Dear 18/19C & Mass Culture Workshoppers,

Thank you for reading this piece! This is a draft of an article-in-progress, one I am hoping to submit somewhere like Victorian Studies or Dickens Studies Annual. Although it has gone through a number of revisions it still feels rough around the edges, and I would be most grateful for help with what needs to be done before I submit for publication. Feedback on the following will help me the most:

• Any problems you run up against with the clarity and flow of the argument or writing; anything you find confusing or misleading

• Conceptual and argumentative coherence: especially deployment of key terms (do I need to more carefully define any of my terms? is there still slippage between terms like “phenomenological” and the “perceptual” – which I have scrupulously but maybe not scrupulously enough tried to remove! etc.) but also: moments where close readings need more detail to be convincing, where argument can be clarified or reinforced, where I move too quickly or telegraphically?

• For those of you who are more familiar with the field, are there secondary sources crucial to my argument that I am missing here, especially in nineteenth century media history and theory, or on Dickens and magic lanterns/cinema/cinematicity? I will be glad to hear broadly about things you all think I might read as part of this general archive, but especially glad to know if there are sources this piece is weakened by not dealing with.

With these triage priorities in mind, I am also very happy to speculate and muse with you all about the larger stakes and possible future for this project, which spirals out into my dissertation-to-be.

Thanks again! Looking forward to talking!

yours, Amanda
In an early scene in Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, his historical novel set in London and Paris during the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror, a young man named Charles Darnay is on trial at the Old Bailey as a suspected French spy. Dickens lingers on the image of a mirror above the prisoner’s head that, though intended as a spotlight, becomes the source of an imagined ghostly reflection:

> Crowds of the wicked and the wretched had been reflected in it, and had passed from its surface and this earth’s together. Haunted in a most ghastly manner that abominable place would have been, if the glass could ever have rendered back its reflexions, as the ocean is one day to give up its dead.¹

Dickens is describing a magic lantern—a kind of mirror that gives back the dead. At least, this is what the magic lantern signified for nineteenth-century audiences that flocked to the theater to see the spectacle known as the magic lantern phantasmagoria. Popularized in France by the physicist turned showman Etienne-Gaspard Robert, called Robertson, at the tail end of the French Revolution, the phantasmagoria was a staple of the London entertainment world in the

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first two decades of the nineteenth century. Robertson and his followers employed catoptric projectors known as magic lanterns to exhibit, as the poster for Robertson’s Fantasmagorie advertised, “Apparitions of Specters, Ghosts and Revenants, as they have existed and appeared in all time, in all places and for all people.” Men metamorphosed into skeletons and ghosts soared into the audience. In a recollection strikingly reminiscent of Dickens’ description of the crowds of the wicked and wretched reflected in the haunted mirror, one audience member at an early exhibition of the phantasmagoria wrote, “A decimvir of the republic has said that the dead return no more, but go to Robertson’s exhibition and you will soon be convinced of the contrary, for you will see the dead returning to life in crowds.”

This essay argues for the shaping influence of Robertson’s magic lantern phantasmagoria on Charles Dickens’ writing of historical fiction in A Tale of Two Cities. For Dickens, phantasmagoria was expressive of a historical imaginary through two interrelated aspects of its production: its dematerialization of the visual into a metamorphic flow; and its apparent effects of resurrecting the dead. The dominant trend in scholarship on Victorian visual culture has been

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2 The German showman Paul Philidor, also known as Paul de Philipsthal, first brought the phantasmagoria from Berlin and Vienna to Paris in 1793 and London in 1801. Robertson adapted many aspects of Philidor’s show, but he also significantly advanced it through technological innovation in magic lantern technology and the expressivity of his showmanship. While magic lantern shows were prevalent throughout the Victorian period, the most popular moving picture entertainment until the advent of cinema at the turn of the twentieth century, the magic lantern phantasmagoria faded from view in London by 1830. For a fuller account of the origins of the magic lantern phantasmagoria and its popularity in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, see Laurent Mannoni, The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema, translated and edited by Richard Crangle (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000) and Marina Warner, Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors and Media into the Twenty-First Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Most studies of Robertson’s phantasmagoria draw heavily on his Memoires récréatifs, originally published in 1831, as well as his illustrations and hand-painted slides; the most comprehensive of these is Françoise Levie’s biography Un vie d’un fantasmagore (Montréal, Quebec: Le Préambule, 1990).

3 Quoted in Françoise Levie, Un vie d’un fantasmagore, 79. My translation.

4 Quoted in Fulgence Marion’s The Wonders of Optics (New York: Scribner, 1871), 189.
to assert that nineteenth-century new media were forces for objectification and materialization.\(^5\)

It is conventional, in other words, to categorize visual culture as material culture. Magic lantern phantasmagoria, with its flickering and insubstantial projections, radically resists this classification. I argue here that Dickens drew on the immateriality of phantasmagorical representation, and its concomitant model of forms in a state of transfiguration, to structure his account of historical experience during the French Revolution.

