

## Fireworks

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What does it mean to represent fireworks? Or, to be more precise, how might we use this question to interpret James McNeill Whistler's 1875 *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket?* (Fig. 1). And, to expand this line of questioning yet further, how may we use this painting to explore a far larger question; namely, what takes place when a spectator encounters a work of art that both provokes an intensely affective response, and yet also clearly references elements of the recognizable contemporary world inhabited by both artist and viewer alike — one in which, in this instance, fireworks figured on a very regular basis?<sup>1</sup>

The dominant move in art history is to see Whistler's painting as a proto-abstract piece, one concerned with conveying atmosphere. I use 'atmosphere' in a threefold sense: as signifying, in Whistler's terms, the 'artistic impression that had been carried away from the scene' by the artist himself;<sup>2</sup> as suggestive of the smoky night air in a pleasure garden on the banks of the Thames; and as descriptive of the distinctive, auratic quality of the work itself — the emotional and aesthetic response provoked by the tone and application of paint. Whistler's testimony during the 1878 Whistler–Ruskin libel trial (initiated by Whistler, who felt that Ruskin had

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Anne Kalba's excellent *Color in the Age of Impressionism: Commerce, Technology, and Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), was published after I had completed the first version of this article. Her fourth chapter, 'Fireworks: Color, Fantasy, and the Visual Culture of Modern Enchantment' (pp. 120–47), which includes a section on Whistler's painting, likewise considers this work in the context of the broader cultural, technological, and — of course — colourful developments and associations in the field of nineteenth-century pyrotechnics. Although our emphases are somewhat different, there is an inevitable overlap in some source material. I wholeheartedly recommend Kalba's chapter not just for the dialogue that is created by reading it in conjunction with my discussion here, but also for the wealth of research and insight into visual and material culture that it contains.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Merrill, *A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in 'Whistler v. Ruskin'*, new edn (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press in association with the Freer Gallery of Art, 1992), p. 154. Merrill gives a detailed account and transcript of the Whistler–Ruskin trial. See also, Costas Douzinas, 'Whistler v. Ruskin: Law's Fear of Images', *Art History*, 19 (1996), 353–69; Shearer West, 'Laughter and the Whistler/Ruskin Trial', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 12 (2007), 42–63.



Fig. 1: James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, 1875, oil on panel, Detroit Institute of Arts. Wikimedia Commons.

defamed him and his art in print) constitutes one of his clearest statements concerning his aesthetic priorities. Compared to his ‘Ten O’Clock Lecture’ — an aesthetic manifesto delivered, in sweeping rhapsodic language, at the Prince’s Hall, Piccadilly, on 20 February 1885, and subsequently reprinted —

he spoke with precision, albeit, at times, somewhat sardonic and pointed precision.

In the courtroom, Whistler made his formal priorities clear. ‘A nocturne’, he said, ‘is an arrangement of line, form, and colour first’ (Merrill, p. 144). This suggests that he saw a canvas as providing a circumscribed, two-dimensional space on which to try out artistic challenges — ‘a problem that I attempt to solve’ (Merrill, p. 144). The canvas’s flat surface is more than a plane on which to arrange shapes and colours, however: thin washes — often with the canvas texture showing through — also made an impact on the spectator, as did patches of denser, rougher paint, and specks and touches of yet thicker pigment. Plenty of critics, however, even if sympathetic to these formal impulses, saw no point in exhibiting publicly such ‘studio-experiments’, to use Henry James’s term.<sup>3</sup>

This question of appeal and, by extension, of monetary value, was central to the trial. Asked by Sir John Holker, the Attorney General and counsel for the defendant, what the ‘peculiar beauty’ of the picture might be, Whistler replied that ‘I daresay I could make it clear to any sympathetic painter, but I do not think I could to you, any more than a musician could explain the beauty of a harmony to a person who has no ear’ (Merrill, p. 153). A clear put-down of Holker’s tone-deafness in the matter of art, this also speaks to Whistler’s appeal to the qualities of music: imageless, except for the impact on the imagination — the inward eye — of the listener. His patron, Frederick Leyland, first suggested the applicability of the term ‘nocturne’ to him, and as the painter explained at the trial: ‘By using the word “nocturne” I wished to include an artistic interest alone, divesting the picture of any outside anecdotal interest which might have been otherwise attached to it’ (Merrill, p. 143).

Whistler’s titling was part of his developing battle against the popular preference for pictures that told stories. He was to repudiate the anecdotal particularly forcefully in the ‘Ten O’Clock Lecture’. Rather, he hoped that the spectator might become absorbed in, or be absorbed by, a generalized sense of place, of time of day, or of colour and tonality, with, in this case, the fluidity of paint set off by carefully applied dots of bright pigment. Whistler looked to stimulate an affective response, expecting the painting to spark reactions in the spectator for which an adequate vocabulary might not readily be available — a response registered more somatically than intellectually.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> [Henry James], ‘The Grosvenor Gallery and the Royal Academy’, *Nation*, 31 May 1877, p. 320.

<sup>4</sup> For contemporary theories relating to aesthetics and somatic response, see Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

The term ‘nocturne’ is the clearest indication of Whistler’s own concern with the importance of going beyond surfaces, of regarding the image as a starting point for personal affective response. As has long been pointed out, the use of the word ‘nocturne’ signifies far more than a work depicting night-time. In the sense of a piece of music designed to evoke dreaminess, reverie, and introspection, ‘nocturne’ was an early nineteenth-century coinage, first used by the Irish composer John Field. It was especially associated with the twenty-one pieces for solo piano written by Frédéric Chopin between 1827 and 1846. Free flowing, and using melody in the same way that one might employ vocals in an operatic composition, these works sought to convey and produce emotional depth. Interested in the idea of aesthetic synaesthesia, Whistler experimented with various labels. The two works that he exhibited at the Dudley Gallery in November 1871 were almost certainly *Nocturne in Blue and Silver — Chelsea* (then titled *Harmony in Blue-Green*) and *Variations in Violet and Green*. Away at Leyland’s home, Speke Hall, beginning *Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink: Portrait of Mrs Frances Leyland*, he referred to them as ‘harmonies’ in a letter to Walter Greaves.<sup>5</sup> He thanked Greaves for sending him a copy of *The Times* with Tom Taylor’s review of the exhibition, which picked up on the significance of this musical nomenclature:

They are illustrations of the theory [...] that painting is so closely akin to music that the colours of the one may and should be used, like the ordered sounds of the other, [...] that painting should not aim at expressing dramatic emotions, depicting incidents of history or recording facts of nature, but should be content with moulding our moods and stirring our imaginations, by subtle combinations of colour, through which all that painting has to say to us can be said.<sup>6</sup>

The mode of interpretation that Whistler implicitly advocates is one that — however ephemeral the subject matter might be — relies on slow looking on the viewer’s part; on spectatorial immersion.<sup>7</sup> Such immersion is very different from the type of watching invited by fireworks, when, however much the viewer may be drawn into the moment, the objects of vision are continually moving. Duration of spectatorship is not a matter of personal choice, but choreographed by the display’s organizer. Yet, with

<sup>5</sup> James McNeill Whistler to Walter Greaves, 14 November/December 1871. Washington DC, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Pennell–Whistler Collection, PWC 9/645-6.

<sup>6</sup> [Tom Taylor], ‘Dudley Gallery — Cabinet Pictures in Oil’, *The Times*, 14 November 1871, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> For more about the concept of slow looking, see Jennifer L. Roberts, ‘The Power of Patience’, *Harvard Magazine*, November–December 2013 <<http://harvardmagazine.com/2013/11/the-power-of-patience>> [accessed 29 October 2017].



the *Nocturnes* careful observation is not required in order to tease out the associations behind a painting's component parts, as was customary with many of the narrative-based mid-Victorian canvases that Whistler so despised, reliant on the middle-class viewer deciphering the cultural connotations of furnishing, dress, and gestures. It is primarily directed at the work's formal properties — composition, colour, tone, and texture — rather than its subject matter. Whistler's foregrounding of these aspects does not, however, imply that they are ends in themselves; that the spectator is to be concerned with technical recognition and admiration. Indeed, to receive a full impression of the overall effect, one has to stand back from the painting — a quite different mode of occupying spectatorial space.<sup>8</sup>

If we bring together the type of spectatorship implicitly demanded by the *Nocturne in Black and Gold* and belonging to the captivating activity of watching fireworks — abstract, beautiful, transient apparitions in the sky — some telling questions emerge. Is Whistler implicitly distancing himself from firework spectatorship, offering a critique of such popular entertainment by emphasizing, via painting, the importance of individual response? Yet how do we account for the individualized associations that may be set in motion for the painting's viewer? After all, this viewer provides the knowledge that these apparently stationary spots of light traverse the sky, and supplies further elements belonging to such a scene — the fizzes and bangs, the press of crowds, the smells, the other visual attractions — not to mention the cultural familiarity with fireworks derived from other representations, both visual and literary.

