

The Telectroscope (1877-2008):
Contemporaneity, Televisuality and the Science-Fictional

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Abstract: The story of the telectroscope circa 1877, when read against Paul St. George's 2008 installation, reveals ambiguities within modernity: perceptions and representations of time, physical and mechanical vision, and contrary notions of truth and believability. In 'What is the Contemporary,' Giorgio Agamben questions perception of time in relation to the moving of the cosmos. Paul Virilio's *Vision Machine* constructs a philosophy of mechanical vision in relation to the speed of the stars and the brightness of electric light. This study builds upon Agamben's contemporary and Virilio's critique of modern vision through an historical analysis of the innovative period of development between 1877 and 1883 in which authors, scientists and artists were enamored with the fantasy of the televisual. Author and scientist Louis Figuier's imaginary invention of the telectroscope distinguishes the fine line between popular science and science fiction. The Victorian history of the telectroscope is then compared with the 'contemporary' appearance of the device in Paul St. George's 2008 art installation. This study raises questions and confronts issues of contemporaneity and the narrativization of history. Is the telectroscope a 'contemporary' device as well as an object of imaginary media? Is it possible to conceive of co-present contemporaries? Do the Victorian and the Neo-Victorian constitute each other recursively? Can one exist without the other? Perhaps the telectroscope's vision offers a lens through which to see Agamben's 'darkness of the epoch,' or else to witness alternative ways of viewing our past, present, and future.

Keywords: Telectroscope, Figuier, St. George, Agamben, contemporary, Fin de Siecle, Victorian, Steampunk, Neo-Victorian, technology, science fiction, imaginary, vision, blindness, popularization, history, historical, image, present, time

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The story of the telectroscope circa 1877, when read against Paul St. George's 2008 installation, reveals ambiguities within modernity: perceptions and representations of time, physical and mechanical vision, and contrary notions of truth and believability. The telectroscope was invented in 1877 by French scientist and author Louis Figuier, misled by an anonymous letter to the editor of the *New York Sun*. The article, entitled 'The Electroscopie,' told of the newly discovered qualities of a color- and light-sensitive gas, which only the most credulous readers would have believed. The anonymous author, who identified himself as 'the Electrician,' went on to explain the invention of 'the electroscopie,' a contraption that sounds a lot like a pair of phone booths that incorporate real time video displays. Figuier included the 'telectroscope' in his 1878 science annual, and from that moment the race had begun. Inventors, scientists, authors, and illustrators imagined what the invention might look like, how it might work, and the social relations that might form around such a technology. After a few years of development, sketches were being made, though the technical and scientific foundations had not yet been achieved to make televisuality possible. For all intents and purposes, the telectroscope is the prototypical television.

I end my story of the telectroscope in 2008, with Paul St. George's art installation, by asking the questions: What is the relationship between the future imagined and represented by the Victorians, and the one that we live in today? What is the relationship between Neo-Victorian historical narrative of the 19th century and the life and times of Figuier? Are they counter-narratives, or are they sedimentary? Together, these questions of time and representation comingle into a larger inquiry into modern vision and technology.

Following Virilio, is it possible that we moderns of late-capitalism, being inundated by image and speed, no longer possess the ability to be contemporary, but rather look to the past or the future to make sense of the present?

To answer this question, I bracket my study with a reading of William Uricchio's intermediality against Simon Joyce's analysis of heritage cinema to argue that the montage signifies the disjointed experience of time; prototypical television signifies synchronicity. In 'Phantasia, Techne and the Fin de Siecle,' Uricchio reframes contemporary media through the "ideal-typical visions of proto-television." Uricchio invokes Husserl and Heidegger to approach notions of subjectivity and technology. Uricchio goes on to argue, through Heidegger's *techne*, that the telectroscope at once aids in the (imaginary) vision of simultaneous presence for the Victorians and serves as an historical foundation in which to reconsider the dissociative effects of new media:

Although *what* we see as a televisual image might appropriately be bracketed off and labeled as representations, *how* we see seems both far more important and somehow more consistent with pointing out the world, with extensiveness of being, with the notion of presence.¹

For Uricchio, the telectroscope signifies a desire for presence, just as St. George referred to his installation as a "device for the suppression of absence." In terms of the intermedial approach, Uricchio raises the problem in media history studies of tracing the history of cinema (and television) back to pre-modern representational media. Rather, we can situate the modern vision of new media in a rearticulated history: the science-fictionality of the Victorian imagination and the heterotemporality of the telectroscope.

¹ William Uricchio, "Phantasia, Techne and the Fin de Siecle," Intermediality: History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies 6 (2005): 36.

Simon Joyce's 'rearview mirror' approach to Victorian studies also proves useful. In his reading of heritage cinema and the implications of mimetic realism in the media, Joyce reveals contradictions in the Victorian representations of time and space, and those of contemporary adaptations of Victorian art and text. What rises to the surface is a contemporary blindness toward simultaneity and collage; rather, contemporary cinematic vision is predicated on the montage aesthetic and experience of discontinuous time. Joyce argues:

[W]e never really encounter 'the Victorians' themselves but instead a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rearview mirror while driving. The image usefully condenses the paradoxical sense of looking forward to see what is behind us, which is the opposite of what we do when we read history in order to figure out the future.²

In this respect, St. George's telectroscope can be seen as an evocation of the Victorian imaginary in opposition to an inherited cinematic aesthetic. These two conflicting modes of vision (telectroscopic vs. cinematic) raise issues of subjectivity and objectification.³ But more important to the present study will be opposing notions of believability and verisimilitude, narrativization and historiography, and most crucially discontinuous experience and mediation of time.