Although the magic lantern show was ubiquitous during Dickens’ lifetime, and several critics have written eloquently on the influence of magic lantern projection on Dickens’ prose,\(^6\) I am dealing exclusively here with the sub-genre of the phantasmagoria, one that, by the time Dickens was writing, was already outdated, even historical. A handful of drawings and engravings of the show, as well as written accounts, were in circulation, emphasizing the Gothic décor of the exhibition and its method of frightening and astonishing its audiences. But the Gothic style of the phantasmagoria is not its ultimate category difference from the magic lantern shows on prominent display in Victorian London—rather, it is the phantasmagoria’s particular perceptual effects, effects that Dickens, arriving too late on the scene to experience first hand, would have had to imagine for himself. Since it is precisely this perceptual aspect of the phantasmagoria that informed Dickens’ writing, it will be helpful to go through a similar imaginative exercise.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) I focus here exclusively on the magic lantern component of Robertson’s phantasmagoria, and therefore to “the phantasmagoria” more generally as the name for a style of magic lantern projection and its visual regimes. Although I share this usage with many scholars who have
Magic lantern phantasmagoria relied on three central media: the magic lantern projector, an arsenal of glass slides, and a diaphanous screen onto which these slides were projected. At the same time, it sustained its illusions through the occlusion of these media. Unlike your average magic lantern show, in which the magic lantern was mounted before the audience as part of the evening’s entertainment, the phantasmagoria was rear-projected. That is to say, both Robertson and his magic lantern were located behind the screen on which the slides were projected, invisible to the audience. The phantasmagoria was always exhibited at 6:30 in the evening in a room drenched in complete darkness. The screen was made of diaphanous black fabric to camouflage it within the room: a curtain covered it until the lights were extinguished, at which point it was swallowed by the darkness. On Robertson’s hand-painted slides, lampblack surrounded the figures to eliminate any visible border that would betray their location in space.

This set-up decontextualized the images from the apparatus that produced them, heightening their status as spectral beings imbued with volitional capacity.

The show began within this space of complete darkness. “In the remote distance,” as Robertson described it, “a mysterious point seemed suddenly to appear: a figure, first small, took

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(worked on the magic lantern phantasmagoria (Terry Castle, Max Milner), I wish to note here that the phantasmagoria in Robertson’s and his contemporaries’ deployment of the term referred to the larger exhibition in which the magic lantern show was housed, an exhibition that included scientific demonstrations and acoustic phenomena like the glass harmonica among other forms of sensory disorientation. Located in an abandoned convent Robertson decorated with murals and hieroglyphics, the Phantasmagoria was an early predecessor of the haunted house; Disney Land’s Haunted Mansion, which takes visitors through a variety of rooms aimed to disrupt and disorder their sense of space and time, including one filled with dancing holograms, is perhaps its best known late twentieth century derivation. For a fuller account of the phantasmagoria’s many sensorial facets, see Gunning, “The Long and the Short of It: Centuries of Projecting Shadows, from Natural Magic to the Avant-Garde,” The Art of Projection, ed. Stan Douglas and Christopher Eamon (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009), 23-35.

10 Ibid.,” 25.
shape, then approached in slow steps, and at each step seemed to enlarge.”\textsuperscript{11} These specters appeared to surge into the audience. Robertson’s \textit{Fantascope}, his new and improved magic lantern, was stationed on wheels just for this purpose: it could be rolled forward to enlarge the figures, a technique that, combined with the camouflaged screen and decontextualized space of the theater, made the apparitions seem to approach and loom above the viewers. The figures Robertson projected, and the scenarios in which he staged them, sprung from a Gothic imaginary that blended revolutionary history with Judeo-Christian and classical mythologies. Thus, among many apparitions, one could see Louis XVI metamorphosing into a skeleton and the head of Danton projected onto smoke as it transformed into a skull; the Bloody Nun out of Matthew Lewis’ Gothic novel \textit{The Monk}; the Three Graces transforming into skeletons; and the preparation of the Sabbath.\textsuperscript{12}

Dickens took Robertson’s phantasmagoria as a model as he developed narrative techniques for representing history as a collective lived experience of transformation. Having read Robertson’s memoirs, publishing two articles based on his life story and accomplishments in \textit{Household Words} in 1855, Dickens reflected on the relationship between the phantasmagoria and historical narrative by focusing on the phantasmagoria’s play with perception, its dialectic of superstition and reason, and its manifest disconnect of perceptual and physical reality. Dickens’ biographical profile “Robertson, Artist in Ghosts,” detailing Robertson’s career as an optical illusionist and culminating in his demonstration of the \textit{Fantasmagorie} in Paris 1798, forwards an essentially phenomenological view of revolutionary history through the lens of the magic lantern.

\textsuperscript{11} Robertson, quoted in Max Milner, \textit{La Fantasmagorie} (Presses universitaires de France, 1982), 11. My translation

\textsuperscript{12} The phantasmagoria did not, however, exclusively exhibit Gothic scenes. Picturesque vignettes included the birth of love, the dance of the fairies, the apotheosis of Heloise, and Mohammed’s paradise. The show also included anticlerical satires: Venus caressing a hermit, or a monk being considered for beatification burning in the flames of hell. See Milner, 11.
phantasmagoria. Shifting from an account of the Belgian showman’s experiences in Paris during the Reign of Terror, Dickens writes, “But it is another reign of terror with which Robertson’s life has most connection—the terror of the ignorant at shadows and hobgoblins.”

Dickens sets up the local phenomenon of the phantasmagoria as parallel to and expressive of the turbulent moment of its emergence.