Before turning to the full cultural context of Victorian fireworks, let us first consider the painting itself. Whistler's familiar image shows several cascades of golden sparks falling down the green-black night sky above the Cremorne Pleasure Gardens, with a few red, pink, and, more startlingly, lime-green fiery outliers descending somewhat closer to the assumed spectator. On the left-hand side of the picture, almost three-quarters of the way down the canvas, a more intensely incendiary band of light breaks through a mass of darkness: this is the silver-gilt oyster shell-covered grotto, or the platform from which the Cremorne fireworks were set off, with a large, near-black tree on its left-hand side. The air is thick with the hazy grey smoke from exploding pyrotechnics. In the foreground are a few diaphanous female figures; they seem disconnected from one another,

<sup>8</sup> The role of distance was very presciently remarked upon by the French critic Théodore Duret when writing on the Whistler–Ruskin trial: 'You can imagine the amazed horror of the public, who, accustomed to finding in catalogues explanations of the scenes to be gazed at with their noses touching the canvas, finds itself in front of an assortment of colors, requiring viewing at some distance and claiming to provide only a general impression of the transparency and poetry of the night.' Théodore Duret, 'James Whistler', *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 23 (1881), p. 554, quoted in Kalba, p. 137.

linked only by sharing the space with the fireworks display. If we follow their gaze upwards, to the rocket's apex, our eye then travels down again, along with the sparks, to the other bottom point of an elongated triangle — one occupied by the painter himself, in the form of his trademark butterfly signature, here rendered in decidedly Japanese fashion.

Or we could describe the *Falling Rocket* another way, in terms of paint and brushwork on canvas. Whistler's *Nocturnes* were painted on a dark background; according to his studio assistant (and artist in his own right), Walter Greaves, 'For the fireworks there was a lead ground.'<sup>9</sup> The dominant colours were applied in large, sweeping brushstrokes, creating bands of colour, and Whistler adjusted the tone as needed, then turned to the remaining colours ready for use on his palette. Although the subject matter may be kinetic — light in motion — as the catalogue entry to the major 1994–95 Tate Gallery Whistler exhibition explains, the effects of the soaring and then slowly descending rocket 'are achieved not through spattering paint on the canvas, but by carefully painting in each separate fleck of colour'.<sup>10</sup> In *The World in Paint* (2004) — which bears the *Falling Rocket* on its cover — David Peters Corbett considers the broad implications of this technique. Whistler's visible brush strokes and patches of colour, he maintains, affirm the materiality of paint, and hence the 'sensuous character of experience'.<sup>11</sup> Their flagrant assertion of difference from verbal language offers a form of modernity in dialogue with the foggy, urban atmospherics of the London in which he was painting, and in which his works were shown. We are tacitly exhorted to be aware of the tools of mediation, which — like language that calls attention to its own rhetorical moves — underscore the gap between external world and thing represented. But, unlike verbal language, we are invited to see the texture, the colours, the compositional properties as having affective power in their own right, irrespective of the subject matter.

Corbett, at this point, makes a crucial turn, pointing out that rather than critiquing the conditions of the industrial metropolis, Whistler beautifies them. In Whistler's own terms, these conditions are, courtesy of the transforming power of Nature (which Corbett reads as responsible for the softening effects of evening mist, rather than attributing these to smoke from polluting chimneys), the source 'of brilliant tones and delicate tints, suggestions of future harmonies' (p. 207). Whistler, says Corbett,

<sup>9</sup> E. R. and J. Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Lippincott; London: Heinemann, 1909), 1, 164. Walter Greaves himself painted *Fireworks: Cremorne Gardens* (1877), the falling rocket-sparks owing a great deal to Whistler. See <<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/fireworks-cremorne-gardens-138542>> [accessed 29 October 2017].

<sup>10</sup> Richard Dormant and Margaret F. Macdonald, *James McNeill Whistler* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1994), p. 138.

<sup>11</sup> David Peters Corbett, *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848–1914* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 122.

affirms the capacity of the visual as a means of engaging with modern experience. [...] The irrationality and material opacity of paint detached from mimesis and frankly declared on the surface of the painting serve, in Whistler's work, as a metaphor for the perceived opacity and resistance to understanding of modernity, of modern experience itself. But it is also a means through which that threatening otherness can be ameliorated. (p. 125)

Such a claim, however, through considering the material properties of medium alone, puts to one side the nature of the subject of representation, simply generalizing it as 'modern experience'. Fireworks are transitory, rapidly moving artefacts that when set off, as here, in multiples, create intersecting patterns and traces that may entertain the eye. But outside of representation, a firework display does not allow this eye to rest on a stable point of light. In failing to consider this, Corbett places fireworks on a par with the other lights that shine out steadily in Whistler's crepuscular scenes, like the lit windows of the Chelsea shore in *Nocturne: Blue and Silver – Chelsea* (1871), or the lights coming from the small industrial establishments in Lambeth in *Nocturne: Grey and Gold – Westminster Bridge* (1871–72), or the single riding lamp in a boat in *Nocturne: Grey and Silver* (1873–75) (Fig. 2), or the delicate illuminations of Cremorne Gardens themselves in *Nocturne: Blue and Silver – Cremorne Lights* (1872) (Fig. 3). In each of these cases, the lights are doubled and elongated, reflected in the limpid waters of the Thames. Corbett thus, to be sure, detaches the pyrotechnic displays from the systems of mass leisure and celebration in which they played a commercial



Fig. 2: James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: Grey and Silver*, 1873–75, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Wikiart.



Fig. 3: James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: Blue and Silver — Cremorne Lights*, 1872, oil on canvas. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/whistler-nocturne-blue-and-silver-cremorne-lights-no3420>>.

role, but in so doing he diminishes the difference between *Black and Gold* and the other *Nocturnes*. The other paintings show scenes in which the viewer, had they been present, could have engaged in contemplation of reflections and colours that would have slowly changed in depth and shade with waning or growing daylight, but were nonetheless available for introspective reverie. By contrast, *Black and Gold* holds a moment still, serving something up for immersive spectatorship in a way completely unavailable to a visitor to Cremorne Gardens.

For to paint fireworks is to attempt something rather different from representing a lamp in a window. For a start, the artist engages with many of the same challenges facing those who depict other forms of rapidly moving light that stand out against darkness, like the branches of a lightning flash, or the streak of light left by a shooting star tackled by Jean-François Millet in *Starry Night* (c. 1850–65) (Fig. 4). However, fireworks are distinct from celestial light shows since they are human-made, and, as Laura Anne Kalba has so ably shown, have their own cultural and material histories. Moreover, in aesthetic theory, fireworks occupy an interestingly unstable position. In Chapter 4 of Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (*Ästhetische Theorie*, 1970), the Frankfurt School philosopher turns to the representation of fireworks in his discussion of art, beauty, and what he calls 'the *apparition*, the heavenly vision', with which a true work of art stands in close relation, since such a work 'rises above human beings and is carried beyond their





Fig. 4: Jean-François Millet, *Starry Night*, c. 1850–65, oil on canvas, Yale University Art Gallery. Wikimedia Commons.

intentions and the world of things'. If an artwork does not display such immanence, such magical quintessence, that it transcends its own materiality, the conditions of its making, and its subject matter, it is no more than a husk. 'The phenomenon of fireworks', Adorno continues, 'is prototypical for artworks, though because of its fleetingness and status as empty entertainment it has scarcely been acknowledged by theoretical consideration.' This is, incidentally, a manifestation of mass culture, and indeed of mass spectatorship, that Adorno is atypically prepared to celebrate, because he regards fireworks as temporary, detached from material earthly existence:

They appear empirically yet are liberated from the burden of the empirical, which is the obligation of duration; they are a sign from heaven yet artificial, an ominous warning, a script that flashes up, vanishes, and indeed cannot be read for its meaning.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 106–07.



Fig. 5: John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1820, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art. Wikimedia Commons.

This, with typical Adornian allusiveness, is an equally brief flashing up of the artistic problematic faced both by Rembrandt (*Belshazzar's Feast*, c. 1636–38) and John Martin (*Belshazzar's Feast*, 1820) (Fig. 5): how to convey, visually, the supernatural flaring light and mysteriously appearing, doom-laden letters, written by a divine hand, that prophetically appear on Belshazzar's wall in the Book of Daniel, foreseeing his imminent death. These can only be interpreted by Daniel, the seer. By extension, the story of Daniel's superior interpretive ability may also be an allegory for those who can, indeed, read meaning into fireworks — not, however, as *representing* anything, but as standing for a principle of pure aesthetics, a principle which is simultaneously tied to the empirical (as in the pigment, brushstrokes, and forms of a painting) and floats free of it. 'It is not through a higher perfection', writes Adorno, 'that artworks separate from the fallibly existent but rather by becoming actual, like fireworks, incandescently in an expressive appearance' (p. 107).

As Rei Terada usefully explains, the importance of fireworks to Adorno, like another of his examples, 'the water fountains of the seventeenth century' (Adorno, p. 106), is that they rely on 'nonconceptual sensuous appeal'.<sup>13</sup> This principle may be extended to the appeal of purely abstract

<sup>13</sup> Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 186.

art, and clearly has something in common with Whistler's 'artistic interest alone'. Yet, to regard fireworks solely in this light limits the possibilities inherent in their spectatorship. Philosopher Joseph Margolis, building on his strong commitment to relativism, an evolved version of pragmatism, and historicism, attacks Adorno's view of fireworks head on, calling it

preposterous [...]. Fireworks are not 'apparitions' at all, though they certainly feature transient visual displays; they are not delusive appearances that are or must be confused with the 'real appearances' of real things — any more than are lightning strikes. They plainly involve the mastery of a perfectly real technology [...] their effects are entirely actual, known, and controlled.<sup>14</sup>

Just as a firework manufacturer can anticipate the effects of the pyrotechnics that they have constructed, so an artist who 'works in a deliberate way and is genuinely aware of what he or she is doing' should have an awareness of the 'import' of their work (Margolis, p. 438). (Margolis sidesteps the word 'meaning', and hence avoids falling into too much of an intentionalist trap.) Margolis stands back, like Adorno, to consider not so much fireworks, but artworks themselves. More than this, he takes the spectator (of a work of art, or indeed of fireworks) into account. 'Meanings' — and here he *does* use the word, pluralized — are not out there in art and history, 'waiting to be plucked — latent, independent of our interpretive labors. No. Not at all! Rather, we construct those meanings in a way analogous to constructing works of art themselves' (Margolis, p. 438). I explore, in what follows, how we negotiate the aesthetic representation of a visual display that can well be taken as an abstract form — a set of moving, coloured lights usually with, by the mid-nineteenth century, no referential properties — yet is also a display inseparable from the developing culture of mass entertainment. Like art in public exhibitions, or engravings in the pictorial press, fireworks are simultaneously consumed communally and by a perceiving individual.

A painting like *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, at once representational — those scattered gold and red flakes of light are unmistakably fireworks — and achieving its effects through an obliteration of detail and the substitution of carefully calibrated swathes of pigment, throws down particular challenges to our 'interpretive labors'. This was made abundantly clear by numerous critics who grappled with it, both when first exhibited in 1875 at the Dudley

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Margolis, 'Art and Technology: The Touch of the Human', in *Technology and Cultural Values: On the Edge of the Third Millennium*, ed. by Peter D. Herschok, Marietta Stepaniants, and Roger T. Ames (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press and East-West Philosophers Conference, 2003), pp. 433–47 (pp. 437–38). For Margolis's evolving views, see 'Interview with Joseph Margolis', *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 6 (2009), 305–17.

Gallery, and in 1877 at Sir Coutts Lindsay's new Grosvenor Gallery — highly innovative as an exhibition space.<sup>15</sup> In 1875 the *Building News* sneered that the painting 'might, if it were come upon unframed and unglazed, be mistaken for the first efforts of an artistic Japanese baby with a blacking-bottle'.<sup>16</sup> *Punch*, in 1877, summed up the reaction of the *Nocturne's* detractors: 'Above, all fog; below, all inky flood; For subject — it had none.'<sup>17</sup> Reviewing the Dudley show, Tom Taylor, influential art critic of *The Times* (and also editor, at the time, of *Punch*), while acknowledging that 'what Mr. Whistler calls his nocturnes and symphonies have a real beauty and suggestiveness of their own', treated them as though they were exercises, studies in colour, rather than finished canvases.<sup>18</sup> As Clive Wilmer has discussed, the relationship of incompleteness to the artwork's evaluation was to play a major role in the well-known trial that followed Ruskin's accusation against the painter that 'the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture', since he dared to charge two hundred guineas for a work in which he had done no more than '[fling] a pot of paint in the public's face'.<sup>19</sup> Whistler won his libel case, but received only one farthing in damages — something of a damp squib in financial terms, and a verdict that was to ruin him financially. All the same, the trial itself provided him with an opportunity to articulate his aesthetic doctrines, and to see them publicized.

Even those critics who spoke admiringly of Whistler's work — *Nocturne in Black and Gold* was by no means universally reviled — could express particular qualifications. Significantly, William Michael Rossetti, writing of the Dudley show in the *Academy*, had reservations about the subject matter. As he describes it,

<sup>15</sup> See *The Grosvenor Gallery: A Palace of Art in Victorian England*, ed. by Susan P. Casteras and Colleen Denney (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Julie Codell, 'On the Grosvenor Gallery, 1877–90', *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. by Dino Franco Felluga <[http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps\\_articles=julie-codell-on-the-grosvenor-gallery-1877](http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=julie-codell-on-the-grosvenor-gallery-1877)> [accessed 29 October 2017]; Colleen Denney, *At the Temple of Art: The Grosvenor Gallery, 1877–1890* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2000). Christopher Newall, *The Grosvenor Gallery Exhibitions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) contains a complete listing of the paintings exhibited.

<sup>16</sup> 'Oil Pictures at the Dudley Gallery', *Building News and Engineering Journal*, 29 October 1875, pp. 472–74 (p. 473).

<sup>17</sup> 'The Palace of Art (New Version)', *Punch*, 7 July 1877, p. 305.

<sup>18</sup> [Tom Taylor], 'Winter Exhibitions: The Dudley', *The Times*, 2 December 1875, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> 'Letter 79', 18 June 1877, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library Edition, 39 vols (London: Allen; New York: Longmans, Green, 1903–12), xxix: *Fors Clavigera: Letters 73–96* (1907), pp. 146–63 (p. 160). See Clive Wilmer, 'The Falling Rocket: Ruskin, Whistler and Abstraction in Art', <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/ruskin/wilmer4.html>> [accessed 29 October 2017].





Fig. 6: James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: Grey and Gold — Westminster Bridge*, 1871, oil on canvas, Burrell Collection, Glasgow. Wikimedia Commons.

The scene is probably Cremorne Gardens; the heavy rich darkness of the clump of trees to the left, contrasted with the opaque obscurity of the sky, itself enhanced by the falling shower of fire-flakes, is felt and realised with great truth. Straight across the trees, not high above the ground, shoots and fizzes the last and fiercest light of the expiring rocket.

Yet he does not feel able to rate it as highly as a crepuscular Thames view — which now seems a far less remarkable work — the *Nocturne in Blue and Gold, No. 3* (now known as *Nocturne: Grey and Gold — Westminster Bridge*), ‘a *chef-d’oeuvre* of tone; tinting, solidity, and sentiment too’ (Fig. 6). For with respect to the *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, ‘its artificial subject-matter places it at a less high level.’<sup>20</sup> At the Whistler–Ruskin trial, he again expressed scepticism about the choice of topic: ‘There is no reason why fireworks should not be represented’, he cautiously opined, ‘I have seen them represented before in pictures — but I do not think it is a good subject’ (Merrill, p. 158).

Rossetti, like other reviewers, constructs his meaning — to use Margolis’s terms — in relation to other works of art, whether these be

<sup>20</sup> W. M. Rossetti, ‘The Dudley Gallery’, *Academy*, 31 October 1875, p. 462.

paintings hung alongside Whistler's, or whether they belong to a far broader body of works stored in his memory, providing norms and expectations and used for comparison. In his hierarchy — one strongly indebted to Ruskinian values — nature trumps the artificial. But I want to consider what it might mean to reinsert this canvas, and two others, not only into a context formed by paintings on gallery walls, but into various other discourses, both literary and visual, that surrounded pyrotechnics themselves.

Other Whistler paintings besides *Nocturne in Black and Gold* depict fireworks. A startlingly dark canvas (although, by Whistler's own testimony, deteriorating varnish made it even darker than he had intended), *Nocturne: Black and Gold — The Fire Wheel* (c. 1872–77) shows a huge blazing Catherine wheel, whirling off sparks at its edges. Depicting a chrysanthemum-like vortex of flame, *The Fire Wheel* suggests a persistence of vision — the sense that the fiery impressions linger on the retina — that shows a different form of painterly experimentation, representing the physiological effects of fireworks on the viewer. *Nocturne: Blue and Gold — Old Battersea Bridge* (1872–75) is a painting predominantly in a lighter sea-green shade, suggesting an evening lit by a luminous full moon. Under the tall, dark grey span of the bridge can be seen a thin splatter of descending golden firework sparks and, on the right, the upward and more rapid trajectory of a rising rocket. Here, indeed, we are invited to compare the reflection of sparks with the reflection of lights on the river, the painting creating the illusion that fireworks and lights on the shore are equally static. Only our knowledge that comes from information outside of the painting tells us otherwise.

In all three works we come face-to-face not just with moving lights held in visual suspension, but with the whole history of rockets and other pyrotechnics designed for entertainment and display, and with the occasions and sites of their being launched into dark air — an important part of the cultural context available to contemporary viewers. As I signalled earlier, any consideration of a painting's spectatorship has to take into account not just the affective atmosphere of the canvas itself, but the associations, however faint, that are set into motion for each individual when faced with the work — something that blurs the edges of what constitutes affective response. As we have seen, Whistler's titles link the works to practices of reverie and contemplation evoked by the synaesthetic parallel with music. In what follows, however, I want to discuss the implications of spectatorship not so much in relation to individual subjectivity, but in relation to interpretive communities bound by common exposure to fireworks, by shared cultural connotations concerning fireworks (including their visual and literary representations), and by their experiences of visiting public exhibitions of art. The spectator's body may be stationary, but the mind is not.

Setting matters. In the case of *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, we might hypothesize some diversity among people who saw the image when it was exhibited in 1875 and 1877. The Dudley Gallery and the Grosvenor Gallery were very different kinds of sites. The Dudley Gallery was situated in the Egyptian Hall, in Piccadilly — almost opposite the Royal Academy — which was the location for many popular entertainments in the mid-nineteenth century, including the Ojibwa whom George Catlin brought to England in the 1840s, Laplanders giving sleigh rides, illusionists, and, at the end of the century, ‘animated photographs’ — as advertising on the hall’s facade called the new medium of film. From 1865 the Dudley Gallery (from 1883, the Dudley Gallery Art Society) held exhibitions there. Though the original aim was to provide a venue for watercolourists, whose work was not admitted to the Royal Academy, watercolour exhibitions alternated with shows of oil paintings. Whistler’s two canvases, hung at the exhibition of works in oil that opened in October 1875, appeared alongside paintings that appealed fair and square to the tastes of the middle-class public. They hence potentially functioned as a very direct provocation: ‘defiantly enigmatical’, the *Art Journal*’s critic termed them.<sup>21</sup> They flanked the painting that held pride of place, George Dunlop Leslie’s *Anthylla* (much admired by the critics), which showed a young lady sitting by a classical fountain and gazing at flowers in the stream by her feet. The other 447 works included: a very different kind of treatment of the Thames, G. F. Watts’s oil sketch for *Found Drowned* (c. 1850), depicting, with sentimental realism, a young woman’s body on the bank of the river under Westminster Bridge; idealized portraits, like Edward Fahey’s *Lily and Her Butterflies* (a much happier young woman standing in a conservatory amid a huge flutter of coloured wings) and Mary Ellen Edwards’s *A Golden Hour*; genre paintings, from J. W. Waterhouse’s *Margaret, Scottish Martyr*, ‘bound to a stake on the seashore to be drowned by the approaching tide’,<sup>22</sup> to Alfred Dixon’s *The Broker’s Man*, with the agent — firmly in possession of home and furnishings — trying to make nice to the bewildered children of the house; flower paintings; some examples of French Naturalism, including Lhermitte’s *The Cloth-Market, Landerneau*, and several representatives of that mid-century genre that one might term ‘animal comedy’, like J. C. Dollman’s *How D’Ye Do?*, depicting a kitten surprised by a jack-in-the-box, and Briton Rivière’s *A Double Entendre*, in which a pig winds the rope by which he is being led around a milestone. Faced with this exhibition, it is small wonder that the *Athenaeum*’s critic — almost certainly Frederic Stephens — writes of *Anthylla* in words that sum up the whole show: ‘We must not be ungrateful,

<sup>21</sup> ‘The Dudley Gallery Winter Exhibition’, *Art Journal*, February 1876, pp. 45–46 (p. 45).

<sup>22</sup> ‘Rapier’ [Alfred Watson], ‘How the World Wags’, *London Society*, December 1875, pp. 555–68 (p. 560).

but we really should next season like to be enchanted by something novel.’ At the same time, while observing that Whistler’s titles, like his two paintings themselves, act on some people ‘like red rags shown to bulls’ — and while noting that these works are, for him, more ‘studies’, or ‘exercises’, than finished pieces — Stephens claims that ‘they are examples of high and precious art, and they illustrate in a sublimated fashion certain peculiarly pictorial qualities of inestimable importance, but of which the English school is prodigiously ignorant’.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to the Dudley Gallery, the Grosvenor was from the start largely identified with artists who saw themselves as part of the Aesthetic Movement. Many of them emphasized formal aspects over the narrative appeal of scenes taken from everyday life. While narrative subjects were certainly present, they were, at least initially, frequently drawn from mythology, poetry, and religious subjects (although this was to change with the younger, French-trained artists working under the influence of Naturalism, such as George Clausen and Edward Stott, who exhibited there after the mid-1880s). Many of the initial exhibitors were often engaged with decorative projects that moved beyond painting. Furthermore, the gallery was distinguished by its mode of hanging art, grouping all works by one artist together, yet placing them in individual wall bays so that one could pause and examine each artist’s style as a whole. On the occasion of the Grosvenor’s opening show, for example, Whistler’s eight canvases were placed together, allowing the group to be brought into comparative dialogue with, say, Edward Burne-Jones’s idealized, elongated figures in *The Days of Creation*, *The Mirror of Venus*, *The Beguiling of Merlin*, and some smaller allegorical works; or with Albert Moore’s long vertical panels depicting static, classically draped women against decorative backgrounds (*Sapphires*, *Marigolds*, *The End of the Story*); or with William Holman Hunt’s carefully painted, chromatically brilliant Orientalist/Mediterranean subjects (*The After-Glow in Egypt*, *An Italian Child*, *On the Plains of Esdraelon, above Nazareth*, *A Street Scene near Cairo*). In this company, Whistler’s work not only seems strikingly different by virtue of a mode of painting that encouraged viewers to pay attention not to the surfaces and decoration of the objects represented, but to the surface of the canvas, and to obscurity, not clarity, of line and shape. It is sharply distinct from these other paintings, moreover, because Whistler places contemporary London at its centre. To be sure, it is a deliberately softened, beautified London, but it is, nonetheless, a London of public space and popular entertainment.

Fireworks were a regular component in London’s recreational landscape. They were commonly set off at commemorations and celebrations — for the end of the Crimean War or the Queen’s Jubilees, for example, and they formed

<sup>23</sup> [Frederic Stephens(?)], ‘The Winter Exhibition: Dudley Gallery’, *Athenaeum*, 30 October 1875, pp. 580–81 (p. 581).



part of regular displays in pleasure gardens like Cremorne or Vauxhall, or the Crystal Palace, on piers during the summer holiday season, and, of course, on Bonfire Day, 5 November, which marked the anniversary of Guy Fawkes's attempt to blow up the Houses of Parliament. This national day of firework ignition provided periodicals with an annual opportunity to run pieces about the history and making of fireworks. Despite the short-lived nature of each pyrotechnic launch, fireworks themselves have a long past. Victorian publications almost always traced them back to thirteenth-century Chinese practices, while also emphasizing military uses of rockets.<sup>24</sup> Following the Victorian journalistic fascination with explaining how things are made, a writer for *All the Year Round* in 1874, for example, visited the 'dozens of little huts at wide intervals' that constitute Mr Brock's firework factory, noted the 'formidable list of rules' that are posted to ensure safety, and before going on to give a detailed account of their construction, relished describing components of the fireworks:

Here also are stores of peculiarly fine, thick, and heavy brown paper, hand and machine made from brown rope, and many reams of cartridge and other varieties of white paper; many hundredweight of pins for attaching 'quickmatch' to set pieces; barrels of steel and iron-filings and turnings, for producing bright starry coruscations; and chemicals for 'colouring' — nitrate of strontia for producing red, nitrate of baryta for green, sulphuret of antimony for white; oxychloride, carbonate and arsenate of copper for blue fires and stars.<sup>25</sup>

Firework making was also considered a pastime that could be carried out at home, and a number of publications explain that one would just be making smaller, domestic versions of the rockets, crackers, sparklers, golden rain, blue candles, Roman candles, pin wheels, star lights, and

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<sup>24</sup> For a comprehensive history of fireworks (that stops short of the nineteenth century), see Simon Werrett, *Fireworks: Pyrotechnic Arts and Sciences in European History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Alan St Hill Brock, *Pyrotechnics: The History and Art of Firework Making* (London: O'Connor, 1922), is very valuable for understanding Victorian firework manufacture. For further works, see Chris Philip, *A Bibliography of Firework Books: Works on Recreative Fireworks from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Winchester: Philip and St Paul's Bibliographies, 1985). Very little change in the type and coloration of fireworks occurred throughout most of the Victorian period. Chlorates — which produced the blues and greens, in addition to the gold and silver — were available from the 1830s onwards. Aluminium (for more metallic colours) became commercially available in 1888, but not seriously used in fireworks until Brock employed it at the Crystal Palace in 1894.