To approach the problems of synchronicity and contemporaneity inherent in the invention of the telectroscope, I take two theoretical stances. First, Agamben describes the contemporary as the untimely. Building upon Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, Agamben characterizes the contemporary:

Nietzsche situates his own claim for 'relevance', his 'contemporariness' with respect to the present, in a disconnection and out-of-jointness. Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly

² Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007) 4.

³ See Uricchio.

coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are in this sense irrelevant. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time.⁴

Contemporariness, he continues, 'is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and anachronism.'⁵ Agamben constructs a theory of the contemporary in regard to the individual: the historical figure irrelevant in his time that keeps his eyes locked on the eternal. The contemporary figure may be historically unrecognized. In this way, the truly contemporary vision is one outside of the socio-political paradigm. Agamben insinuates a particular mode of *vision* in the perception of contemporariness.

Agamben continues by distinguishing a second quality of the contemporary: the ability to perceive "the darkness of the epoch":

In the expanding universe, the most remote galaxies move away from us at a speed so great that their light is never able to reach us... To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot—this is what it means to be contemporary.⁶

A logical corollary to Agamben's play on darkness and light can be found in the physiology of vision espoused by Paul Virilio. In fact, Agamben's and Virilio's philosophies converge on more than one occasion; Virilio devotes passages to the philosophy of the speed of light, which could be related to Agamben's notion of the moving constellations. However, our concern here is with optics and perception: the degradation of eyesight by the overstimulation of light. Following a discussion of the democratization of lighting in the 18th century, Virilio moves to the abstract: 'But this constant straining after "more light"

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?,' *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009) 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

was already leading to a sort of precocious disability, a blindness.’⁷ He continues: ‘Faced with such a permanent regime of bedazzlement, the range of adaptability of the eye’s crystalline lenses was quickly lost.’⁸ In *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Virilio goes so far as to posit that wearing sunglasses is a modern phenomenon signifying this regime of bedazzlement.⁹ Indeed, the linguistic connection between different meanings of ‘spectacle’ deserves attention: to look; an extravagant display; devices for seeing. Mechanical vision, Virilio argues, will eventually replace physical eyesight. Can we draw from this that the fascination with spectacles of light in the modern age designates an inability to see into the darkness of the present, in order to be contemporary?

Virilio’s conception of light and time opens up a space in which to consider the telectroscope in terms of contemporaneity and modernity. Virilio categorizes visual perception in terms of relative space, echoing Agamben’s darkness of the present and bringing the theory to its ultimate conclusion:

It is not only the dim brightness of these stars that comes to us from out of the distant past, out of the mists of time. The weak light that allows us to apprehend the real, to see and understand our present environment, itself comes from a distant visual memory without which there would be no act of looking.¹⁰

Going on to describe the effects of telecommunications and the extinction of physical-perceptual distance, he posits that moderns experience a type of amnesia and visual dyslexia whereby it becomes increasingly difficult to discern the real from the virtual. If these concomitant binaries (time/contemporary and light/vision) apparent in Agamben’s and Virilio’s philosophies work together to say anything, it might be that modern

⁷ Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1994) 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹ Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, (Paris: Semiotext, 1991) 51-52.

¹⁰ Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, 62.

chronologies are less temporal but rather spiraling discontinuities through which we can discern moments of inspiration where the 'darkness of the epoch' becomes visible. I hope to build upon these themes in a microhistory of the telectroscope in order to elaborate on patterns in the modern conditioning of visual perception.

1. The Telectroscope circa 1877: Louis Figuier and the Popularization of Science

For contemporaries of 1877, it was not only the recent invention of the telephone but also the accomplishments in telegraphy and optics that brought about a popular interest and fantasy of televisuality. The imaginary invention of the telectroscope is credited to Louis Figuier (1819-1894), a French scientist, author and inventor who wrote and taught broadly in areas of geology, natural science, and chemistry. He left his professorship at Montpellier to pursue a career as a journalist with the intention of promoting public education of the sciences. He was editor of *La Science Illustree* and published a number of books, but is historically recognized as a second-rate author. 20th and 21st century historians of science fiction often refer to Figuier's writing as 'scientific vulgarization.'¹¹ Figuier's penchant for combining accepted scientific fact with speculation and fantasy pervades his work as well as his attitude toward the sciences.

In a March 1877 letter to the editor of the *New York Sun*, an anonymous author describes a device for televisuality:

[A] combination of the electroscope and telephone will be made which will permit people, not only actually to converse with each other, no matter how far they are apart, but also to look into each other's eyes and watch their every mien, expression, gesture and motion while in the electroscope.¹²

¹¹ See Unwin, 57, and Debus.

¹² 'The Electroscope,' *New York Sun*, 30 Mar 187, 4, in *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers* <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>> [accessed 11 Dec 2013].

Withholding details on the scientific foundation and specification of the device, the letter focuses on the social and interpersonal nature of the invention. It describes the electrical configuration, but the veracity of the account is entirely unclear: no names are given, no verifiable facts. The article reads like science fiction, but Figuier took it at face value. His credulousness speaks to his attitude toward facts and fictions: a worldview representative of Victorian science-fictionality.

