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Review of Clare Pettitt, *Serial Forms:
The Unfinished Project of Modernity, 1815–1848*

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Reviews

Clare Pettitt, *Serial Forms: The Unfinished Project of Modernity, 1815–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). 368 pp. ISBN 9780198830429

Sometime around mid-century, British newspapers began to abandon their volume numbers. Whereas previously each issue of a newspaper was located in two series, one a sequence of issues and the other a sequence of volumes, now they would be located in only one. Discarding these numbers had no effect on when newspapers appeared, whether daily or weekly; instead, they changed how newspapers situated themselves within wider serial structures that themselves had further effects. Volume numbers, for instance, insisted that issues belonged to one volume or another and these were in sequence. They also maintained there was a moment for pause and reflection as each volume came to a close, even if that moment was never realized as the rhythm remained unbroken from one volume to the next. And, of course, the volume numbers made it possible for issues to be collected somewhere and made available for readers in the future, even if they rarely were. Without them, newspapers numbered themselves just once, each issue situated in a single series apparently without end.

Clare Pettitt's *Serial Forms* looks to the newspaper as the most visible form of a seriality that would come to define modernity. Focusing on London in the period between the Napoleonic wars and the 1848 revolutions, she traces the emergence of this serial logic across a huge swathe of cultural production. While the newspaper features in the book, Pettitt recognizes its limited reach at this time. The taxes on knowledge, brought in as part of the Six Acts in 1819, priced anything containing news beyond the means of most readers, and, for many of those that did get their news from print, they did so at second- or third-hand and so got

their news late. Rather than look to the newspaper, then, as the medium that created the serial rhythms that divided up the past and demarcated the present, Pettitt sees it as a function of a 'new regime of time' in which seriality, and so the newspaper, flourished (p. 6).

The first in a series of three books, *Serial Forms* provides a rich analysis of how this new temporal logic emerged in the early nineteenth century (the second, *Serial Revolutions 1848: Writing, Politics, Form* was published earlier this year). The book is a significant achievement in its own right, offering a new and compelling account of how this often overlooked period came to mark its moment. Yet because it is the first in a series it necessarily goes far beyond its stated ends. Required to lay the foundations for a broader argument about seriality across the nineteenth century, *Serial Forms* contains a thoughtful account of seriality as concept, setting it up for the volumes that follow, and situates its analysis of the period before 1848 in a set of arguments that anticipate the analyses of later periods. *Serial Forms* does full justice to its subject but, because it has to set up the books to follow, also does so much more.

It is a privilege to read a scholar working with such ambition. On the evidence of this first volume alone, the project will constitute a major rethinking of the period that sets out new relationships between the figures, material, and events from which it is constituted. Pettitt's arguments are bold but underpinned by rigorous research. *Serial Forms* engages with theories of seriality, history, and time; it is situated in media history and media theory; and it is always interested in the lived, embodied experiences of those under discussion. Pettitt employs her conceptual

material thoughtfully, allowing the reader to understand how and why she interprets the historical material as she does. And she is a generous writer too, documenting her scholarship in illuminating footnotes permitting the reader to enjoy the diverse and interesting material she presents. There are accounts of a wide range of print media, including almanacs, broadsides, different types of newspapers and periodicals, as well as books and book series of various kinds. Literary figures appear throughout, including Bulwer-Lytton, Gaskell, Dickens, Scott, Byron, and Carlyle. Other figures also appear: Géricault, for instance, is placed alongside Byron in chapter three; Daniel Auber is discussed alongside Bulwer-Lytton in chapter four; Pugin is discussed alongside Dickens and Carlyle in chapter five; and Frederic Douglass and the Howitts appear alongside Gaskell in chapter seven. Keen to describe how London evoked other times and places as it asserted the here and now, Pettitt includes vibrant descriptions of its everyday life: the posters and advertisements that jostled for the attention of passers-by; the range of popular shows and other kinds of theatrical performance on offer; and the toys and other amusements through which people engaged with the world as they passed the time.