<sup>25</sup> 'Fireworks', *All the Year Round*, 7 November 1874, pp. 84–89 (p. 86).

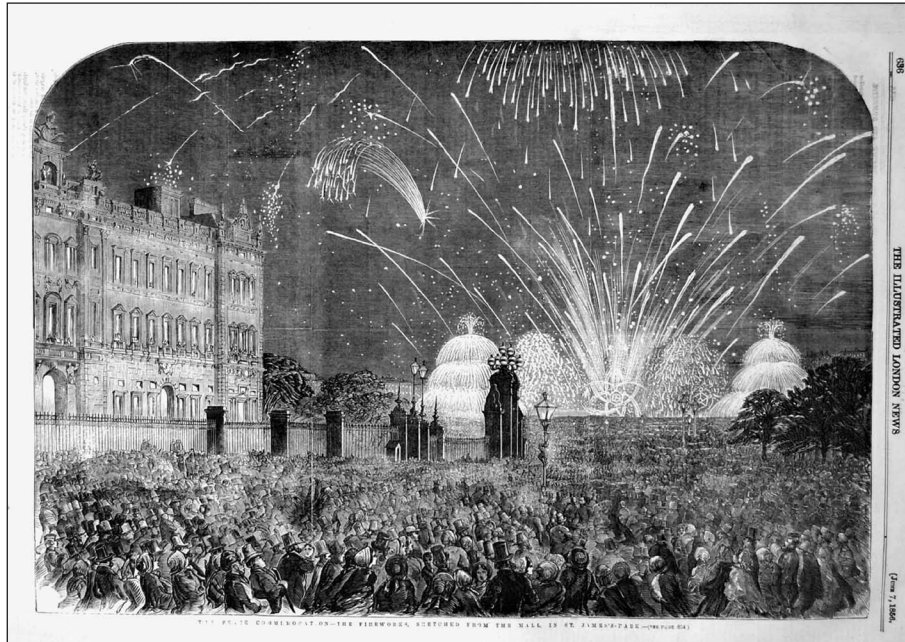


Fig. 7: ‘The Fireworks, Sketched from the Mall in St. James’s Park’, *Illustrated London News*, 7 June 1856, p. 636.

‘saucissons’ that were set off commercially — even though the space of their consumption, and the spectatorship they encouraged, were inevitably very different.<sup>26</sup>

The Dudley Gallery and Grosvenor Gallery exhibitions seem to have attracted somewhat different picture-viewing audiences in terms of class and aesthetic expectations. Fireworks themselves, however, provided entertainment that crossed class lines. This was an inevitable result of them patterning the sky, visible from very many vantage points, but depictions in the illustrated press also show the assumed heterogeneity of crowds. The *Illustrated London News*’s 1856 image of fireworks being let off in St James’s Park to celebrate the Crimean War’s conclusion, for example, not only displays a melange of social types closely crammed together — as evidenced by the range of headwear — but also people standing on balconies in the elegant buildings to the left of the image (Fig. 7). Later in the century,

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Frederick Bruhl, *The Art of Making Fireworks* (London: Brittain, 1844); *Fireworks and How to Make Them* (London: Routledge, 1871); Thomas Kentish, *The Pyrotechnist’s Treasury; or, Complete Art of Making Fireworks* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1878) — and subsequent reprints; ‘Practicus’, [Dennis Times Moore], *Pyrotechny; or, the Art of Making Fireworks, at Little Cost, and with Complete Safety and Cleanliness* (London: Ward, Lock & Tyler, 1871; repr. from *Boy’s Own Magazine* (1864–67)).

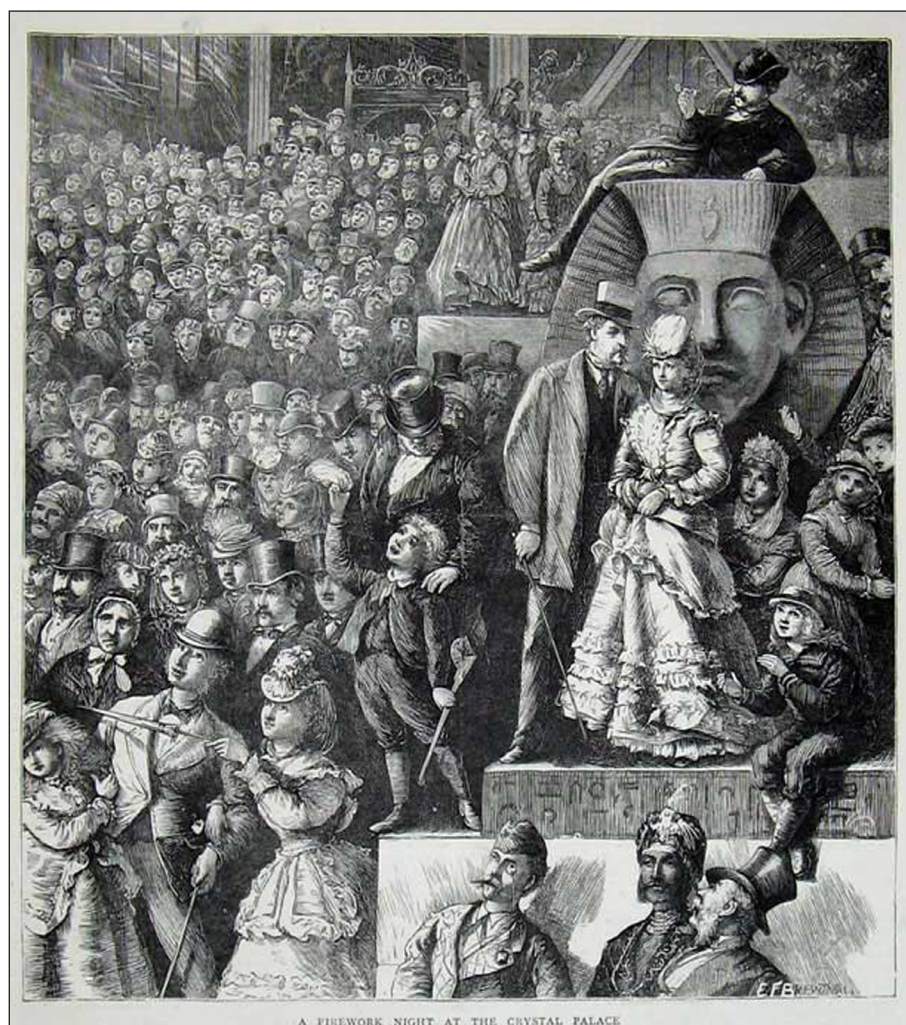


Fig. 8: Edward Brewtnall, 'Firework Night at the Crystal Palace', *Graphic*, 22 October 1870, p. 404.

social, generational, and racial diversity is even more carefully indicated in the rapt crowd shown in Edward Brewtnall's 'Firework Night at the Crystal Palace' (Fig. 8), which, even if not necessarily an accurate transcription of the mass of people in front of the artist, is a rendition of how wonder and delight can unite a very heterogeneous body of people.<sup>27</sup> If some fictional depictions of firework spectatorship give the impression that they appeal to a very plebeian taste — notorious here is the 'Io Saturnalia' chapter of George Gissing's *The Nether World* (1889), in which the disdainful narrator

<sup>27</sup> On wonder and firework displays, see Kalba, pp. 143–45.





Fig. 9: Stanislaw Bejchan, 'The Fireworks at the Crystal Palace', *Graphic*, 27 June 1891, p. 717.

recounts how 'up shoot the rockets, and all the reeking multitude utters a huge "Oh" of idiot admiration'<sup>28</sup> — Polish artist Stanislaw Bejchan's 'The Fireworks at the Crystal Palace' from two years later suggests that they also appealed to a more sophisticated spectator. While some of the company in

<sup>28</sup> George Gissing, *The Nether World*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 111.



the Crystal Palace dining room clearly found flirtation and conversation more compelling, others are shown spellbound by the exploding fiery flowers in the dark sky outside (*Fig. 9*).

