

## Bill Douglas Cinema Museum CDA: Immersive Images 1820-1920

\*\*\*If you wish to express an interest in undertaking this project and would like to find out more about the candidate selection process, please contact the full supervisory team at: [P.J.Wickham@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:P.J.Wickham@exeter.ac.uk); [J.Plunkett@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:J.Plunkett@exeter.ac.uk); [thomasj1@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:thomasj1@cardiff.ac.uk) \*\*\*

This CDA will analyse the popularity of immersive and interactive images in visual culture 1820-1920. It will be based on the extensive and unique resources of the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, and would make a substantial contribution to both its public mission and to our understanding of the nature and development of 'immersive' media. Many new visual formats and optical devices in the period were characterised by their 'immersive' qualities: these could be experienced within the home or as part of a lecture, performance or fairground attraction. Circular and moving panoramas awed with enormous canvases; the diorama created illusionistic tableaux; stereographs beguiled with a 3D world, while the many varieties of peepshow promised a marvellously garish experience of patriotic battles and far-off places. If that was not enough, printed ephemera and toys, such as protean prints, mutoscopes and Kinora Viewers required an embodied spectator. 'Immersion' is often seen as a defining characteristic of contemporary digital media, but this CDA will elaborate a much longer genealogy.

**Key Research Questions:** What were the visual formats and devices offering an 'immersive' experience in the period 1820-1920? In what ways did they 'immerse' their viewers? How was 'immersion' characterised through a series of discourse and motifs prior to the invention of film? In what ways do contemporary devices and technologies remediate and build on a longer tradition? How does the BDC collection present an alternative history of immersive media through its games, novelty prints, devices, toys and everyday ephemera? How might such material be best exhibited by the BDC and other museums?

**Research Context:** The CDA will contribute to studies of the convergence between art and technology, as well as the history of popular leisure, play and entertainment. More specifically, it will be part of recent scholarship reshaping notions of the way modern audiences viewed, engaged and interacted with images. The CDA will also draw on the recent advent of Media Archaeology as an academic field and a methodological approach to the study of visual and acoustic media; media archaeology seeks to recover critical or artistic practices utilised by media forms of the past but whose significance is now overlooked.

**Research Collection:** This CDA will augment and expand the work of the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, located at the University of Exeter, which is home to one of the largest collections of material relating to the moving image in Britain. It is both an accredited public museum and a research facility and holds a collection of over 80,000 items. The collection includes artefacts dating from the seventeenth century to the present day, covering all aspects of cinema, pre-cinema and the history of the moving image. The collection is diverse but is united by an emphasis on the audience's experience of the moving image. A key strength is its holdings of items relating to nineteenth-century moving, projected and 3D images, both in terms of devices, toys, pictorial media such as lantern slides, and printed ephemera. The collection, for example, contains 30 small peep shows and 70 peep show prints and *vues d'optiques*, as well as more than 1500 assorted stereoscope cards. These resources would be crucial for the proposed PhD studentship.

This CDA is a clearly-defined and feasible doctoral project at the cutting-edge of research (*pace* the current AHRC Programme 'Immersive Experiences'); the BDC also has an excellent track record of enabling PhD scholarship and delivering Employability skills. Thirty-one PhDs have drawn significantly on the collections. It is currently hosting a DTP funded student on a placement, and Dr Phil Wickham, curator, currently works with a PhD scholarship on the personal papers of Bill Douglas in a similar model to the CDA. This CDA would provide numerous value-added opportunities for the student to gain professional skills, training and experience; they would gain heritage and museum skills; contribute to a redisplay of the permanent galleries; curate a temporary exhibition based on the studentship; be trained in cataloguing and working with archival sources, including objects and printed ephemera; receive training from Exeter Digital Humanities regarding the curation and digital presentation of 'immersive' objects. There would also be opportunities to contribute to the Public Engagement programme of the museum. A digital exhibition could be curated by the student and hosted by Special Collections, Cardiff University. In future, the BDC also would like to build on its links with other regional museums to create a touring exhibition, with Immersive Media a likely theme; funding would be made available to help support such an exhibition. The curator would offer supervision and support through the project, as well as the in-kind benefits and additional financial support for research outlined in the brief. The museum has a very strong record in working with volunteers and interns that have gone on to work in the heritage and cultural sectors.

**Methods** The proposed studentship aligns with a number of SWW2 Theme and Methods; **STEMM subjects and objects and Visual and textual aesthetics and materialities** (optical devices and toys were part of the popular fascination with new sciences and technologies). The CDA would be based on **Co-Production** in that the research will be shaped by the unique nature of the BDC archives and its ambition to better display and promote its holdings; this project will also require an innovative methodological approach in accordance with the SWW2 concern of **Engaging with Materialities**.

**Supervisory Team** Professor John Plunkett (Exeter), Professor Julia Thomas (Cardiff) and Dr Phil Wickham (BDC). Plunkett is an expert on 19<sup>th</sup> c visual media and performance, and uses the BDC extensively in his research and teaching; he is currently part of an AHRC network 'Fashioning Victoria', with Historic Royal Palaces Trust; his forthcoming book is *Picture Going: Visual Shows*

*1820-1910* is based on a large AHRC grant. Thomas is an expert on Victorian illustration, material culture, and digital humanities. She has been involved in numerous externally-funded projects as PI and CI, as well as a number of digital exhibitions. Her most recent book is *Nineteenth-century illustration and the digital: studies in word and image* (Palgrave, 2017). Dr Phil Wickham, Lead Curator, will act in the role of supervisor for the BDC.