The book, which is lavishly illustrated, consists of an introduction, seven chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction sets out the arguments of both *Serial Forms* and the broader project of which it is a part. It takes the reader through different formulations of seriality (Primo Levi, Umberto Eco, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Paul Sartre, Freud, Benedict Anderson) before justifying the focus on London in the period 1815–1848. At a time when nineteenth-century studies is once again alert to the global, Pettitt explains her relatively narrow focus, placing Regency and Georgian London in the vanguard of processes of urbanization, industrialization, and democratization that were also being experienced, albeit differently, in other European cities. For

Pettitt, this is the point: while the forms of seriality lend themselves to broader globalizing processes they can be studied in specific, localized instances.

The first chapter, ‘Yesterday’s News’, provides a fascinating account of how older print forms such as the broadside, chapbook, and almanack continued to flourish alongside innovative cheap periodicals like the *Mirror* and the various publications of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK). For Pettitt, these older forms provided a “straggling” print culture’ for poorer readers ‘in which time and history were modelled in various and often conflicting ways’ (p. 65). While she recognizes that some publications attempted to assert a rational model of uniform linear time — her contrast between the SDUK’s *British Almanac* and the venerable *Moore’s* is brilliant — her argument is that rather than displace these older publications, new print forms drew upon and grew out of them to become part of an interconnected and complex print culture in which readers negotiated a number of temporalities simultaneously.

The following chapter, ‘Scott Unbound’, enlarges the arguments of the first, reading Scott’s *Waverley* as a work that engages with and draws from these diverse temporalities. Arguing *Waverley* is best understood as part of this broader print culture than an example of the linear, unitary genre of the novel, Pettitt shows how Scott drew upon the miscellaneous materials he encountered while reshaping them into a series of books that themselves, because of their popularity, became newsworthy. The chapter provides a way of reading Scott’s antiquarianism not as old-fashioned dilettantism but as a kind of media theory, with Scott imagining himself as a machine generating texts from the materials that surrounded him.

Chapters three and four both focus on the show as live event. Chapter three, ‘Live Byron’, considers Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819), with its evocative account of shipwreck, alongside Géricault’s *Scène de*

Naufage (1819), known as *The Raft of the Medusa* when displayed in London in 1820. Pettitt does justice to the newsworthiness of these works (they were often discussed together) and sets out their relationship to their sources, but the real interest lies in how she places them in the broader context of the popular show. For Pettitt, the show created the conditions for a form of ‘liveness’ that, in turn, refigured the topical event so it gained ‘a version of “actuality” through virtuality’ (p. 128). This is developed further in the next chapter, ‘Vesuvius on the Strand’, which traces how Vesuvius’s eruptions throughout the period were reproduced in print and in performances ranging from the famous reconstruction in Vauxhall Gardens to the various versions of the *Masaniello* story that reached their climax in Daniel Auber’s opera *La Muette de Portici* (1828) and Pacini’s *L’ultimo giorno di Pompei* (1825). Pettitt understands the eruption of Vesuvius as standing for ‘any enormous event’ that has the potential to disrupt the everyday (p. 157). However, she also argues that it was a serial event and so part of ‘a new perception and culture of “eventfulness” that bound people together in a shared sense of the present that could be disrupted by other events to come (p. 165).

Chapters five and six turn to the role played by the past in creating the conditions for the present. In chapter five, ‘Scalar: Pugin, Carlyle, Dickens’, Pettitt contrasts how Pugin and Carlyle used the past in *Contrasts* (1836) and *Past and Present* (1843) to Dickens’s use in *Sketches by Boz* (1836). According to Pettitt, Pugin and Carlyle reach to the distant past to create an exaggerated comparison with the present that, in turn, serves to satirize the present’s own exaggerations, illustrated here through advertisements. Pettitt argues that such comparisons depend on a serialized understanding of history, that the past invoked belongs to a period with a place in history. Dickens, she argues, does something different. *Sketches by Boz*, a collection of articles from a number of

publications brought together, combines what she calls ‘broadside temporality’ with ‘serial temporality’: individual, end-stopped moments brought into series ‘as its protagonists are drawn together as contemporaries in large-scale London’ (p. 200).