Fireworks did not solely function as visually bonding entertainment. They were transformed into metaphors on the grounds of their explosiveness and the short duration of their eye-catching flare. Dickens's writings offer a synoptic vision of these associations at work. Jingle referred disrespectfully to Mr Pickwick as 'Old Fireworks' because of his tendency to burst out in fiery temperamental explosions.<sup>29</sup> Mr Pecksniff worked on a 'vast number of mathematical diagrams, of such extraordinary shapes that they looked like designs for fireworks'.<sup>30</sup> Mrs Lirriper, overwhelmed by her first visit to Paris, felt 'as if it was beautiful fireworks being let off in my head'; and, if Dickens's prose makes it sound as though she was rummaging through her experience to find an adequately sensational metaphor, the more verbally practised David Copperfield observed that 'conversational phrases are a sort of fireworks, easily let off, and liable to take a great variety of shapes and colours not at all suggested by their original form'.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, the rapid rise and fall of the skyrocket was used to illustrate the ephemerality of short-term, worldly fame (or notoriety). Count Guido Franceschini in Robert Browning's twelve-book verse-novel *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69), an abusive and jealous husband in jail for the murder of his wife and her parents, gives one long, last self-defensive monologue, and then the narrator takes over to begin the concluding book:

Thus, lit and launched, up and up roared and soared  
A rocket, till the key o' the vault was reached.  
And wide heaven held, a breathless minute-space,  
In brilliant usurpature: thus caught spark,  
Rushed to the height, and hung at full of fame  
Over men's upturned faces, ghastly thence.  
Our glaring Guido: now decline must be.  
In its explosion, you have seen his act.  
By my power — may-be, judged it by your own, —  
Or composite as good orbs prove, or crammed  
With worse ingredients than the Wormwood Star.  
The act, over and ended, falls and fades:  
What was once seen, grows what is now described.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. by Mark Wormald (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 268.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. by Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 86.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Mrs. Lirriper's Legacy', in *Christmas Stories and Other Stories* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1891), pp. 258–80 (p. 272); *David Copperfield*, ed. by Jeremy Tambling (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 296. For these and other fireworks references in Dickens's work, see Granville Garley, 'Celebrating the "Fifth" with Dickens', *Dickensian*, 37 (1941), 103–04.

Then talked of, told about, a tinge the less  
 In every fresh transmission; till it melts,  
 Trickles in silent orange or wan grey  
 Across our memory, dies and leaves all dark,  
 And presently we find the stars again.  
 Follow the main streaks, meditate the mode  
 Of brightness, how it hastes to blend with black!<sup>32</sup>

In these lines, Browning expertly uses line breaks and caesurae to mimic the rocket's rise, and the brief moment when it appears to hang suspended before falling to earth, its train of sparks fading, just as fame is not only short-lived in itself, but in our memories.

Such associations would have been readily available both to viewers of Whistler's paintings and to those who witnessed the nightly display at Cremorne Gardens, directly across the Thames from where he lived between 1866 and 1878 at 2 Lindsey Row (now 96 Cheyne Walk). This pleasure garden came to life at night.<sup>33</sup> During the day it seems largely to have been frequented by tradesmen, clerks, shopkeepers, and their families and sweethearts — a relatively respectable location, with carefully tended flower beds and manicured lawns; with displays such as floral fetes and maypole dancing. But once night fell, music, less decorous dancing in the form of gallops and polkas, captivating displays, and visual illusions took the place of these signifiers of English pastoral. At various times, Cremorne's heterotopic attractions included a Crystal Grotto, a marionette theatre, Japanese jugglers, a Hermit's Cave, an American bowling saloon, a circus, several theatres, and all manner of other sideshows, including fiery ones: an engraving in the *Illustrated London News* for 18 September 1858 shows a 'human Salamander' — a helmeted man walking through a tunnel of flames (it seems that what appeared to be ordinary clothes were in fact made of asbestos) (*Fig. 10*).<sup>34</sup> As Lynda Nead has written, 'Cremorne was a mutable social space. To an extent, it gave people what they wanted to find' (p. 130). Its diverse forms of entertainment bring home how popular

<sup>32</sup> *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–), ix: *The Ring and the Book, Books IX–XII*, ed. by Stefan Hawlin and T. A. J. Burnett (2004), pp. 325–26.

<sup>33</sup> For Cremorne Gardens, see Hazelle Jackson, 'Who to Cremorne Would Not Gladly Repair?', <<http://www.londongardenstrust.org/features/cremorne.htm>> [accessed 29 October 2017]; Tom Morton, *Urban Pleasures: Whistler at Cremorne* (London: Courtauld Institute, 2000); Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 109–46; Warwick Wroth, *Cremorne and the Later London Gardens* (London: Elliot Stock, 1907).

<sup>34</sup> Robert H. Jones, *Asbestos and Asbestic: Their Properties, Occurrence, and Use* (London: Crosby, Lockwood, 1897), pp. 261–62.



Fig. 10: 'The Italian Salamander', *Illustrated London News*, 18 September 1858, p. 263.

leisure was given order not just by place and space, but by the hours of night and day.

As the evening wore on — especially after 10 p.m. — the ambience changed, becoming more rowdy and, at least by reputation, dissolute. As an engraving of Derby Day revellers that appeared in *La Ilustración Española y Americana* strongly suggests (Fig. 11), Cremorne had well-developed and widely disseminated notoriety as a site where sex workers plied their trade. It is impossible to tell the class and occupation of the women who appear in *Nocturne in Black and Gold* and other Whistler paintings of the same location, but the lack of clear delineation in their depiction suggests not just anonymity, but a sense of drifting, somewhat shadowy existence. Richard Dorment, writing in the catalogue that accompanied the 1994–95 exhibition of Whistler's work, explicitly conflated the women who appear in the *Nocturne* with the fireworks themselves, saying that Whistler 'depicts those aspects of Cremorne in which the beauty was ephemeral — the fireworks and the sad parade of prostitutes' (Dorment and Macdonald, p. 133). Even if the elegant women, dressed in pastels and holding their fans with





Fig. 11: 'Costumbres Inglesas — Les jardines de Cremorne, en las fiestas del Derby', *La Ilustración Española y Americana*, 1 June 1872, p. 333.

practised coquetry, seen in *Cremorne Gardens, No. 2* (1872–77), seem far from 'sad' in themselves, the predominant motion is one of languor and purposelessness on the part of women and men alike.<sup>35</sup> The colours, dominated by dull greens and tans, similarly lack energy: this is an earthbound lethargy that the fireworks seem to transcend (Fig. 12).

<sup>35</sup> In an 1869 daylight scene by Whistler's assistant, Walter Greaves, *Whistler in the Cremorne Gardens, Chelsea*, Whistler is seen lounging in a chair while a couple of elegantly dressed ladies stroll past him. See <<http://www.leicestergalleries.com/19th-20th-century-paintings/d/walter-greaves/13013>> [accessed 29 October 2017].