In *L'Annee Scientifique et Industrielle* (1878), Figuier appropriates the Electrician's imaginative proposal under the neologism 'telectroscope.'¹³ Perhaps he was aware that the 'electroscope' already existed as a scientific device used to detect electric charge, and bore no relation to televisuality. Figuier describes the telectroscope as having 'a flat surface,' that is, a screen:

If this surface is placed before any object, and if the light vibrations responding to the details of shapes and colors of this object is captured by each conductor has a transmitted electric current, they recur identically at the ends of this circuit.¹⁴

The fact that Figuier centers in on the screen-based aspect of the device proves telling. While visual devices with screens were not unheard of in his time (after all, the camera obscura is the quintessential antique screen-based viewing machine), the telectroscope's screen tells us that it was imagined within the purview of arts, aesthetics and vision. Emphasis is placed on simultaneity and the fusion of disparate locations, which the language he uses to describe the visual aspects of the device is extremely perfunctory. What shines through is the possibility of the machine to span distance, fuse time, and also convey arts.

¹³ Louis Figuier. *L'Annee Scientifique et Industrielle*. (Paris: Librairie Hatchette, 1878) 80-81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

Figuier made many speculative leaps, but one similarity that he retained from the *Sun* article was the depiction of a theatrical performance. Both articles describe the ability of the device to bring opera and the theater into one's own proximal space, a dream of having the world brought to you. Figuiers' vision was more science-fictional than actual. His innovative eye, his assumptions over the reliability of the anonymous Electrician, heralded the invention of television.

No mention is made of the persistence of vision. Rather, the scientists describe the machine in ways that almost make it seem like telepresence as opposed to televisuality, with the discussions of magic gasses, electrical circuits and a phone booth. Given the enormous leaps society needed to take to accept a technology as comparatively simple as the telegraph, the telectroscope conveyed a fantasy of supernatural ubiquity.

What must be stressed in this history of televisuality is the significant difference between Figuiers' original dream of the telectroscope as enabling synchronous experience as opposed to the eventual use of television to broadcast discontinuous (montage, pre-recorded) programming. The telectroscope is recognized as the prototype for the television, but these two devices signify opposing relationships with time and space.¹⁵ The telectroscope represents the Victorian-imaginary-ideal of simultaneity and the fusion of topography. In opposition, the present-day instrumentalization of television is a medium for the dissemination of cinematic content. Live television is the exception, not the rule. As will become evident upon a further investigation of Figuiers' conception of science, his imaginary invention signifies a science-fictionality of future visions in order to reflect back on the interiorized present.

¹⁵ This could be approached through Virilio's notion of teletopology.

In her eulogy published in *Popular Science*, Ida Tarbell writes: 'M. Figuiet was one of those men whom the popular fancy had wearied of and dropped, and who, unable to understand why he was not as thoroughly in touch with his generation as ever, insisted tenaciously on being heard.'¹⁶ She continues:

'His bitter protest against the way in which the journalism of the day treats the popularization of science, his persistency in regarding himself as the one and only popularizer; his despair at the good-natured raillery which the hobbies of his old age had called out, all showed that *M. Figuiet was out of touch*.'¹⁷

Given Tarbell's portrayal of Figuiet as out of touch and out of sync with society, would it be reasonable to characterize him as a contemporary in Agamben's sense? It is possible that Tarbell's impression of Figuiet was contained in her meeting of the man in his old age. She describes the appearance of his rooms as just as outdated as his personality. His character was outdated like the spaces he inhabited, stuck in old notions of science and literature. In what ways could we imagine Figuiet as living outside of time rather than in the past? Certainly his unusual combination of science and fiction sets him apart from others. Debus, and Unwin note that Jules Verne lifted ideas and even verbatim passages from Figuiet's writings.¹⁸ While Verne became a recognizable household name, Figuiet fell into the cracks of historical memory. While Figuiet's ability to see beyond the constraints of late 19th century society may only be recognizable in his peculiar approach to the popular sciences, his legacy I believe justifies him as a contemporary. His speculative vision of technology represents a schism with modernity.

¹⁶ Ida Tarbell, 'Sketch of Louis Figuiet,' *Popular Science* 51 (1897): 834.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 185. My italics.

¹⁸ See Debus, 407, and Unwin, 186.

He believed in life after death. Tarbell recounts Figuiet explaining his intention to continue his work in the afterlife: 'Nature indicates a future life by all her transformations, common sense preaches it... and if we live again we shall work. Do you suppose the good God is going to leave us with our aspirations unsatisfied? No.'¹⁹ Tarbell continues:

He based his theories of the future life on no religion. It is modern philosophy based on science and reason, which in his judgment promises a future life. But this promise is only to the upright, who in this world practice righteousness and cultivate their minds. They after death take on the attributes of superior beings that is, become what M. Figuiet calls *etres surhumains* or, in ecclesiastical parlance, angels.²⁰

What Tarbell interprets as 'angels' literally translates from the French as 'superhuman beings.' What are the similarities and differences between Figuiet's superhuman beings and Agamben's contemporaries? Both live out of time, or in a deeper level of existence in time. Both attribute heightened qualities of perception and righteousness to personality, set outside social spheres, influence and historical judgment. While Figuiet relegates eternity to the afterlife, Agamben recognizes eternity in a view looking out from the present. Figuiet's superhuman beings exist in a 'spiritual' utopia in an expectant future; Agamben's contemporaries live outside history in a perpetual and boundless present. While Figuiet may not exactly coincide with Agamben's ideal contemporary, he provides a fascinating historical account of extra-temporal perception and out-of-jointness.