Written four years before the publication of *A Tale of Two Cities*, “Robertson, Artist in Ghosts” offers a nuanced perspective on phantasmagoria’s optical trickery and its perceptual effects. Dickens implies that the phantasmagoria registers something that the rational apprehension of reality cannot. Take, for instance, the following passage:

> It was very easy to excite the wonder of the town, even without any great dexterity or conjuror’s tools of a refined description. Crowds were flocking daily to the gardens of the Palais Royal to gape at the shadow of a chimney, which, at a certain hour of the day, resembled the figure of Louis the Sixteenth. Thousands believed that the shadow of the king upon whom they had trampled haunted the Parisians by appearing daily in the garden. A commissary of police, by the help of a few masons, at last caused the demolition of the august shade in the presence of a concourse of astonished people. It does not take much to produce a ghost.

Dickens concludes that Robertson’s phantasmagoria produced the kinds of ghosts that his audiences were already seeing. While apparently qualifying the power of Robertson’s so-called magic—suggesting, that is, that Robertson merely exploited the credulity of spectators brought on by radical and violent upheaval—Dickens in fact introduces a more troubling possibility: that

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13 Charles Dickens, “Robertson, Artist in Ghosts,” *Household Words* no. 253 (January 27, 1855), 556
14 Ibid., 557.
historical experience can leave behind a phantasmal residue. It does not take much to produce a
ghost because, Dickens implies, ghosts are a consequence of history – of history as collective,
lived experience. In this sense, Robertson’s phantasmagoria does not run counter to reality; it
enlarges reality, exposing the phantoms that already exist within it.

I want to draw two conclusions from my account of Dickens’ analysis of magic lantern
phantasmagoria that, taken together, will inform the discussion of A Tale of Two Cities that
follows. The first is that Dickens conceptualizes vision as something other than the sensory-
cognitive registration of the material object world. Human vision, like the magic lantern, projects
inner imaging onto the external world—it transforms as it perceives. Reflecting on the perceptual
effects of the phantasmagoria and the apparent automatism of its images, Dickens shows vision
actually divesting from materiality and taking on a ghostly life of its own. Secondly, resurrection
operates for Dickens as a metaphor for this procedure. Dickens’ anecdote of the ghostly shadow
of Louis XVI may play on a real event from Robertson’s life, described in his memoir but not
explicitly mentioned in the essay: Robertson’s Fantasmagorie at the Palais Royale was shut
down, and Robertson himself run out of town, when a rumor spread that he could resurrect the
French monarchy. Resurrection was a thematic and framing conceit of the phantasmagoria, and
its apparent effect. In his article, Dickens primarily deploys resurrection as a figure for the
technological capacity of the magic lantern phantasmagoria, its re-animation of the material as

15 Marina Warner, Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors and Media into the Twenty-first
16 This was reinforced by the context of the larger installation Robertson created for his
Fantasmagorie. Viewers entered the main theater through a salon in which they could view a
series of scientific experiments, including demonstrations of galvanism such as the application of
electrical currents to dead frogs causing their legs to twitch. These experiments primed audiences
for the magic lantern show by demonstrating the scientific viability of animating dead matter.
See David J. Jones, “Etienne-Gaspard Robertson’s Gothic Fantasmagorie and E.T.A. Hoffman,”
Gothic Machine: Textualities, Pre-Cinematic Media and Film in Popular Visual Culture
(University of Wales Press, 2011), 65.
immaterial image. In this sense, Dickens’ profile on Robertson is a preliminary sketch for *A Tale of Two Cities*, articulating historical fiction’s task of resurrection. Informed by Robertson’s technologically engineered resurrections, Dickens approaches the novel as a technology for the production of historical phantasms.

A broad and unruly discourse of the “phantasmagorical” existed in the Victorian period, and exists today; and, as Terry Castle has shown, the term’s drift from its original meaning as spectacle to its modern sense as psychic experience makes it especially difficult to speak of phantasmagorical narration with conceptual specificity. While phantasmagoria was coined to describe an externalized spectacle, Castle claims that it has come—via Proust and Freud—to denote an internal haunting, with the mind itself ridded with ghosts. The multiple, sometimes interacting and sometimes distinct meanings of phantasmagoria are showcased in contemporary literary scholarship where the term can refer, among other things, to ghosts and ghostliness, Gothic or supernatural themes, dream states, the unconscious, and commodity fetishism. This essay intends to restore a more granular and historically applicable use of the term “phantasmagoria” as referable primarily to the stage phenomenon that inaugurated the word. At the same time, my reading identifies *A Tale of Two Cities* as registering a crossover moment for the semantic shift of which Castle writes: for Dickens, phantasmagoria is simultaneously employed in the service of historical set pieces, staged like pieces of theater, and as an expression of the phenomenological, rather than positivist, nature of history. His positioning of phantasmagoria as suspended between the internal and external also highlights phantasmagoria’s cinematicity, an issue I will take up in the final section of this paper.

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History as Phantasmagoria

When Dickens calls Robertson an “Artist in Ghosts,” he names an identity that can also describe the writer of historical fiction. The title echoes a phrase from the early nineteenth-century historian Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle called historians “Artists in History,” because the writing of history was not an act of transcription but rather one of imaginative synthesis.  

History is a process of metamorphosis, “an ever-living, ever-working Chaos of Being, wherein shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable elements.” The organic, animistic nature of historical reality could not be approximated by antiquarianism, collecting artifacts to stand in for the whole: the historians had to sustain “an Idea of the Whole” in order to fire up fragments into a totalizing vision.