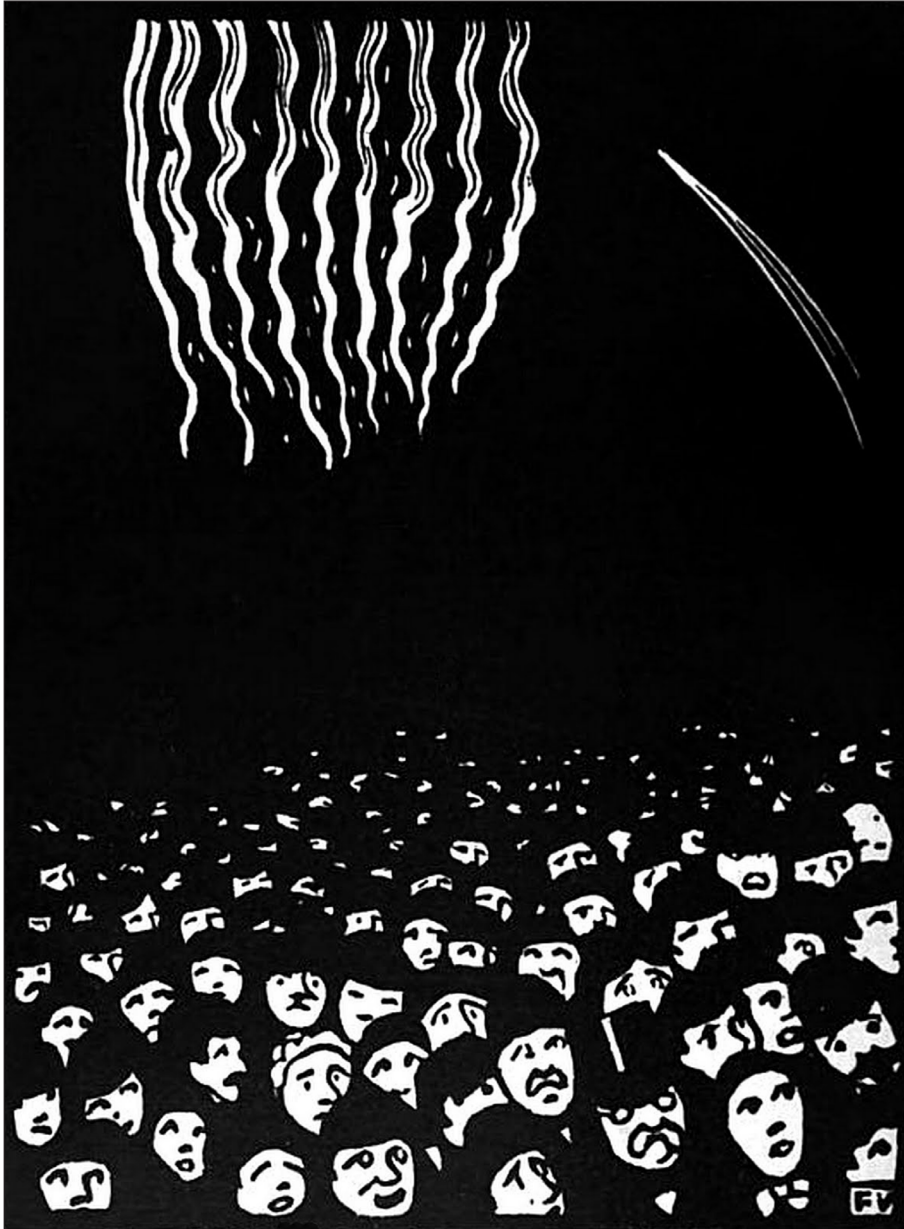


Fig. 12: James McNeill Whistler, *Cremorne Gardens, No. 2*, 1872–77, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Wikiart.

But in *Nocturne in Black and Gold* women are not the point of an implied gaze in an urban setting. Rather, they themselves appear as gazers, drawn to the celestial spectacle, not just by the explosion of lights in the sky, but by that which no painting of fireworks can show: the whooshes, bangs, and fizzles that accompany a firework display — sounds, of course, that anyone who has been present at such a display can provide for themselves, just as the thick smoky air in the centre part of Whistler's image is redolent of the distinctive smell of sulphur. Whistler does not put spectatorship at the conspicuous centre of his firework paintings, as Félix Vallotton was to do in his 1901 woodcut *Fireworks* (Fig. 13). Here, light — presumably from the soaring fireworks — illuminates the faces of the crowd with a harsh glare, showing their mingled expressions of fascination, awe, anticipation, and apprehension. This anatomy of spectatorial physiognomies anticipates news photographer Weegee's signature habit, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, of turning his Speed Graphic's flash unit so that it lit up the faces of a crowd absorbed in the shocking scene of a murder or an accident. In Vallotton's woodcut, the nine dangling tails of one firework, and the swooping trajectory of a rocket in the distant sky, are decoratively subservient to the expressions of the people watching.

But the spectatorship that truly matters in relation to *Nocturne in Black and Gold* does not involve a depicted audience for fireworks. Indeed, Whistler apparently moved away from inviting us to consider mass spectatorship: not only are the visible watchers transparently spectral, but at some point between 1882 and 1892 he removed two further figures.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Andrew McLaren Young and others, *The Paintings of James McNeill Whistler*, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 1, 99.



*Fig. 13: Félix Vallotton, Fireworks, Plate VI, The World's Fair (L'Exposition Universelle), 1901, woodcut, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Wikimedia Commons.*

First, as already discussed, there is the viewer of the artwork: implicitly invited to engage their own subjectivity and to enter into a meditative space, where time's suspension is evoked by the very figuration of moving sparks left hanging in the painted night sky. At the Dudley Gallery, certainly, this sense of personal engagement was further complicated by

the combination of dark pigment and the painting's glaze: the *Art Journal's* reviewer remarked that

these dark surfaces are to the glass of the frame what quicksilver is to a mirror, and the visitor standing opposite these pictures is startled to see the reflected figure of himself and others passing and repassing like troubled ghosts in the mysterious gloom of the 'Nocturnes'. ('Dudley Gallery Winter Exhibition', p. 45)

Moreover, the art spectator will almost inevitably engage in associative mental work, bringing in aspects of those shared sets of cultural associations. Or, they could find community in celebrating (or mocking, or puzzling at) the virtuoso effects not of Mr Wells, who mounted the nightly firework shows, but of the painter himself.

The other spectatorial position to be taken into account is, necessarily, that of Whistler, observing the fireworks prior to painting them — notwithstanding his claim that before painting a *Nocturne* in his studio, he said that 'I am going to make my mind a blank'.<sup>37</sup> Whistler was a frequent visitor to Cremorne Gardens. Whether he made any very rough sketches there himself, as he did, for example, when he went out on the Thames in a boat, or whether he jotted down what he had seen when he returned home, is not apparent: what *is* known, however, is the extent to which he relied on memory. Memory, too — not just of his immediate surroundings, but of a career spent translating gradations of colour and tone into paint — lies at the heart of the much quoted moment in the Whistler–Ruskin trial, when Attorney General Holker asked:

Did it take you much time to paint the *Nocturne in Black and Gold*? How soon did you knock it off?

WHISTLER Oh, I 'knock one off' possibly in a couple of days — (laughter) — one day to do the work and another to finish it [...].

ATTORNEY GENERAL The labour of two days is that for which you ask two hundred guineas?

WHISTLER No, I ask it for the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime. (Merrill, p. 247)

This 'knowledge' is typically discussed — if it is discussed at all — in technical terms: the habituated coordination of eye and hand; the understanding of the effects that will be achieved by applying diluted oil paint to canvas; the way that a tiny speck of bright yellow paint will draw the eye into the deep sea-green depths of a London night. Or it is taken up in reference to that category of 'labour', and Ruskin's valorization of physical work's importance. But I want to argue for the materiality and representation of fireworks themselves as establishing further types of 'knowledge' — ones

<sup>37</sup> Mortimer Menpes, *Whistler as I Knew Him* (London: Black, 1904), p. 11.

that form part of the reserve of images and associations within the memory of artist and spectator alike.

In painting pyrotechnic displays, Whistler would have been drawing on a lifetime of seeing these ephemeral nocturnal shows — in his native America, in France, in London. It is hard to say for sure what we see when we observe a rocket flare and fall, because of the likelihood of its brightness and motion creating a persistence of vision, meaning that we think that we are still seeing something that may in fact have passed. This persistence of vision was solidified in very many earlier depictions of fireworks. Centuries of firework representation — images that circulated through book illustrations and as prints — tended to show the magnificent displays as sustained arcs and streams of fiery light, very similar to the graphic conventions used to display — to hark back to Adorno — the moving waters of a fountain.

This translation of fire into water — this representation of duration — is something that Whistler works to deny in his paintings. He freezes each individual spark: there is little sense of a rocket's long tail, except in the rising projectile on the right-hand side of *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, just a succession of fiery droplets, some closely packed and some further apart. This distinguishes his canvases not just from many earlier prints and paintings, but from photography, since only a very fast lens speed is capable of distinguishing the segmented sparks of a firework. By the later nineteenth century, photographic magazines published instructions for how best to photograph firework displays, as well as descriptions of spectacular photographic records of, say, Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee celebrations in Delhi, or the firework displays at the Crystal Palace. Invariably, the light used to take these pictures was 'available light' — that is to say, the light of the fireworks themselves. The result is a pattern of connected lines and loops, arches and pillars — an architecture of illumination, even when those who witnessed the displays would have seen constant splutters and flashes and explosions and floating fire.

Yet despite the prevalence of continuous arcs and curves in firework representations, Whistler's decision to represent singular sparks and scraps of fire is hardly without precedent. Certainly, by any standards, *Nocturne in Black and Gold* is a remarkably bold, experimental painting for its time. But in celebrating its achievement — its capacity to draw attention to its own materiality and its capacity to evoke, rather than to show — what has been overlooked is its overlap with the decidedly non-experimental within visual culture. Whereas no definitive claim can be made about Whistler's detailed familiarity with such representations, we can state with confidence that they would have helped constitute the visual literacy of many of his paintings' original viewers, shaping their understanding of how fireworks looked when on the page, rather than when soaring and fizzling through the night sky. Consider the visual material that circulated widely among the middle classes: those news engravings found in such publications as the *Illustrated London News* and the *Graphic*. While in terms of print culture





Fig. 14: James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: Blue and Gold — Old Battersea Bridge*, 1872–75, oil on canvas. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/whistler-nocturne-blue-and-gold-old-battersea-bridge-no1959>>.

critics have fairly remarked on the similarities between the *Nocturne: Blue and Gold — Old Battersea Bridge* (Fig. 14) and Utagawa Hiroshige's *Fireworks at Ryōgoku Bridge* (1858) (Fig. 15), in fact the depiction of fireworks in many news illustrations is far closer to Whistler's scatter of sparks than is the formalized quarter-sky of stylized, regular pyrotechnics in this Japanese woodcut.<sup>38</sup>

In an 1845 *ILN* illustration with an Orientalist setting far closer to home, the 'Firework Temple at Vauxhall', we encounter both fiery parabolas and slow cascades of falling sparks (Fig. 16), as we do in the copious illustrations for the commemorative supplement that the same publication brought out in June 1856, showing nationwide celebrations to mark the end of the Crimean War. We have already considered the crowds in the image depicting the St James's Park display; other engravings represent similar scenes in Victoria Park, Hyde Park, Green Park, Primrose Hill, Phoenix Park in Dublin, on the Chain Pier in Brighton, and a range of other locations. All depict streaks of fire in the sky, fountains of intense light, and, like Whistler's painting, hosts of separate sparks, some like tadpoles with incendiary trails, some like bursting stars, some like blizzards of blazing snowflakes (Figs. 17, 18).