2. Science-fictionality

Figuiet cared deeply about his public image. Tarbell recounts a moment when he showed her a drawer of newspaper clippings of reviews of his books. Critical reception ran

¹⁹ Tarbell, 840.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 841.

hot and cold. While he was recognized as a popularizer of science on par with Verne, he was ridiculed for getting the facts wrong.²¹ It is, perhaps, for this reason that he became interested in science fiction. Where science and religion left off, Figuiet filled in the blanks: “Since science,” he writes, “excuses itself from explaining the nature of the comets and the role they play in the universe, it is permitted to the imagination to say a word on the subject.”²² It can be gleaned from his words that he believed fact and fiction to have the same basis in reality. After 1878, he never returned to the telectroscope, though he continued to publish on subjects of including electricity and modern invention.

SF was only beginning to become popularly recognized in the 1880s. In his study of the pre-history of science fiction in France, Angenot claims that the genre interiorized robust nationalistic identities and temporal anxieties:

From Souvestre to Robida, from Villiers de l'Isle-Adam to Perochon, bourgeois SF in France can be called a fiction of Science only if we allow for one reservation: it felt a visceral horror, an aristocratic contempt tinged with panic, for Science, and dreamt for the future of nothing but a return to a closed, feudal and patriarchal society, an ideological 'zero growth' in a pastoral environment. This phantasm becomes more and more exacerbated in the years immediately after Souvestre, during which a number of anti-modernist dystopias appeared.²³

Angenot typifies proto-SF according to its futuristic dreams, which merely throwback to the contemporary isolation of utopian desires: hopes for the present masked as fantasies of the future. Science fiction as a genre expressed fears for science, and also an extremely self-conscious anti-modernism. Take Albert Robida's writing, for instance, which the sublimity of technology alongside its dysfunctions. French society tolerated science fiction only when its morality and fantasy abided by the bourgeois aesthetic and reflected back on the 19th

²¹ See Unwin and Debus.

²² Tarbell, 842.

²³ Marc Angenot, “Science Fiction in France Before Verne,” *Science Fiction Studies* (1978): 63.

century interiorized society as opposed to projecting into a futurist utopia. For this reason, the most memorable character in tales of the time was the contemporary time traveller who journeys into the future only to happily return home.

Writers, scientists, and politicians equally feared judgment of the eyes of the foreign powers concerning the popular national approaches to science (representative in Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, for example).²⁴ The science-fictionality of Figuiet's contemporary echoes Luckhurst's discussion of heterotemporalities at the World's Fairs. While Luckhurst uses the exhibitions to raise issues of spatial and temporal representation and national identity, it has also been proposed that, up until the late 1880's, French science fiction had been quelled for the purposes of commanding an upright nationalistic image.

Angenot's history of French science fiction before 1870 solidifies Verne as the iconic figure. Interestingly, history holds a special place for Jules Verne while largely forgetting Figuiet. In many retrospective accounts of Verne, scholars have noted that his style was characterized by the appropriation of literature and fictionalization of nascent technologies. Clothed in science-fictional attire, the technologies appear futuristic. But in fact, Verne borrowed his ideas from the newspapers, journals, and other of his contemporaries. He was not as original as many think. Perhaps the true luminaries of the time were lesser known authors and inventors, who lacked Verne's capacity for self-promotion: figures whom history has all but forgotten.

²⁴ See Debus, 412, on nationalism and the refusal to accept scientific discoveries as hoax.

Verne is also said to have plagiarized a large portion of Figuiet's *World Before the Deluge* for a passage in *Journey to the Center of the Earth*.²⁵ Figuiet must have recognized Verne's appropriation as homage; He began publishing a section devoted to *roman scientifique* in *La Science Illustrée* beginning in 1877.²⁶ An 1866 review of Figuiet's *Deluge* likens it to Verne, insinuating that his work of science is more like science fiction than hard scholarship. In fact, the reviewer describes the book as if it were a picture book:

Fancy a handsome volume, full of beautifully-executed ideal illustrations, and no less fertile in errors of science, continuing much useful instruction, conveying many absurdly-erroneous doctrines, and harmonizing Scriptural and scientific evidence, and you may see M. Figuiet's book. It is likely to have a success, nevertheless, for its English version is clearly translated, and it is profuse in sensation pictures. So that a book is readable, it printed in agreeable type, and is studded with handsome plates on tinted paper, it matters very little now-a-days whether the views it puts forth be sound or not.²⁷

The dividing line between popular science and science fiction was thin in that period in France that brought about not just the scientific technological advances we monumentalize today, but also the burgeoning of the science fiction genre. In a review of *Les Nouvelles Conquetes De la Science*, a *Le Temps* critic compares Figuiet to Verne. While Verne's novel is described as a scientific fable, Figuiet's popularization of science is characterized as reductive though having the appeal of a novel. Verne disguises science in fiction; Figuiet clothes science in a 'pleasant appearance.'²⁸ The two authors seem to have similar purposes in mind, though their approaches are slightly different. Perhaps the only real difference is their chosen genre.

