corner of the Crystal Palace that resonated with ironies (p. 175). Like Teukolsky, she employs sculpture—and the *Greek Slave* and *Wounded Indian*, specifically—to identify the conflicting notions of promise and hypocrisy, past and future, and abundance and emptiness that characterized the American court. Eitan Bar-Yosef points, too, to the ironies of imperial display, as he examines the Palestine exhibitions that began in 1891 and continued into the Edwardian era. These installations, which traveled to provincial towns and villages, promulgated fantasies about an Orient that they rendered as a romantic daydream by relying on the pastoral and the timeless, all the while obscuring the bloody reality in Palestine (p. 200). Building on these insights in her examination of the First Venezuelan National Exhibition of 1883, Beatriz González-Stephan extends Flint's understanding of how raw materials helped to create a cultureless space in the spirit of creating possibility and builds on Bar-Yosef's suggestion that a pastoral image helped to tame a new frontier in the service of domesticating empire (pp. 218, 228). Finally, the contribution by editor Joseph W. Childers works against the grain, reminding us of the limits of the spectacle as a colonizing device by analyzing the writings of Indian visitors to London who employed the ethnographic gaze to make a spectacle of the metropolis in the latter nineteenth century.

The essays in the final section work in a similar vein to those in part 3, as they complicate the master narrative of modernity and reconsider the moment's canonical figures. John R. Davis's essay takes on the notion that the Exhibition was to be a harbinger of modernity, noting that it contained much within it that was traditional and conservative (p. 235). Ultimately, he argues, the Exhibition was notably modern because it managed to create an alliance of industrialists, aristocrats, and agriculturalists around the formerly divisive notion of free trade. While cast as celebration, this consensus was hard won, and Jay Clayton sustains a concern with the Victorian practice of mythmaking in his imaginative reconsideration of Joseph Paxton as a horticulturalist and environ-

mentalist, among other things, which he performs in the service of accessing a “heterogeneous past” (p. 283). Similarly, Clare Pettit reassesses the work of another canonical Victorian, Charles Dickens, in the Exhibition year. Through a reading of *Bleak House* (1853) that highlights questions of creativity and intellectual property, Pettit asserts that Dickens felt used up by the great spectacle. And, as she endorses the larger platform of the volume, she concludes that the cultural battlefield of 1851 “spilled out well beyond the railings of Hyde Park” (p. 266).

Unquestionably, these skillfully rendered and sharply argued essays manage to deliver on the editors’ promise of casting the Exhibition as a “polyvocal” affair (p. 7). In the process, they contribute to a broader, ongoing project of casting the mid-Victorian age as a time of complexity when leading figures held precariously to tradition while reluctantly greeting the future. The essays make their points, in large part, through the analysis of printed texts. Alongside Exhibition catalogues, both official and unofficial, they look to the principal literary and cultural inter-

locutors of the day—including Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, Mayhew, and John Ruskin—to illuminate the complexities of the Exhibition moment. Given the concerns of these writers, it is no surprise that the essays hone in, collectively, on the matters of morality, labor, creativity, and commodification, as well as the tropes of the gothic and the grotesque that were so important at mid-century. Perhaps the editors might have highlighted the distinctly literary character of this important volume. Were there more contributors from the historical profession, the volume might have attended more closely to the specifics of politics and empire, to the theme of equipoise, and to the Exhibition’s place in a broad institutional history of spectacular display. Art historians, similarly, might have offered greater attentiveness to the analysis of illustrated publications or to the grammar of the displays themselves. Without a doubt, however, these refractions of the Crystal Palace remind us of the richness of the Great Exhibition, and the need for recurring revisions of this landmark, and protean, event.

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