By reinserting *Nocturne in Black and Gold* into a matrix of visual representation that goes beyond the walls of the Dudley or Grosvenor galleries, and beyond the categories of painting that both contemporary and subsequent critics have tended to reference, a further understanding of Whistler's image making emerges. Unarguably, *Nocturne* is a work that encourages a spectator's absorption in the act of looking, suspending their own sense of time just as the painter suspends firework sparks in the inky sky. But when one sets this painting alongside news media images of firework displays, and when one also considers the variety of print sources that encouraged the reading of fireworks in both material and allegorical terms, Whistler emerges as an artist whose most controversial work is far more engaged with popular culture than it is customarily taken to be. The world created by the *Nocturne* — what we might think of as the force field of its associations and affect — encompasses the fireworks found in print illustrations, as well as in the experience of firework displays themselves, just as much as it does the visual impact of rich blue-green-blackness shot through with golden dots of paint.

What we are left with, then, when we ask what it means to represent fireworks — particularly when we approach this question through Whistler's painting — is the demonstration of the productive tension between a

<sup>38</sup> Although more scattered sparks above a bridge can be seen in a tiny work by Shuntosai, in a book of etchings that Whistler kept in his studio till his death. See Margaret F. MacDonald and Patricia de Montfort, *An American in London: Whistler and the Thames* (London: Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2013), p. 24.



Fig. 15: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Fireworks at Ryōgoku Bridge*, 1856–58, woodcut, Brooklyn Museum. Wikimedia Commons.



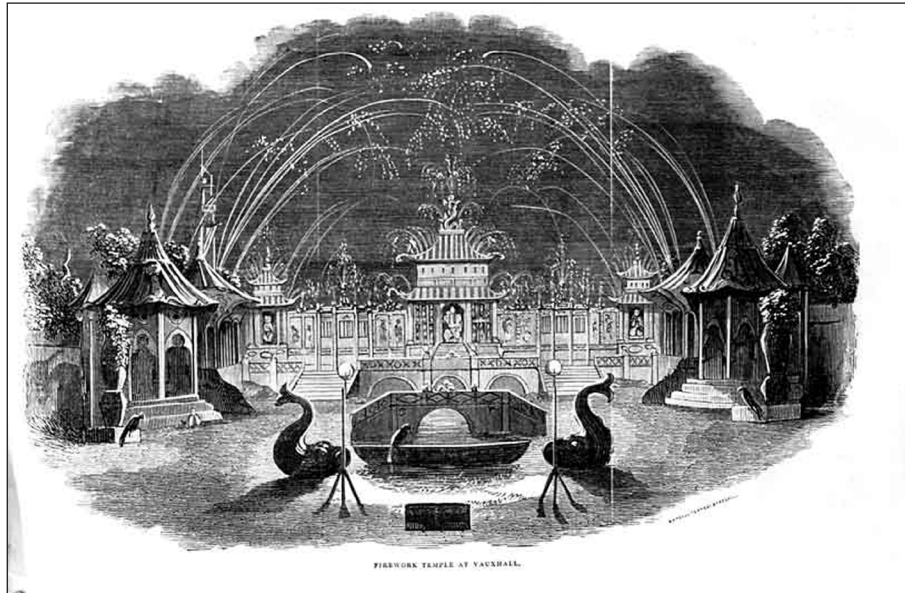


Fig. 16: 'Firework Temple at Vauxhall', *Illustrated London News*, 21 June 1845, p. 396.



Fig. 17: 'The Peace Commemoration at Brighton — Fireworks on the Chain Pier', *Illustrated London News*, 14 June 1856, p. 664.



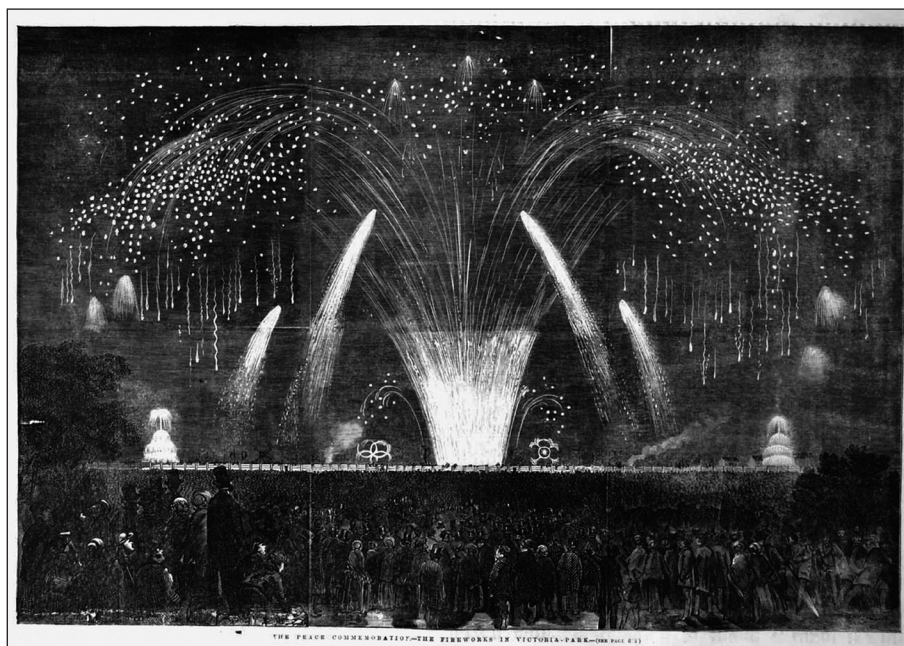


Fig. 18: 'The Peace Commemoration — The Fireworks in Victoria Park',  
*Illustrated London News*, 7 June 1856, p. 613.

representational work of art with powerful affective properties on the one hand, and the knowledge, history, and prior and concurrent representation of the subject matter of such an artwork — in this case fireworks — on the other. To quote the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, 'Reductive or explanatory criticism, be it psychological, sociological, or stylistic, attempts to exorcize the personal character of the work in order to make it a part of the world, thus placing it within a network of transparent relations.'<sup>39</sup> Such relations necessarily constitute part of the world of both spectator and artist, but as Vattimo sees it, in his Heideggerean understanding of the power of art, an artwork itself must constitute part of the world of the observer — indeed, create its own world — and thus helps shape the world of its observers. As Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell — Whistler's first major biographers — remarked back in 1908:

Whistler made people look at his pictures, until it has become impossible to look at Nature at night without remembering the Nocturnes. He painted the effect that the world at night produced on him, and the great artist, like the great author, moves people, makes them think they see things as he does.  
 (1, 163)

<sup>39</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth (Poesia e ontologia, 1967)*, ed. by Santiago Zabala, trans. by Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 117.

The same may well be said, indeed, of how Whistler's paintings make one see fireworks.

At the same time, recognizing Whistler's role as a recorder of a commercial cultural spectacle — of 'artificial subject matter', to recall William Michael Rossetti's term of disdain — should make us cautious about granting too much agency to the affective mood of the canvas taken just on its own terms. For viewing does not take place in isolation, whether we consider the comparative environment of a gallery, or the associative practices of a viewer's mind. For all the experimentalism of Whistler's application of paint, for all the appeals to a spectator's feelings that are exerted by the indistinct masses of shade and smoke, he is still depicting a recognizable phenomenon. If inward, even melancholic, reverie is the customary state induced by a musical nocturne, or for that matter by a canvas dominated by deep swathes of indigo and greyish black, the interruptive effect of bright dots of colour — or of fireworks' associations — disturb this. *Nocturne in Black and Gold* brings into dialogue the stasis of painterly representation on the one hand, and memories and associations surrounding a lively culture of highly mobile pyrotechnics on the other. Paying attention to this subject matter allows us to use the properties and culture of fireworks themselves to unsettle some of the claims Whistler himself made in relation to this work of art.

### Acknowledgements

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