²⁵ See Stableford and Debus.

²⁶ See Stableford.

²⁷ 'The World Before the Deluge,' *Popular Science Review Quarterly* V (1866): 84.

²⁸ 'Bibliographie,' *Le Temps*, Monday 28 Jan 1884, 4, in [Gallica Bibliothèque Numérique](#) [accessed 11 Dec 2013].

The *Le Temps* review also mentions that Figuiet garnered accomplishments in science and technology at the 1881 Paris Exposition in order to popularize them in his book. Verne was known to take similar tactics, gleaned the Nautilus submarine from the 1867 Exhibition for his *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*. Exhibitions presented public display of the sciences, but without contemporaries like Verne and Figuiet the popularization would have been incomplete. There is a rich connection between the World's Fair 'technological sublime' and the rise of French science fiction in the 1880's. Luckhurst concurs, following that same history in his study of the 1889 Paris Exposition: 'The spirit of Jules Verne dominated the imaginary of the exhibition.'²⁹ He continues:

After 1889, the spectacle of the technological sublime was intended to disadjust visitors from the contemporary world, not only by contrast with the primitive past but also by immersing them in a site that shifted proleptically into the future, a projection routinely envisioned as a borderless flow of capital along streamlined routes of electronic communication.³⁰

The parallel histories of the World's Fairs and the science-fictional find representation in 'the technological sublime,' an image with dramatic staying power in both realistic and fantastic settings. Imagined futures represented in real technologies on display at the Expositions, viewed in concert with those depicted in literature, play upon notions of science as opposed to fiction. The image of the technological sublime can be seen in perpetual reconstitution throughout the period. These technologies and images of the future are not simply futurist—they are first and foremost images of the present, intended to evoke nascent possibilities and burgeoning desires.

3. Blindness and Contemporariness

²⁹ Roger Luckhurst, 'Laboratories for Global Space-Time: Science-Fictionality and the World's Fairs, 1851-1939,' *Science Fiction Studies* 39 (2012): 392.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 393.

Du Maurier's 'Telephonoscope' also deserves mention before we skip ahead more than a century. George du Maurier was one of the four main figures contributing to the London magazine *Punch*.³¹ As a student of chemistry, he lost the vision in one eye in a terrible accident and decided to devote himself to a life as an illustrator. Dauphne du Maurier, his granddaughter, writes: 'When I first knew du Maurier he was living in rooms over a shop quite close to the British Museum, and was in daily terror of losing his sight.'³² A published compilation of his early letters are peppered with preconditions: 'if I keep my sight...' Du Maurier was practically blind, but he was the first to illustrate the truly utopian potential of the telectroscope. His 1878 *Punch* illustration depicts a televisual conversation. Before this time, no one had ever *seen* a telectroscope.

The illustration (figure 1) depicts a Wilton Place, London, living room, in which a family converses with their children in the Antipodes, Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka). The image is clearly influenced by colonial rhetoric, expressing the ideological vision of a British empire desiring to bridge geographic distance and bring its people together both temporally and spatially. Du Maurier, in referring to Ceylon as *the Antipodes*, insinuates that the telephonoscope could bridge diametrically opposite spaces in its visualization of sameness. The telephonoscope represents other spaces contiguously with the familiar. The visualization of the Other was also a mode heavily present in Exhibitions of the time.³³ The idea clearly has as much weight as its visuality, for Du Maurier, who was perhaps more aware of the virtual possibilities of the device as its social actualities. In this illustration, the

³¹ See Spellman, 503.

³² Daphne Du Maurier, Foreword, *The Young George Du Maurier*, by George Du Maurier, (NY: Doubleday, 1952) xx.

³³ See also Hoffenberg's history of the British colonial Exhibitions.

telephonoscope serves both as a prosthetic eye of Imperial Britain, and a promotion of utopian science-fictional vision.

Where Figuiet imagined booths, Du Maurier places the flat-screen display front and center: on the mantel. Curiously, the telephonoscope offers lighting on par with the fireplace. Domestic electric lighting was only becoming a dim possibility for the 1880's and wasn't institutionalized in Britain until after the turn of the century.³⁴ Without a paradigm of electric light through which to view the flat-screen, it's possible that the display would have been interpreted as type of window, not simply a display device. Was the telephonoscope a source of light or a living painting? Du Maurier's device that "transmits light as well as sound" possibly served both purposes: to refract antipodal light and to mirror an aesthetics of painting: '*impressionist*, like the pyrotechnists who created those eye-dazzling displays of flashing, flooding lights.'³⁵

What abstract connotations does Du Maurier's story have to Agamben's notion of seeing into the darkness of the present? Perhaps the ability to see into the 'darkness of the epoch' is less a physical visual aptitude than a virtual idiosyncrasy. Perhaps the overestimation of the clarity of sight blinds us to the darkness of the present. Agamben writes: contemporaries are 'those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century.'³⁶ A relation to Virilio could also be made in terms of the virtual image and the mechanical vision of the telectroscope. Du Maurier's anxiety of sight mirrors a social preoccupation with vision; his physiological detriment might in fact have contributed to a

³⁴ See Hammond and Otter.

³⁵ Virilio 1994, 15.

³⁶ Agamben, 45.

heightened perception of the 'spectacle' of Victorian age. Du Maurier's ability to 'see' might have more to do with his whimsical satire than with a persistent visuality.