There is good reason to believe that Dickens alludes to Carlyle deliberately in his construction of the phantasmagorist as an “Artist in Ghosts.” Carlyle was a significant influence on Dickens’ novelistic production from the mid-1850s through the end of his career, and Carlyle’s History of the French Revolution was arguably the single most influential source for A Tale of Two Cities. (Dickens claimed to prepare for writing his novel by reading Carlyle’s History nine times.) Although idiosyncratic, Carlyle expresses a value that was widely held among historians of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: what Stephen Bann terms a “desire for history,” a construction of historical narrative as a mode of immediacy through which

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19 Ibid., 88
21 Goldberg, 2.
readers could re-experience the past as present. “There is nothing as impartial as the imagination,” the French historian Prosper de Barante commented in 1824. “We want to get to know what existence held for peoples and individuals before our times. We insist that they should be summoned up and brought living before our eyes…”22 The historian would be a sort of resurrectionist, with impartiality and objectivity as his method of conjuration. The phantasmagoria, contemporary with the professionalization of history as a discipline in France, Britain and Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, was a readily available figure for this kind of conjuring. Carlyle literally calls on the magic lantern phantasmagoria to describe the ethereal theater of history in *The French Revolution*. “Such vision (spectral yet real) thou, O Thuriot, as from thy Mount of Vision, beholdest in this moment,” he addresses one historical actor during the storming of the Bastille, “prophetic of what other Phantasmagories, and loud-gibbering Spectral Realities, which thou yet beholdest not, but shalt!”23

In drawing on the magic lantern phantasmagoria as a metaphor for historical narrative, *A Tale of Two Cities* can thus be read as participating within this genealogy of nineteenth century history writing as resurrection. For Dickens, however, the phantasmagoria is not only symbolic of historical narrative—it is also a source for representational effects. Take the following passage from the end of the novel:

Six tumbrils roll along the streets. Change these back again to what they were, thou powerful enchanter, Time, and they shall be seen to be the carriages of absolute monarchs, the equipages of feudal nobles, the toilettes of flaring

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Jezabels, the churches that are not my father’s house but dens of thieves, the huts of millions of starving peasants.¹²⁴

By thinking material objects through the lens of historical temporality, Dickens portrays objects as palimpsests of past forms. The revolutionary tumbrils, which carry French aristocrats to the guillotine, are constructed from the ruins of the feudal order—the carriages, dressing rooms and ornate churches of the aristocracy and the dismal huts of the peasants. Like the personified Time, the narrator is implicitly a powerful enchanter himself. He is capable of apprehending the material forms of objects as provisional states that only partially account for their reality; and of reverse-engineering historical transformation to show their prior states. Since the tumbrils of the passage are metonyms for revolutionary France, and the cluster of carriages and churches for feudal France, the narrator’s ability to see through objects to their former states corresponds to the historian’s apprehension of historical-political change as a metamorphosis—one form morphing into another.

This construction recalls Carlyle’s similarly metonymic use of material and architectural forms in *The History of the French Revolution*, where sites like the Bastille that were sacked and ruined during the revolution have not vanished but are only “what we call vanished… the body, or sandstones, of it hanging, in benign metamorphosis, for centuries to come, over the Seine waters as Pont Louis Seize.”²⁵ Despite the conceptual similarities between these two passages, however, and their shared use of metamorphic, spectral and uncanny imagery to convey the phenomenon of historical transformation, Dickens occupies a distinct relation to the technologically mediated images of the magic lantern phantasmagoria. Dickens describes a scenario that might have been displayed in Robertson’s show: a vignette of tumbrils

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¹²⁴ Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 385.
metamorphosing into carriages, or carriages into tumbrils, would have fit in nicely with other episodes of transformation such as the Three Graces turning into skeletons, or, in a more sentimental mode, a rose tree blooming under the sun until Love is born from within a flower.26 Dickens is less interested than Carlyle in the spectral tableaux of history and more drawn to the phantasmagoria’s virtual representation of rapid, internal transformation. It is the moving image, both spectral and metamorphic, from which Dickens adapts his strategies for historical representation and on which he bases his conception of historical change. Like Carlyle, he recognizes that the historian or novelist aiming to present the truth of historical experience must record the metamorphic immateriality of the phenomenal world: that an artist in history is necessarily artist in ghosts.

“A bright continuous flow”

Dickens’ sense of the magic lantern as a medium for historical representation does not only come from his research into its already-historical form of the phantasmagoria. It also reflects the cultural saturation of magic lantern projection during Dickens’ lifetime, when the virtual moving image was employed to bring stories to life.27 Public exhibitions combined magic lantern projections with scripted dramatic readings, often by the projectionist-showman himself, to illustrate folk tales and Bible stories as well as contemporary novels and stories adapted for the lantern. Several of Dickens’ novels, mostly notably A Christmas Carol and the Gabriel Grub tale from The Pickwick Papers, were regular and popular sources for magic lantern shows. The phantasmagoria depicted vignettes rather than stories, sometimes in reference to extended

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26 Dickens describes both the Three Graces and Birth of Love slide sequences in his profile on Robertson.
fictional narratives (like Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk*) or historical events (the Revolution), but often succeeding in their Gothic effects precisely through their decontextualization of images from narrative: the effect, for example, of the head of Danton projected onto smoke, indexing revolutionary history without representing it in terms of narrative duration. Dickens is, I argue, interested in the historical work this form of image-making does, precisely through the way the decontextualization of images from a narrative frame (like the Louis XVI shadow) can collectively disorient those who apprehend them and trigger an unconscious awareness of shared experience. At the same time, he is motivated by his life-long familiarity with Victorian moving pictures as a narrative medium capable of representing histories, both fictional and non-, as a durational unfolding. While critics have written convincingly about the influence of storytelling magic lantern shows on Dickens’ fiction, my particular interest is how Dickens' conception of the historical applications of the magic lantern phantasmagoria is enlarged by his understanding of the contemporary usages of magic lantern technology.