The interest in scale is pursued in chapter six, ‘History in Miniature’ which takes up the arguments in chapter four to further explore the role of cheap weeklies in constructing a common notion of history and so a shared sense of the present. Taking a remark in *David Copperfield* about David and Em’ly being like models of the ‘Colosseum’, Pettitt sketches the various ways the classical world was made present in popular culture (there was a Colosseum in Regent’s Park, but that was modelled on the Pantheon rather than the ruined amphitheatre). Her focus, in particular, is the *Mirror of Literature*, and she argues its miscellaneous contents, both text and image, brought representations of historical events into peoples’ hands while its seriality modelled the linear temporality into which such events needed to be situated.

The final chapter, ‘Biopolitics of Seriality’, shifts the focus from history onto attempts to create a better future. Pettitt explores how *Howitt’s Journal* (1847–48) sought to improve social conditions by identifying marginalized and victimized groups in its pages and attempting to build new sets of affective relationships towards and between them. Focusing on three categories — the child, the Irish, and the slave — Pettitt examines how the publication elicits the sympathy of the reader to effect social change. Her argument is that *Howitt’s* exemplifies a contradiction at the heart of liberal efforts of reform: it mobilizes ‘humanitarian sentiment and a politics of care’ to ameliorate the excesses of industrial capitalism but can only do so by participating in the same ‘capitalist biopolitical agenda’ (p. 255).

For readers of the *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, the interest

in *Serial Forms* will most likely be in its specific case studies, especially those that deal with print media, and its arguments to do with seriality and temporality. There is plenty of discussion of serials throughout, but readers of this journal will not need persuading that print culture encompasses more than books and newspapers (p. 38); that print ephemera are important (p. 89); or that print is 'three-dimensional and pliant' (p. 223). They might note, too, that newspapers here tend to stand for abstract seriality, reduced to flat vehicles of timely information rather than considered in all their material complexity like the other print genres under discussion. What readers will enjoy, though, are the rich accounts of print media, serial and otherwise. The discussion of the *Mirror* in chapter six is superb, for instance, particularly in the way Pettitt locates it alongside older print forms like the almanac while considering what its representations share with everything from the architecture of places of popular entertainment to children's toys. Indeed, one of the reasons this book is so important is that Pettitt not only demonstrates the centrality of print but also its many and complex relationships to other aspects of cultural life. *Serial Forms* is a major contribution to the study of print culture in the nineteenth century but it also argues for the importance of considering print culture in any account of the period.

For me, Pettitt's arguments about temporality were more persuasive than those regarding seriality. In some ways this is to be expected: after all, *Serial Forms* is intended to provide the context for the emergence of the seriality that Pettitt thinks so dominant from mid-century onwards. As it stands, there remains something of the master sign or mysterious origin about seriality. In some chapters, it barely features. Chapter two, for instance, on Scott, makes reference to serial print media, but its argument that *Waverley* should be considered 'unbound' disavows the fact that it was, ultimately, still a book (albeit the first in a series). Similarly, in

chapter three, which offers a persuasive account of how 'liveness' was constituted, seriality can only be recuperated as repetition in 'the serial work of looking' (p. 145). Sometimes seriality is attributed to things that repeated without attention as to how they constituted a series. Pettitt's account of all the Vesuviuses in chapter four brilliantly demonstrates how it moved and was refigured across various contexts but not what gathered them together, put them in order, and arranged them in ongoing sequence. Equally, there were times when the processes of subdivision and categorization were described as serial even though they lacked an ongoing temporal dimension. In her wonderfully nuanced account of the ideological work of *Howitt's Journal*, for instance, the seriality of the periodical establishes its categories through time but given the work of the various statistical agencies in the period I wanted to know more about what was distinctive about the serial rhythm of the journal compared to the ongoing work of the institution.

Serial Forms establishes the importance of seriality as organizing logic and uses it to open up the period in illuminating ways. The arguments about temporality, however, particularly how a sense of shared present was developed, are not just persuasive but transformative. As Pettitt argues, the present 'is not only the micro-instant of now, but a created and furnished space achieved by an elastic form of consensus' (p. 239). *Serial Forms* sets out how a new reading public were introduced to a new sense of shared 'world history' that, in turn, created a new sense of the contemporary (p. 239). This book, and the project that it inaugurates, are landmarks in the scholarship on both the nineteenth century and serial media more broadly. *Serial Forms* sets the series in motion: I look forward to how the serial is developed in the books that follow.

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