4. St. George's Telectroscope

From the imaginary invention of the telectroscope in 1877, let's jump to the revival of its image in 2008. In order to negotiate these two visions, it will be necessary to characterize the Neo-Victorian approach to technology. Aesthetically, Paul St. George's 2008 telectroscope installation (figures 2 & 3) bears the marks of the Neo-Victorian. Neo-Victorianism finds a popular representation in the Steampunk sub-culture, mainly visualized through fiction, fashion, and craft (though Neo-Victorian studies has broader reaches than just Steampunk). It can be seen as an offshoot of cyberpunk in its fetishizing of mechanical as opposed to electronic technology.

In terms of Agamben's contemporary and Nietzsche's conception of history, Steampunk risks antiquarianism and nostalgia. Despite being a 'contemporary' cultural movement, it is predicated on anachronism and the flux of historical narratives, negotiated by modern notions of truth and believability. Neo-Victorian scholars and critics vacillate between modern (Joyce, Onion, Mays) and postmodern (Kucich, Clayton, Pike) approaches.

How do Neo-Victorians defend Steampunk? As Rebecca Onion writes, Steampunk is interested in the inventions and failures of the 'daring of the people of the time.'³⁷ She also mentions the democratizing defamiliarizing effects of Steampunk technology. St. George's fictionalized history situates the telectroscope in a heterotopic space, one in which the public must negotiate between their knowledge of the Victorian, their expectations about

³⁷ Rebecca Onion, 'Reclaiming the Machine: An Introductory Look at Steampunk in Everyday Practice,' *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1:1 (2008): 150.

technology, and their perceptions of time and space. Christine Ferguson justifies fictionalized alternate histories as a Steampunk genre convention: 'Ultimately, the existence of the past is not in question, and what is of interest are the various texts and discourses through which we access and make sense of the past.'³⁸ In terms of the play on historical narrative, Ferguson continues by explaining that the rewriting of the past begs readers to question the veracity of its claims.³⁹ We might insinuate from Ferguson's argument that there is an ideological connection between St. George's rewritten historical narrative of the telectroscope and Figuier's original misattribution. They both imagine the possibility of televisuality while leaving the mechanical-technical practicality to the scientists.

Building upon the anachronisms of time and history inherent in the Neo-Victorian, British Literature scholar Kelly Mays writes:

I want to stress just how frequently nineteenth-century Britons imagined their own present one day becoming the object of the same sort of scrutiny, fascination, and misinterpretation to which they subjected the past and, more importantly, just how habitually they sought to make the present *present*, as it were, by imaginatively looking back at it from the future.⁴⁰

If Mays' Victorian self-consciousness holds true for our account of the telectroscope, it finds its most accurate interpretation in her mention of present-ness. The stories and illustrations of the telectroscope clearly evoke a possible future, but one that never came to be. Therefore, the 1877 dream of televisuality must be a representation of the hopes that contemporaries held of their present: an ultimately innovative, evocative image of a world

³⁸ Christine Ferguson, 'Surface Tensions: Steampunk, Subculture, and the Ideology of Style,' Neo-Victorian Studies 4:2 (2011): 323.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁴⁰ Kelly Mays, 'Looking Backward, Looking Forward: The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror of Future History,' Victorian Studies 53:3 (2011): 447.

in which time is always 'now' and space is always 'here.' The 2008 telectroscope is also an evocation of such a dream, however backward that may seem. While St. George places the subjective viewer in the armchair of 19th century, he does so from a bizarrely futurist historical perspective: one that negotiates between Victorian futures and 21st century versions of history. The telectroscope is an *untimely* object. The 19th century preoccupation with their own image, heralded by the science fiction character of the time traveller, speaks volumes to the friction of contemporaries. While Steampunk seeks to address such issues, it also aids in further complicating such visions.

Mays invokes Joyce's 'rearview mirror' approach in order to articulate the narrativization of history and heterotemporal subjectivities: 'That simultaneously forward- and backward-looking gaze tends to assume a more or less radical discontinuity between present and future, on the one hand, and, on the other, a profound similarity grounded in the very impulse to look back.'⁴¹ This perspective also brings into question who owns the contemporary. Is the contemporary made by those who live through it, or rather by those who imagined what it might be like, or rather those who tell stories of others 'contemporary' times? The rearview mirror metaphor provides a profoundly modern vision, bringing to light the self-consciousness of present-ness and the willingness to tell stories about ourselves from past and future perspectives.

In his 1883 science fiction novel, *The Twentieth Century*, Robida imagines the telephonoscope (borrowing from Du Maurier) within a vividly portrayed 1950's society (figure 4). The novel sets out to know the future in order to understand the contemporary. It serves as an historical document of the Victorian technological imagination, a meditation

⁴¹ Ibid., 447.

on progress, and a recursive statement concerning the over-reliance on the machine. Unlike Robida's telephonoscope (the *tele*), St. George's telectroscope resurrects *the past through the present* rather than the present through the future.