In the following pre-Revolutionary set piece from *A Tale of Two Cities*, for example – a Paris scene in which the aristocrat Monsieur le Marquis kills a peasant boy with his carriage, and then cavalierly drives on – Dickens seems to translate the metamorphic visual procedures of Robertson’ magic lantern show into their linguistic counterparts. Here is the departure of the Marquis that ends the chapter:

He was driven on, and other carriages came whirling by in quick succession; the Minister, the State-Projector, the Farmer-General, the Doctor, the Lawyer, the Ecclesiastic, the Grand Opera, the Comedy, the whole Fancy Ball in a bright continuous flow, came whirling by. The rats had crept out of their holes to look on, and they remained looking on for hours; soldiers and police often passing
between them and the spectacle, and making a barrier behind which they slunk, and through which they peeped. The father had long ago taken up his bundle and hidden himself away with it, when the women who had tended the bundle while it lay on the base of the fountain, sat there watching the running of the water and the rolling of the Fancy Ball – when one woman who had stood conspicuous, knitting, still knitted with the steadfastness of Fate. The water of the fountain ran, the swift river ran, the day ran into evening, so much life in the city ran into death according to rule, time and tide waited for no man, the rats were sleeping close together in their dark holes again, the Fancy Ball was lighted up at supper, all things ran their course.28

In rendering this “quick succession” of images as a “bright continuous flow,” Dickens evokes and mimics the phenomenon of persistence of vision: rather than delineating concrete visual images of objects, he dematerializes the objects into a visual stream. Even the typography embodies this procedure, the stylized eighteenth century capitalizations that identify the carriages metonymically by their owners – “the Minister, the State-Projector, the Farmer-General, the Doctor…” – melting down into a whirl and flow of description. The contours of the Fancy Ball and all its titled aristocrats and gentry seem to dissolve as they speed by, as though the very boundaries delineating them were lost; the upper-case carriages give way to the lower-case peasants metaphorically described as “rats” who creep, look, slink and peep as the spectacle passes them by. The doubling of the careening carriages with the water’s flow sets off a series of images that flow like conjugations – the water runs, the river runs, life runs into death, time and

tide waits for no man – this time from an omniscient, bird’s eye perspective that looks down on both the rats sleeping in their dark holes and the Fancy Ball at its supper tables.

This passage contains many of the qualities of the phantasmagoria. There is metamorphosis of image and perspective echoed by linguistic and rhetorical shifts; there is uncanny continuity created through the juxtaposition of seemingly discontinuous things; and finally there is the way the passage as a whole is like a vanitas painting in perpetual motion, the prescience of destruction and decay embedded in the images and the way the images move, in an echo of the Gothic forms and themes of Robertson's slide sequences. The magic lantern phantasmagoria is not the only nineteenth century media evoked in this passage. The passage also evokes the tableau vivant, a stage device in eighteenth and nineteenth century melodramatic theater in which actors freeze in place at the end of an act to form, as its name suggests, a living painting. The fact that this passage occurs at the end of a chapter, signaling a narrative pause between the death of the child and the retaliatory peasant uprising that will follow on its heels, and lingering on the suspended image of the Fancy Ball, reveals its structural and formal similarities to the tableau vivant. But I want to suggest that the force of this passage is precisely in how it undermines the static form of the tableau through images of continuous motion. In the place of conspicuous stillness that forebodes action, Dickens inserts the “flow” of carriages “whirling by.” Accordingly, while the tableau suspends time by pausing the action, the Fancy Ball passage is explicitly durational: the rats “remained looking on for hours.” Connecting the motion of vehicles and crowds to the natural and unstoppable cycles of rivers, tides and days, Dickens translates time and space into a visual stream.

The passage expresses Dickens’ conception of history in the novel, one that privileges continuous transformation through the motif of the visual stream or flow. The flow of the
carriages, like the phantasmagoria, makes visible the forces of history, while also distinguishing the visual phenomenon of the carriages as spectacle from their concrete material form. The focus on carriages here is deliberate, referencing a robust tradition of associating the historical novel with the coach or carriage. In Walter Scott’s *Waverly*, the novel that set the standard for historical fiction for Victorian readers and writers, the narrator interjects in an early chapter:

> I do not invite my fair readers...into a flying chariot drawn by hippogriffs, or moved by enchantment. Mine is a humble English post-chaise, drawn upon four wheels, and keeping his Majesty’s highway. Such as dislike the vehicle may leave it at the next halt, and wait for the conveyance of Prince Hussein’s tapestry, or Malek the Weaver’s flying sentrybox.  

