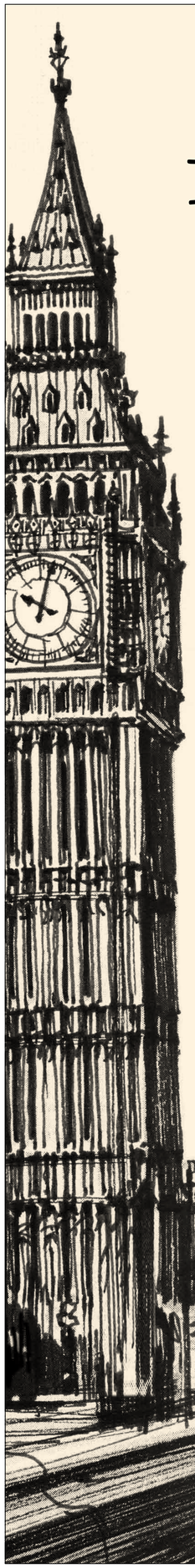
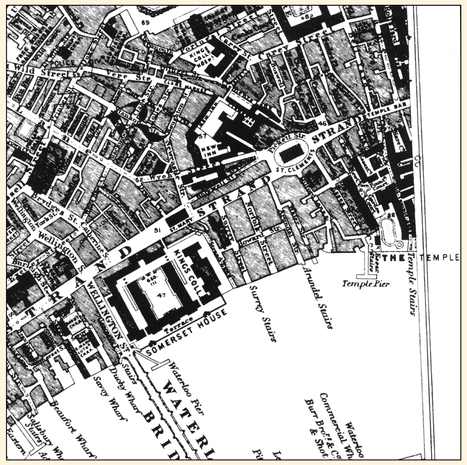
Three Ways of Looking at a Victorian city

Ann C. Colley, SUNY Distinguished Professor, English Department



1 The panoptic, aerial view of the city from maps, hot-air balloons, and elevated spaces.

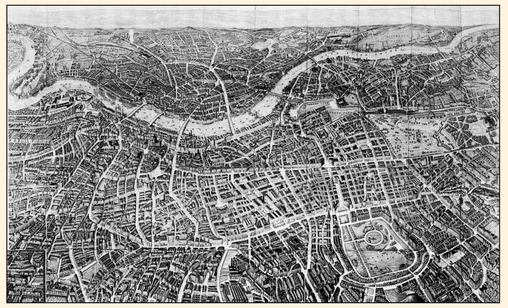
1. This aerial perspective gives the illusion of a totalizing mastery of urban space;
2. it renders a city comprehensible and legible
3. The view offers a graphic scheme, a more rational view of the city
4. The intricacies of the city can be absorbed in a single glance
5. The panoptical view freezes time
6. In an aerial view, space rules over time
7. The view creates borders
8. An aerial or cartographic perspective separates the individual from the city
9. The map reduces a city to functional essentials



Detail from Edward Stanford's Library Map of London and Its Suburbs, 1862.

Henry Mayhew's description of his 1862 hot air balloon flight above London:

For it is an exquisite treat to all minds to find that they have the power, by their mere vision, of extending their consciousness to scenes and objects that are miles away: and as the intellect experiences a special delight in being able to comprehend all the minute particulars of a subject under one associate whole, and to perceive the previous confusion of the diverse details assume the form and order of a perspicuous unity; so does the eye love to see the country, or the town, which it usually knows only as a series of disjointed parts – as abstract fields, hills, rivers, parks, streets, gardens, or churches – become all combined, like the coloured fragments of the kaleidoscope, into one harmonious and varied scene.

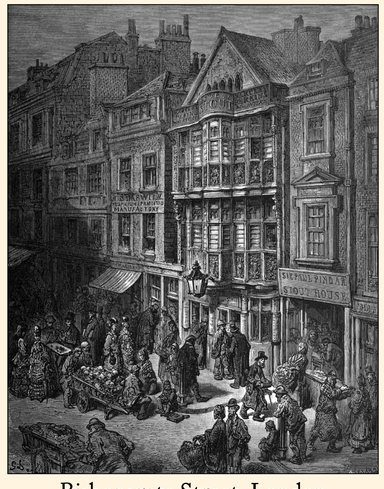


A Balloon View of London, 1851

2 The City at Street Level: Above Ground.

1. The city becomes a place of resistance
2. The city becomes fluid
3. The city defies attempts at organization; it becomes disjointed
4. The city belongs to a rhetoric of walking
5. At street level, time rules the city
6. Borders are permeable; the walker crosses borders and goes through doors
7. There are pockets of mystery and areas of invisibility
8. There is sound, movement, texture, and smell

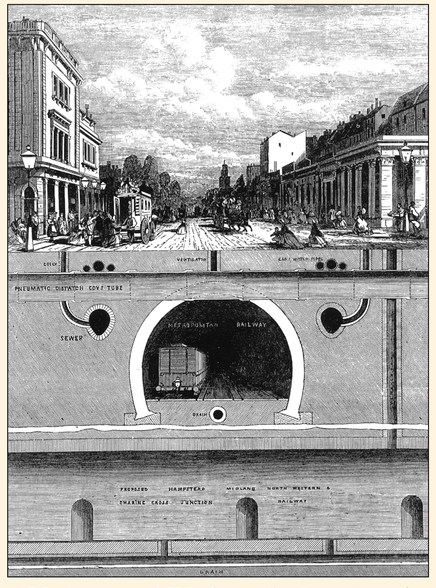
Holywell Street, Westminster. London



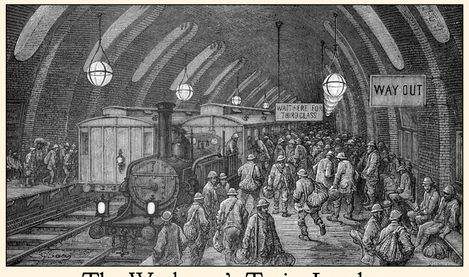
Bishopsgate Street, London

3 The City from its Underground Spaces

1. Underground Railroads
2. Sewers
3. Tunnels
4. Storage Vaults
5. Underground Chambers
6. Mines
7. Cellars
8. "Underground Movements"
9. Cemeteries



Underground Works at the Junction of Hampstead-Road, Euston Road, and Tottenham-Court Road, 1864.



The Workmen's Train, London

English Graduate Course
The Victorian City: Manchester and London

Reading List: Primary Texts

Elizabeth Gaskell. Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life
Friedrich Engels. The Condition of the Working Class in England
Charles Dickens. Oliver Twist
Charles Dickens. "Night Walks" in The Uncommercial Traveller
Henry Mayhew. London Labour and the London Poor
Gustave Dore. London: A Pilgrimage
William Morris. News from Nowhere
George Orwell. The Road to Wigan Pier

Reading List: Secondary Texts

Asa Briggs. Victorian Cities
W. G. Sebald. The Emigrants
Walter Benjamin. "The Berlin Chronicle," "Moscow" from Reflections
David L. Pike. Subterranean Cities.
Lynda Nead. Victorian Babylon.
The Victorian City: Images and Realities. 2 Vols. Ed. H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff.
Facsimiles of nineteenth-century maps