Paul St. George's 'device for the suppression of absence' is at once an historical machine, a postmodern articulation of temporal anxiety, and an evocative mediation of fractured subjectivities.⁴² By defamiliarizing real-time televisuality (i.e., Skype, FaceTime) and re-negotiating the experience of distance through haptic communication, St. George's telectroscope accomplishes many actual social conditions that its Victorian predecessor could not. First, it's a material and physical device. The public can literally touch the device and participate in its spectacle. St. George designed the displays to show rather than tell; the auditory component one assumes from telecommunications devices is absent. Forced to communicate with gesture, the telectroscope enables participants to experience a different kind of space and time: 'We are touched by an unreal temporality. We are made hyperconscious of distinctive features of the present by the dramatic contrast with a past, a past that we know in our heart never existed at all.'⁴³ The rearticulation of perceived notions of distance communications and history intermingle in St. George's installation into an art work that begins to resemble performance piece.

Second, the device begs participants to question historical narrative and contemporary notions of believability. One of St. George's 'historical' diagrams (figure 5) represents a trans-Atlantic subterranean tunnel bridging the two devices in London and New York. St. George's (make-believe) grandfather is Photoshopped into an historical

⁴² Lara Farrar, 'Giant "telescope" Links London, New York,' [CNN](#), 22 May 2008 [accessed 11 Dec 2013].

⁴³ Jay Clayton. 'Touching the Telectroscope: Haptic Communications,' [Journal of Victorian Culture](#) 17 (2012): 519.

photograph (figure 6) and credited with the late 19th century diagrams.⁴⁴ St. George resembles Barnum in this sense, encouraging the public to enjoy the spectacle while bringing into question the validity of what they see.

The telectroscope is situated in a bizarrely nostalgic postmodernity, a phrase that should sound oxymoronic were it not so pervasive in the Steampunk subculture. Neo-Victorian nostalgia takes ‘postmodern’ shape as a brutal rupture visualized in St. George’s drills breaking pavement on the banks of the Thames (figure 7). Many Neo-Victorian scholars approach their subject matter through the postmodern lens, most often citing Jameson in order to question historical rupture and the crisis of radical breaks in time.⁴⁵ Rather, St. George’s telectroscope articulates continuity rather than rupture, representing a thread of the historical imagination running from Figuiet and Du Maurier. While St. George presents a contemporary vision of a fictionalized past, Figuiet conceived of a science-fictional future, which stands as the site of innovation and imaginary invention: the ‘contemporary.’

Is St. George’s telectroscope a victim of Virilio’s ‘regime of bedazzlement’? Or is Steampunk a remedy to the optical stimulation and overexposure of post-industrial modernity? The peculiar method St. George adopts – visualizing an alternative history for his installation – situates the telectroscope in a heterochronotopia inverse to that of Du Maurier (figure 8). Du Maurier’s *Punch* illustration and St. George’s illustration (situating his tunnel drills in a make-believe history) can be placed at extreme poles to construct a reverse chronology of the telectroscope/ telephonoscope as a distinct object of imaginary media. Together, they situate a beginning and an end to a story that evolves in its own

⁴⁴ See Tim Wright’s blog telectroscope.org. For more on the doctored photograph, see Pike (2010).

⁴⁵ For example, see Kucich and Sadoff.

distinct non-chronological time, a vortex that folds in upon itself on too-close examination. The ambiguous timeline of the telectroscope represents two conflicting notions of contemporariness: an (Victorian) imaginary future that reflects on the past and an (Neo-Victorian) imaginary past that reflects on our present. Between these two contemporaries are also the throwbacks to science-fictional representations of past and future through which we make sense of our respective present times.

Victorian Studies scholar Simon Joyce writes:

[O]ur idea of 'the Victorians' in fact serves as a condensation of contrary tendencies and oppositions, which we can see hardening over the subsequent century into doxological assumptions and attitudes that are henceforth available for a range of political and cultural forces; these in turn advance by positioning themselves as for or against a partial image of the whole, in the process helping to *constitute each other in a form of dialectical spiral*. In a sense, 'the Victorian' has become a kind of style and is thereby subject to the vicissitudes of twentieth-century fashion, with its rapid cycles of obsolescence and revivalism.⁴⁶

We late moderns may have more to say about the Victorians that they did about themselves. Their science-fictional paradigm is so embedded in the narratives of the 20th century that it is now impossible for us to disentangle the story from the actual history. We inherit our aesthetics, our modes of communication, our understanding of time and space from the dramatic changes that occurred in the late 19th century. A Victorian history unmediated by contemporary notions of technology and temporality would be impossible to write.

Joyce's 'dialectical spiral' offers a conduit through which to return to Agamben's untimely contemporary. Is it possible to associate contemporariness with an object as opposed to a person? What implications does such a question have on modern notions of subject-object relations? Is the telectroscope a 'contemporary' device as well as an object of

⁴⁶ Joyce, 7-8. My italics.

imaginary media? Is it possible to conceive of co-present contemporaries? Do the Victorian and the Neo-Victorian constitute each other recursively? Can one exist without the other? Perhaps the telectroscope's vision offers a lens through which to see the 'darkness of the epoch,' or else to witness alternative ways of viewing our past, present, and future.

5. Conclusion

This study suggests the existence of two divergent contemporary attitudes toward Victorian aesthetics. On the one hand, 21st century visual culture inherits the mimetic realism of the 19th century Victorian, the struggle to *represent* the real world as accurately and clearly as possible. On the other hand, the opposing narrative speaks of a Victorian imagination longing to bridge distance through *mirrorlike televisuality*, which offers the virtual window to gaze at the networked world.

