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Technologies of Fire in Nineteenth-Century British Culture

Cultural histories of nineteenth-century Britain have studied the important physical and psychological transformations caused by the industrialization of light. Gaslight, though discovered prior to the nineteenth century, became aligned with the era's narratives of national and industrial progress, an arc that, one might argue, culminated in the growing popularity of electric light at the end of the century. Yet, despite these new technologies of 'artificial light', 'natural' wood and coal fires remained popular in British culture. This issue explores fire as a visual and narrative technology in art, literature, and public displays by examining the ways in which fire evoked competing symbolic values, such as primitivism and modernity, vitality and destruction, intimacy and spectacle. The reading order mixes articles and shorter pieces together to demonstrate the continuities of fire across various sites, including: the domestic fireside, the tallow candle, theatrical conflagrations, Turner's fires, subterranean fire, solar fire, fireworks, funeral pyres, and a coal-ship fire.

Introduction

Anna Sullivan and Kate Flint

Animating Flames: Recovering Fire-Gazing as a Moving-Image Technology

Anne Sullivan

Tallow Candles and Meaty Air in Bleak House

Anna Henchman

Fire on Stage

Nicholas Daly

Power, Creativity, and Destruction in Turner's Fires

Leo Costello

Visions of Volcanoes

David M. Pyle

Dirty Fires: Cosmic Pollution and the Solar Storm of 1859

Kate Neilsen

Fireworks

Kate Flint

Victorian Imag(in)ing of the Pagan Pyre: Frank Dicksee's Funeral of a Viking

Nancy Rose Marshall

While the World Burns: Joseph Conrad and the Delayed Decoding of Catastrophe

Jesse Oak Taylor

Afterword

Fire

Isobel Armstrong

To read or download the articles, see: <https://19.bbk.ac.uk/93/volume/0/issue/25/>

Also see 19's Facebook page for updates: <https://www.facebook.com/19studies/>

Reference:

TOC: 19, issue 25, 2017. In: ArtHist.net, Dec 6, 2017 (accessed Jul 15, 2025),

<<https://arthist.net/archive/16900>>.