

Anastasia Klimchynskaya, “The Laboratory of the Mind’s Eye: Scientific Romance as Thought Experiment and Jules Verne’s Extraordinary Voyages.” *Configurations* 29.3 (2021): 289-320.

In “The Laboratory of the Mind’s Eye: Scientific Romance as Thought Experiment and Jules Verne’s Extraordinary Voyages”, Klimchynskaya reads Jules Verne’s *voyages extraordinaires* as experimental records and laboratory notes of speculative experiments. Verne, Klimchynskaya argues, transformed “the technoscientific novelties” in his novels “from merely pretexts for the journeys to objects of attention in their own right” and created “hybrid works that mixed literary and scientific discourses” (290). The article builds on Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer’s research into the development of science into a collective enterprise during the scientific revolution. Klimchynskaya convincingly proposes that Verne picks up on the tradition of the detailed, published experimental record that enabled what Shapin and Schaffer call “virtual witnessing” and makes his novels into thought experiments that enable his readers to envision the cultural significance of techno-scientific progress.

Klimchynskaya begins by laying out how experimentation became a more and more public practice from the seventeenth century onwards. Starting from the detailed laboratory reports of Robert Boyle’s air-pump trials that virtually opened up Boyle’s lab to his gentlemen scientist readers, she then describes how, in the mid-nineteenth century, popular consumption of science through print descriptions not unlike Boyle’s and through public demonstrations by the Royal Society exploded alongside the rise of mass print media. Klimchynskaya links this development to the rise of imagined communities of fiction and of the nation at the same time, citing Michael Saler’s *As If* (2011). When these imagined communities collided with public access to scientific knowledge, Klimchynskaya proposes that another imagined community was born, one that inhabited “fictional imaginary worlds that served as laboratories in order to interrogate the consequences of technoscience in its shared life” (295). She argues that Verne’s extraordinary voyages are just such virtual laboratories.

Unlike the laboratories of the Royal Society, however, Verne’s virtual laboratories are built from narrative and paratextual devices. Focusing on *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (1872), Klimchynskaya shows how the extraordinary voyages present themselves as scientific texts and ask their readers to treat them as such, helped along by their illustrations in Hetzel’s family magazine, where the majority of Verne’s novels were first published. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* contains many instances of what Michael Saler calls the “ironic imagination”: engravings of the view from Captain Nemo’s submarine, for instance, are presented as photographic negatives, invoking the perceived scientific objectivity of the photographic process. Similarly, Klimchynskaya notes that an engraving of the characters wearing diving bells resembles a diagram of figures wearing the device that was itself based on an 1867 exposition of the apparatus seen by Verne. Klimchynskaya argues that these paratextual features of the novel, far from being mere illustrations, fulfil the function of diagrams and thereby “undermine the very possibility of reading for suspense” (300). She observes that Verne’s linguistic choices frequently estrange the reader from the action as well, for instance by interposing Latin terms for shellfish into a bourgeois dinner scene that would otherwise belong in a realist text.

The final two sections of the article address how Verne's novels craft experimental spaces as well as encouraging the reader to treat them as lab reports rather than adventures. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* and many others focus on events within a confined space sealed off from the rest of the world: Klimchynskaya proposes that Nemo's submarine and *From the Earth to the Moon*'s projectile alike can be seen as laboratory spaces. Here, too, illustration plays its part. Outside these spaces, Klimchynskaya demonstrates that across Verne's many novels the world's scientific community follows the "experiments" happening in these confined spaces through published descriptions, even as interested parties followed Boyle's air-pump trials from afar. Unlike in Verne's earlier novels, however, in *Robur the Conqueror* (1886) experimentation moves beyond this limited audience. In the novel, though scientists refuse to believe in the reality of Robur's heavier-than-air flying machine, newspapers around the world write about it, bringing the experimental space of that flying machine to a mass readership. Klimchynskaya asserts that "*Robur* challenges the distinctions between amateur and professional [...] revealing technoscience as an inescapable collective concern within modernity" (314). She concludes that, in the non-fictional world, the *voyages extraordinaires* are built to serve a similar purpose to the public dissemination of Robur's achievement. They instruct their readers about science, certainly, but they also offer the community of readers material through which to debate the significance of technoscience for their time.

Overall, Klimchynskaya presents a useful and historically grounded framework for reading Jules Verne's scientific romances as thought experiments in a highly literal sense. This is not only a crucial addition to Verne scholarship overall, it is also an important contribution to the ongoing rehabilitation of Verne for the Anglosphere. Klimchynskaya's article accords Verne the cultural, literary and scientific significance in English-language scholarship that he has long had in his native French.

Adele Guyton
University of Leuven, Belgium