

## **DIGITISATION AND MATERIALITY FORUM**

Victoria Mills and Heather Tilley

Participants in the forum were asked to consider the following questions in relation to their work on nineteenth-century digitisation projects. We are keen to encourage ongoing debate in this area. To join the debate click [here](#).

### **I**

#### **The material object in a virtual space**

1. What happens to the properties of the material object in a virtual space? How far does this invite us to reshape critical and philosophical approaches to the ontology of material objects? What is the nature of a virtual collection?
2. What is the relationship between the material object and its digital referent? What authenticity can the digital object claim when the processes of digitisation (photography, scanning, etc) are predicated on deferral and absences? Does this lead to a loss of 'aura'?<sup>1</sup>
3. Can digital referents and virtual spaces provide a new material encounter with the object and the object's material qualities? How does this impact on our perception of the 'original' object? How is the eye/body channelled in a virtual space?
4. How might we consider the trajectory with nineteenth-century material culture? When thinking explicitly about nineteenth-century material objects, do we frame these processes as a continuation or a break with nineteenth-century material culture (see Buchli on the similarity between the nineteenth-century engraving and the internet;<sup>2</sup> and the use of plaster casts in Victorian museums, for example Trajan's column in the V&A)? What is unique about the nineteenth-century object in these contexts? How does an understanding of the nineteenth-century object impact on the arrangement and interpretation of Victorian material culture online?

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**19:** *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 6 (2008) [www.19.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk)

## II

**Object/Image/Text**

1. Does digitisation continue to privilege the visual qualities of an object against the move in cultural studies to reclaim materiality and focus on other aspects of sensory engagement? What is the impact of the material turn in nineteenth-century studies for digitisation work?
2. How can we begin to articulate a phenomenology of digital referents or (objects) and to distinguish the impact of digitisation on different types of material objects — artefact, text, photograph?
3. Recent work (e.g. McGann)<sup>3</sup> has focused on the textual nature of digital processes in terms of coding, the language in which the image is written and the way in which network systems encourage users to ‘read’ the image. Can we begin to articulate a materialist analysis of digital objects or can we only ever articulate them through the textual?

## III

**Politics and Access**

1. In what way do external factors such as funding and development decisions shaped by government agencies, corporate sponsors and the institutions housing collections affect how objects are digitised? In what way do such institutions control the interpretation of objects in collections? How might digital collections offer more democratic models and contribute to the promotion of social inclusion?
2. What is the role of the user/visitor in the creation and interpretation of the digital object? Does a digital collection facilitate the blurring of boundaries between visitor and curator? How might the constructivist model of learning in which prior knowledges and experiences generate meanings affect such interpretation?

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In what ways does virtual space include material user spaces — physical, socioeconomic, gendered?

**Endnotes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Fontana/Collins, 1973), pp. 219-52 (p. 225).

<sup>2</sup> Victor Buchli (ed.), *The Material Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2002) p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).