In Scott’s formulation, as James Chandler has written, “each vehicular medium is associated with a mode of probability, a style of world-making” that defines the historical novel as a mode of transport “that stays close to the ground and makes no explanatory leaps.”  

*A Tale of Two Cities* offers a variety of conveyances to figure historical narration, including its own humble post-chaise in the form of the Dover mail coach that travels between London and Paris in one of the novel's opening chapters. However, Dickens’ “vehicles” of history do deliberately different work than Scott’s in that they do seem to be, in some sense, “moved by enchantment,” or at least touched by it. As in the personification of “thou powerful enchanter, Time,” Dickens employs magic figuratively throughout the novel in opposition to probability to explain historical change and identify its motive force. The spectacular Fancy Ball is one such figure. Its “rolling,” a syntactical echo of “the running of the water” and “knitting” of Fate, charges the carriages with

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an almost mystical presence as figures for temporal and cosmic continuity. Although Dickens uses carriages to pun on the *revolution* of the wheels in a foreshadowing of the coming political revolution, he further figures political revolution as an enchanted *metamorphosis*.\(^{31}\) For Dickens, then, modes of narrative transport are not distinguished by the method of travel – post-chaise or flying carpet – but by the phenomenological experience of vehicular motion itself, whether experienced by passenger or passer-by.

**“Recalled to Life”**

What we are seeing is that Dickens relies on phantasmagoria not simply in terms of its spectacular presentation, but also, and more importantly, for the precise ways in which it structures spectatorial experience. The phantasmagoria simultaneously exploits and produces a kind of group consciousness. The sociality built into the phenomenological relation between spectacle and audience distinguishes the phantasmagoria from other forms of theatrical or visual representation. This is expressed in Dickens’ profile on Robertson, when he describes the mass terror of post-revolutionary Parisians at the sight of a ghostly shadow as an index of the receptivity of Robertson’s audiences to his lantern show, and it carries through to his framing of the Fancy Ball as a spectacle that binds together an audience through the act of collective apprehension. While the marquis’ callous response to the death of a child beneath the wheels of his carriage pushes the townspeople to the precipice of revolt, it is in Dickens’ description of them watching the parade of carriages that he figures this latent revolutionary sentiment in terms of the peasants taking on a collective identity and will. The “running” and “rolling” throughout

\(^{31}\) I am indebted to Richard Maxwell’s notes to the Penguin Classics edition of *A Tale of Two Cities* for drawing my attention to the thematic and allusive connection between revolution and metamorphosis throughout the novel. See *A Tale of Two Cities*, 452-453.
the passage is a proleptic figure for the surging revolutionary masses to be described later in the novel, in homage to Carlyle, as an elemental force with a hydra’s powers of regeneration.

I have claimed that Dickens is informed by two formal and technological features of the phantasmagoria: its dematerialization of vision into a visual flow or stream, and its apparent effect of resurrecting the dead. The latter can be traced through A Tale of Two Cities’ resurrection motif, which takes the metaphor of bringing the dead back to life to represent historical processes. This is a novel in which the main characters, Manette, Darnay and Carton, undergo figurative resurrections precisely because they are historical actors, caught in the cross hairs of revolutionary history. Each is “recalled to life,” in the novel’s language. The phrase originates with the English lawyer Lorry, who uses it to describe Dr. Manette “buried alive” in prison for seventeen years and exhumed after the storming of the Bastille in 1789, but it is repurposed shortly after when Darnay is released from prison and declared innocence of treason during a trial that places him, as he describes it, “on the edge of the grave.” It hangs, too, over the novel’s final sequence, when Darnay – on trial again, this time in Paris during the Terror – is sentenced to death, and his look-alike Sidney Carton takes his place at the guillotine only to fantasize, in the novel’s famous final lines, that Darnay’s children and grandchildren will recall him to life by telling his story. The multivalent meanings of “recalled”—to recall is to order a return, but also to remember, even to effect return through the act of remembering—encourages us to see these metaphorical resurrections as historical and perceptual experiences. The men might “recall themselves,” remembering who and where they are, as Manette does when he shakes himself out of his recursive fugue states that began during his prison sentence. “Recalled to life” could also describe the Parisians in Dickens’ article for Household Words, where the Parisians believe Louis XI to be recalled (brought back) to life in a shadow, when they have in
fact recalled (remembered) the king as a result of an image. At the same time, recalling to life expresses the forces of both history and the historical novel: history, because its revolutions and transformations have the power to bury and exhume, to turn and re-turn; and the novel because fiction summons what is past, instantiating it in the present tense of the written word.

Dickens places the moving, metamorphic image at the center of *A Tale of Two Cities’* exploration of the ontologically liminal person as historical actor. This phantasmagorical valence of the “recalled to life” theme finds lucid expression in the scene with which we began: of Charles Darnay’s haunted reflection in the mirror. The chapter, the first of two to describe the treason trial at the Old Bailey, is called “A Sight,” reinforcing Darnay’s status as an image for the spectators who “stood up, not to miss a hair of him…laid their hands on the shoulders of the people before them, to help themselves, at anybody’s cost, to a view of him”\(^\text{32}\), while at the same time establishing the narrative’s perceptual relation to the image. The image is represented in terms of how it is seen, a condition dependent on its mediated status: both the spectators and Darnay encounter the image of Darnay through the mirror, which functions as a spotlight that illuminates the prisoner for the crowd and as a reflecting surface for the prisoner beneath it.

