

Call for Papers

The Victorian Tactile Imagination

Birkbeck, University of London, 19-20 July 2013

Keynote speakers:

Professor Gillian Beer (University of Cambridge); Professor William Cohen (University of Maryland); Professor Hilary Fraser (Birkbeck, University of London); Dr Constance Classen (author of *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch*)

"You people who can see attach such an absurd importance to your eyes! I set my touch, my dear, against your eyes, as much the most trustworthy, and much the most intelligent sense of the two".

(Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch*, 1872)

This conference will explore the various ways in which the Victorians conceptualised, represented, experienced, performed and problematized touch. What does touch signal in nineteenth-century art and literature, and how is it variously coded? How are hands and skin – tactile appendages and surfaces – imagined in the period? By investigating the Victorian imaginary of touch, the conference will address and reappraise some of the key concepts and debates which have shaped Victorian studies in the past twenty years – in particular the emphasis on visuality as the dominant mode via which subjectivities and power were effected in the period: not least Jonathan Crary's influential thesis that the nineteenth century witnessed a pervasive 'separation of the senses'. The conference aims to investigate instead the workings of a more textured vision and reanimate the interoperability of sight and touch in nineteenth century culture.

The conference will also extend and build upon recent critical studies that have begun to explore nineteenth-century tactility in relation to material culture, bodies, and the emotions. By focusing closely on touch and tactility, it aims to establish whether and in what terms we might talk about a Victorian 'aesthetics of touch', and to explore how touch constructs and disrupts, for example, class and gender identities. It will also consider the historical trajectories of touch, asking, for example, in what ways does touch mark or blur the divide between Victorianism and Modernism?

Proposals of up to 400 words should be sent to Heather Tilley at victoriantactileimagination@gmail.com by 10 January 2013. Please also attach a brief biographical note. Proposals for panels of three papers are also welcome, and should be accompanied by a brief (one-page) panel justification.

Possible topics might include:

- Tactile/haptic aesthetics (representations of hands and touching; art historical writing on the senses; perspectival theory; nineteenth century sculpture; arts and crafts)
- Rethinking "visual" media and technologies (photography; stereoscopy; cinema)
- Touch in the Museum (handling/viewing objects; curating; museum policy)
- Readers and writers (material cultures of the book; embodied readers and writers; the writer's hand)
- Social history (domestic violence; hands and work; the gloved hand)
- Travel and place (the imperial touch; haptic geographies)
- The hand, skin and dermal structures in design theory and evolutionary science
- Medicine (blindness; physiology of touch; the medical touch; nerve theory and motor function; pain)
- Theories of mind and body (psychophysiology; cognitive psychology; phenomenology; psychoanalysis)
- The gender and sexual politics of touch, the queer touch (lesbianism, tender masculinities)
- Histories of touch (inheriting and disrupting eighteenth century models of touch; anticipating Modernist touch).

The conference is organised by Birkbeck, University of London's Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies, with support from the Newcastle Institute for the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities.