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Review of Rumiko Handa and James Potter, editors, *Conjuring the Real: The Role of Architecture in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-century Fiction*

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familiar to readers of this journal. For those not familiar with them, this volume is valuable as an introduction to some of the leading figures in fields as far apart as literary medievalism, structuralist art history, poststructuralist architectural theory, and Victorian set design. Most of the chapters restate arguments or present evidence that the authors have published in earlier forms. An analogy might be some projects that bring in a team of superstar architects to design separate buildings for what is supposed to be a common project. Rumiko Handa, one of the editors, provides the introduction to the volume, explaining that the lecture series was part of an effort to integrate architecture into the study of the humanities. One aspect of this effort is a database (<http://aith.unl.edu>) accessible after submitting a copyright agreement with the University of Nebraska. Some of the many buildings, scenes, and illustrations referred to in the text can be found at this site. The representations of the architecture of the past in recent film and popular media functions as a synecdoche for the larger frame of history and a sense of period, she explains, and the chapters in the volume are designed to trace the pre-history of that representation in early cinema, stage design, popular illustrations and literature. The concluding chapter by Nebraska architects Toby Olson and Josh Silvers on buildings and gardens in film versions of Jane Austen are a good example of her project. The “fiction” in the title thus is a very loose category. So is the “real,” for that matter, gesturing toward a theoretical awareness only briefly demonstrated in most of the following chapters, with one or two exceptions.

A brief summary can only point to the subjects and arguments of the various chapters rather than communicate the richness and detail of their exposition. In “All that Life Can Afford?” Perspectives on the Screening of Historic Literary London,” film historian Ian Christie reprises his convincing defense of British film and its proclivity for literary adaptations. Rather than being un-cinematic or uncritically heritage-minded, this attentiveness to historical setting carries on one of the original strengths of early cinema, a reconstruction of the past through

architecture and setting. Michael Alexander, the noted translator and scholar of Old English poetry, gives a clear working definition of historical fiction beginning with Sir Walter Scott. Relying on his widely-read recent study *Medievalism*, he describes how architecture and setting in Scott and others reflect the themes of their socially and politically concerned novels. Alexander ends with a revealing passage from Dickens that cycles through the Victorian period’s entire range of attitudes to the architecture of the Middle Ages, from curiosity to utopian enthusiasm to dismissal. A curiosity of Alexander’s own essay is his hostility to the medieval fantasies of Gothic fiction, which he condemns for their lack of literary merit. Stephen Bann contributes an example from art history, the illustrations of the Norman abbey St. Georges de Boscherville from the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries. Its illustration history tracks the revival of interest in medieval architecture from an antiquarian exegesis followed by a broad popularization to an image that serves as a specimen of Norman architecture in Thierry’s *Atlas*. In so doing, the visual image of this abbey forms something of a counterpoint to the cycles of the historical imagination that Bann had identified many years ago in textual discourse in his influential study of nineteenth-century historical ideologies, from “code,” to “message” to “myth.” Instead, the image of the abbey begins as part of a “myth” and ends up as a piece of “code.”

Richard Schoch, the theater historian, provides what might be considered a prequel to Ian Christie’s chapter. In “Performing History on the Victorian Stage,” Schoch describes the emergence of historical accuracy in architectural settings and costumes in Victorian productions dealing with the premodern past. Schoch details Charles Kean’s almost scholarly sets, which often recreated medieval processions as way of communicating the reality of the past, performing as well as recreating that past. The educational and commemorative quality of these productions were supported by Queen Victoria’s somewhat surprising enthusiasm for the theater, rendering them part and parcel of the many exhibitions, dioramas and tableau that

Rumiko Handa and James Potter,
editors

**Conjuring the Real: The Role of
Architecture in Eighteenth- and
Nineteenth-century Fiction**

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Given how much has been written about architecture and literature over the last few decades, the subtitle of this book might seem to promise a belated subject. The essays collected here are the result of a lecture series held in 2007 at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, though the length and density of some of them suggest versions that preceded their presentation at that conference. This density is in fact one of the strengths of this book, which strays far from its title and announced theme. The other strength is the astounding roster of contributors, many of whom will be

seemed to crowd all of London. In the most arresting chapter in the entire volume, "Shops and Subjects," Andrew Ballantyne explores how characters in various fictions are "interfused" with their surroundings, alluding to Edgar Allen Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher* and Georges Rodenbach's *Bourges-la-morte*, before turning to more apparently naturalistic novels such as Dickens's *Old Curiosity Shop* and Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*. He argues that Zola and Dickens actually reveal a haunted, psychologically charged identity between person and building. Dickens's shop operates like the depths of Freud's unconscious, but Zola's description of mechanical desire looks forward to Deleuze and Guattari. While reflecting a general sense of Paris familiar to us from Walter Benjamin, Ballantyne notes the source of some of Benjamin's perceptions in his friend Louis Aragon. While all of the earlier chapters are learned and worthy, Ballantyne's chapter is the only one that picks up the promising conversation between architecture and literary discourse that started a few decades ago in such books as Sharon Marcus's *Apartment Stories*, Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny*, Jennifer Bloomer's *Architecture and the Text*, and Philippe Hamon's *Expositions: Literature and Architecture in Nineteenth-Century France*, to name just a few.¹

While *Conjuring the Real* might not demonstrate the theoretical coherence that the editors claim, and while its engagement with similar efforts over the past few decades is limited, the rich and masterful essays collected here will reward the patient reading they deserve.

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Note

1. Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1992); Jennifer Bloomer, *Architecture and the Text: The (S) crypts of Joyce and Piranesi* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Philippe Hamon, *Expositions: Literature and Architecture in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. Katia Sainson-Frank and Lisa Maguire (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).