Dickens’ attention here to the phenomenological and spectatorial registers of “sight” distinguishes the trial, explicitly framed as a piece of public theater, as a phantasmagoria.\(^\text{33}\) The phantasmagorical status of the image is only reinforced by its ultimately metamorphic quality as an object of sight. It is not only Darnay himself that the courtroom spectators strain “to get a sight of” but the anticipatory vision of Darnay once he is drawn, quartered and hung—his

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\(^\text{32}\) Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 64-66.

\(^\text{33}\) The narrator remarks that “people then paid to see the play at the Old Bailey, just as they paid to see the play in Bedlam” (63). The phantasmagorical traces in this scene do not override Dickens’ explicit marking of the trial episode as a theatrical set piece, but rather represent another instance, as in the moving *tableau* of the Fancy Ball, of Dickens’ layered approach to narrative mediation.
punishment should he be proven guilty. Thus, “the form that was to be doomed to be so shamefully mangled, was the sight,” the narrator qualifies.\(^{34}\) Darnay becomes the object of his own sight when he sees his image in the mirror overhead, a “sight” that mingles reflection with metamorphosis. By recognizing himself as one of the hoards of condemned men who have stood exactly in his place, he envisions himself as a kind of ghost. The fact that Darnay’s exoneration at the end of this sequence – he is found innocent and released from prison – is described as “recalled to life” gives substance to the visions of Darnay as mangled corpse and ghost that haunt this sequence; it is, in some sense, from these dead and undead states that Darnay is recalled. His metaphorical resurrection is figured as a phantasmagorical metamorphosis.

What Darnay sees in the mirror is the dissolution of his body and identity as a condition of historical subjectivity. If history is a flow of images in which one thing is always morphing into another, then it does not guarantee the solidity or continuity of objects or of identities in time. Ultimately Stryver, Darnay’s counsel, wins the case on the basis of his resemblance to another man present at the trial. The prime witness has identified Darnay as a spy, but Stryver shatters his confidence – and wins over the jury – by asking him to “look well upon that gentleman, my learned friend over there,” and consider whether his learned friend and the prisoner are not very much alike, a theatrical proposition that “surprise[s]” the entire court, witness included, into assent.\(^{35}\) In an almost surreal coup, Darnay is exonerated on the basis that eyewitness testimony cannot be trusted. The irony of this turn of events is that the terms on which Darnay is recalled to life fulfill the vision he sees in the mirror: of the interchangeability,

\(^{34}\) Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 65. My emphasis.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 77.
even the substitutability, of persons and identities. Rather than verify or authenticate identity, the image dissolves it. In this novel, identity is fundamentally discontinuous: anyone can become anyone else, a principle that is borne out at the end of the book when none other than Stryver’s learned friend, Sidney Carton, will take Darnay’s place at the guillotine. The phantasmagoria continues.

**Towards a history of fiction’s moving images**

I have tried to illuminate and elucidate traces of the phantasmagoria in *A Tale of Two Cities* in order to identify another media mode in Dickens’ imaginary and to establish its influence on the representation of historical experience within the novel. But these traces lead me to another question. How might the textual absorption of the moving image – dematerialized, spectral, metamorphic, processual, virtual, and figurative of liminal ontology – allow us to rethink fictionality in the Victorian period?

Another way of asking this question is, how might we track cinema’s prehistory through the Victorian novel’s optical experiments in virtual motion? The American director D.W. Griffith famously defended his editing practice of cross cutting between parallel narratives – a form that revolutionized the visual language of film – by invoking the novels of Dickens.

“How can you tell a story like that? The people won’t know what it’s about.”

“Well,” said Mr. Griffith, “doesn’t Dickens write that way?”

“Yes, but that’s Dickens; that’s novel-writing; that’s different.”

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“Oh, not so much, these are picture stories; not so different.”

This remark has directed generations of critics and scholars including, most notably, the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, to source the Victorian novel as an origin point for narrative film. Eisenstein, in *Oliver Twist*, defended his own system of parallel narrative, a device to keep readers in suspense, by sourcing it to stage melodrama, which presents the tragic and the comic scenes, in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon. The hero sinks upon his straw bed, weighed down by fetters and misfortunes; in the next scene, his faithful but unconscious squire regales the audience with a comic song.

Eisenstein, in his famous essay “Dickens, Griffith and Film Today,” lovingly identifies Griffith’s montage aesthetic with Dickens’ streaky bacon juxtapositions, while critiquing both for their bourgeois dualisms, the endless layering of red and white that never achieves conceptual or aesthetic synthesis. If we look at Dickens through the lens of the magic lantern, however, not through the narrative juxtapositions of his early work but the phantasmagorical imaginary of his later and more experimental fiction, a different genealogy emerges, one that recognizes cinema’s debt not only to the narrative strategies of the novel but its representational strategies for

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38 For an argument dealing specifically with *A Tale of Two Cities* and montage, see Timothy Johns, “Birth of a Medium: Dickens, Griffith, and the Advent of Sentimental Cinema,” *Victorian Studies* 52, no. 1 (2009): 76–85, which takes up Eisenstein’s claims to argue that *A Tale of Two Cities* preserves moral polarity through its dualistic form. I think Johns makes a mistake in calling the form of *A Tale of Two Cities* dualistic, perhaps as a result of reading it in terms of the parallel narrative structure used and theorized in *Oliver Twist*, a considerably earlier and stylistically different novel. As I will argue in the following pages, Dickens sets up dualisms in order to critique, undermine and dissolve them. For a response to Eisenstein’s “Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today” that makes a claim for the influence of Sir Walter Scott’s epic historical novels on Griffith’s filmmaking, see James Chandler, “Scott, Griffith and Film Epic Today.”

conveying the image in motion informed by cinema’s technological precursors. *A Tale of Two Cities*, a novel that sends up the very idea of duality – its juxtapositions, including that of the two cities in the title, are always melting down into symmetries – mobilizes cinematic optics as a dialectical representational mode of the breakdown of social and political classifications.