The cinematic tradition values disjointed time through montage and photographic indexicality. Victorian televisuality values the joining of space and time over distance, insinuating a synchronicity of experience. Cinema and photography—even television—continue the tradition of representational aesthetics of painting while telepresence and VOIP inherit the Victorian dream of spatial and temporal simultaneity. Developing a critical position along these lines, William Uricchio writes:

If we turn to the *telectroscope*, *telephonoscope*, *electronic camera obscura*, and various related ideas (and technologies) regarding a moving image medium that proliferated between the introduction of the telephone in 1876 and the introduction of the filmed moving picture in 1895, we might find more than simply historical access to a once hoped for future, valuable though that is. Their situation at a critical juncture in the emergence of the modern, and their capacities as both *phantasia* and *technè* to embody key elements in the debate over modernity, render them particularly resonant in their address of key aspects of the broader development of *fin-de-siècle* media. More to the point, they might offer insights into a now repressed notion of mediality, one superceded by the regime of the cinematic, but one that

nevertheless seems persistent in our thinking about new media.⁴⁷

Situating televisuality late 19th century imaginary media could help us reframe contemporary notions of new media and cinematic aesthetics, especially as they have to do with gaze theory and post-structural semiotics. Psychoanalytic film theorists have gained a lot of traction with their champion term ‘gaze.’ But considering the cinematic gaze in terms of the telectroscope throws such notions on their head. Perhaps a more accurate approach would be to personify the image itself, imagining that the picture were looking back at you from out of time.⁴⁸ In such a way, we could fuse these disparate notions of montage and collage in order to come to a consensus on the dissociative effects of the time-splice. While theories of indexical media have recently become more popular, our notions of the semiotics of visual media need to be readdressed in terms of the temporal implications of real-time media.

With a similar endeavor, Simon Joyce investigates the Victorian roots to heritage cinema aesthetics. Determining that 20th century adaptations of turn of the century literary works misrepresent Victorian aesthetics, he writes:

A striking feature of heritage cinema is its attraction to a number of turn-of-the-century authors—including Forster, Conrad, James, and Hardy—who collectively might be taken to have undermined the claims to transparent realism that photography had helped validate earlier in the century. In that sense, the desire to film their texts from within the aesthetic tradition of photo-realism... seems a perverse one, in which... form and content are plainly set at odds.⁴⁹

Joyce’s study raises pertinent questions of historical representation. Did the 20th century adopt cinematic mimetic realism from Victorian representational practices, particularly cinema, as is so often suggested? Or did the moderns create cinematic realism and attribute

⁴⁷ Uricchio, 30.

⁴⁸ WJT Mitchell takes such a position in [What Do Pictures Want?](#)

⁴⁹ Joyce, 95.

it to a romanticized notion of the Victorian? The answers to such questions are entangled in Joyce's termed dialectical spirals.

In terms of modernity and contemporary art, how do we define and situate work that exists in an imaginary future that never came to be, and an imaginary past that rearticulates such a future? We encounter objects that are new and old at the same time; how do we situate such objects in a modern contemporary? Victorian artists and inventors latched on to the idea of the telectroscope (Figurier) even though the technology was not possible at the time. The telephonoscope (Du Maurier, Robida) was only an image, a representation of a cultural ideal. The inspiration for such technology arose half a century before it was technically possible. It was not until the late 1920's that scientists and inventors finally put the pieces together (Baird and Farnsworth, among others). The telectroscope signifies the science-fictionality of (idea-typical) television. What does it mean for our contemporary notions of television that its inception was in an imaginary, science-fictional context? What are the consequences of tracing the lineage of Skype, for example, back to the telectroscope?

Emphasis in the current study is placed in notions of historical time and representation. An additional angle to approach the telectroscope is through Foucault's hetero-chrono-topia and Virillio's teletopology. These concepts could help to further explicate notions of space and distance in terms of the telecommunication potentials of the telectroscope. Further study would be necessary to integrate the implications of the telectroscope on new media and telecommunications in the 21st century.

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List of Figures

Figure 1: George Du Maurier. *Edison's Telephonoscope*. Illustration. 9 Dec 1878. *Wikimedia Commons*. Web. 12 Dec. 2013.

Figure 2: Colonel Walden. *Picture of the telectroscope aperture at City Hall in London*. Digital Photography. 25 May 2008. *Wikimedia Commons*. Web. 12 Dec 2013.

Figure 3: Garry Knight. *New Yorkers via the Telectroscope*. Digital Photograph. 22 2008. *Flickr*. Web. 17 Dec. 2013.

Figure 4: Albert Robida. *Le Journal Telephonoscopique*. Illustration. 1883.

Figure 5: Paul St. George (attributed to Alexander Stanhope St. George). *Eureka Plan*. Illustration. 2008. *Telectroscope.org*. Web. 12 Dec 2013.

Figure 6: Paul St. George, *Isembard Kingdom Brunel and Alexander Stanhope St. George against the launching chains of the Great Eastern at Millwall (1857)*. Doctored Photograph. April 2008. *Telectroscope.com*. Web. 12 Dec 2013.

Figure 7: Tim Wright. *Paul St. George Surfaces at the London End*. Digital Photograph. 20 May 2008. *Flickr*. Web. 12 Dec 2013.

Figure 8: Paul St George. *Miner Disruption*. Fake *Punch* Illustration. 2008. *telectroscope.org*. Web.