The majority of recent scholarship on Victorian literature’s visual imagination has taken up photography as the signal visual media form of the period, a priority that – like tracking Dickens through his theatrical mediation – can occlude this discourse of disorder and decay. For example, in her seminal work *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism*, Nancy Armstrong reads Dickens’ *Bleak House* through what she identifies as the Victorian period’s photographically induced propensity for converting the world into visual information. *Bleak House* schematizes identity in terms of a differential system of images, Armstrong writes—it is a novel in which identities are sought, ordered and restored even as the pervasive London fog seeks to dissimulate and dissolve them. (Recall the images of fog, smoke, muck and mire obscuring the city and its inhabitants in the novel’s opening chapter – “Dogs, indistinguishable in mire…Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled…”40 – enveloping the story’s tangled web of lost, misplaced and mistaken identities each laboriously returned, as the novel careens towards resolutions, to its right place within the social and symbolic order.) In *A Tale of Two Cities*, however, there is no such figure as the London fog that intercepts visual clarity, because there is no such interest in crisp, distinguishable images, objects or identities. The historical perspective does not take images as documents for authentication or verification but as stages in

a spectral metamorphosis constantly dissolving and dematerializing object and identity through its “bright continuous flow.”

This contrast speaks not only to the differences between *Bleak House* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, but equally to the different conceptual valences of visual mediation that a focus on the moving over the still image can reveal. For Armstrong, fiction and photography in the Victorian era are engaged in a shared cultural project structured by mutual authorization, with fiction authorizing the transparent, reproducible image and photography the truth-value of fiction. Having failed as a mimetic or empirical tool through which scientists could classify and draw conclusions from human physiognomy, photography became a media for consumer classification, categorizing and thus authorizing the “real-ness” of virtually anything that could be seen. The age of photography initiates a culture of seeing based on a virtual and differential world of images in which Victorian subjects are hailed into visual categories. But we have seen that these visual categories break down in *A Tale of Two Cities*—that they become incoherent, false clues. Armstrong’s reading elides the dimension of fictions and their visual imaginaries that seek to disrupt categorization altogether, to manifest sensory and epistemological disorder. Deprioritizing the classificatory or identificatory image in favor of the phenomenological image leads us to the importance of sensory disorder and spectrality as narrative modes.

The considerable energy that Victorian literary studies has invested in photography as the watershed visual media of the period risks overvaluing mimesis as a governing aesthetic while decontextualizing the media from its place within a century of novel and exciting developments.

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in technologies for the virtual moving image.\footnote{The three most influential accounts of Victorian literature and photography are Nancy Armstrong’s \textit{Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism} (1999), Jennifer Green-Lewis, \textit{Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), and Daniel A. Novak, \textit{Realism, Photography and Nineteenth Century Fiction} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). The latter responds to work on realism, photography and the detail with a valuable counter-argument about the playful constructedness of the photograph image, and its relation to abstraction, generality and type. For a recent study of the moving image in nineteenth century British literature, see Helen Groth, \textit{Moving Images: Nineteenth Century Reading and Screen Practices} (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).} Beyond the magic lantern, a mainstay of public theaters and private homes, there was the diorama, an illuminated mobile theater that created the illusion of motion through the application of light source behind a painted screen—a technique of which Louis Daguerre, whose so-called daguerreotype was the first process to capture camera obscura images on a copper plate, was a pioneer. Optical illusions such as the phantasmagorical Pepper’s Ghost, which used an imperceptible pane of glass to project phantom figures onto a stage, were employed as special effects in the theater.

Photography, too, aspired to motion. As Tom Gunning reminds us, the earliest films were Victorian,\footnote{Tom Gunning, “Hand and Eye: Excavating a New Technology of the Image in the Victorian Era,” \textit{Victorian Studies} 54, no. 3 (April 1, 2012), 495-496.} and the moving picture’s pioneers Thomas Edison and Etienne-Jules Marey based their cinematic experiments on chronophotography, photography that, as in Muybridge’s famous athletes and horses, attempts to capture bodies in motion. Early cinema drew, too, on the perceptual play of children’s toys such as the thaumatrope, a spinning top with matching partial images painted on either side that, when spun, fused into a single image.\footnote{Ibid., 498-500.} The history of these inventions chart a pre-history to the cinematic image while also attesting to the importance of motion in nineteenth century technologies that sought to playfully manipulate and prosthetically extend the capacities of human vision. The phantasmagorical representation of history in \textit{A Tale...
of Two Cities shows us glimmers of the novel’s cinematicity, not through its narrative structure or its mimetic representations, but rather through its visual animation – its will to motion.
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