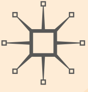

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Victorian Surfaces in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture

Skin, Silk, and Show

Edited by
Sibylle Baumbach
Ulla Ratheiser

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CHAPTER 1

How to Do Things with Surfaces: The Politics and Poetics of Victorian Surfaces

Sibylle Baumbach and Ulla Ratheiser

1 The Surface Turn: Approaching Victorian Surfaces

We habitually approach our environment through surfaces. Particularly by means of sight or touch, we tend to assess the outside first before we decide whether it is worthwhile to dig deeper, provided that the surface we are encountering allows for its transgression. Arguably, especially in the Western hemisphere, the attention to surfaces has increased drastically over the last two centuries, driven by the emergence of 'the society of the spectacle,' a growing desire for 'simulation,' which led to "the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing" (Debord 1967,

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thesis 17), and increasing engagements in simulacra rather than an outer 'reality' (Baudrillard 1994), which proliferated with the digital turn. Reproducible images and particularly the World Wide Web with its numerous social media platforms, such as Facebook or Instagram, have given rise to numerous new surfaces to gaze at, while enabling novel modes of self-fashioning that affirm the growing significance of visual and surface culture.

As suggested by these developments, the emergence of new surfaces, which in turn prompts new modes of surface readings as well as critical reflections thereof, tends to go hand in hand with rapid technological advances which introduce new materials (or novel uses of familiar ones) into everyday culture. While radically different in many respects, the height of industrialism in the nineteenth century led to similar attention to new surfaces, which was driven by the introduction of photography (1834) and photographic paper (1834/1839), the increasing manufacturing of cotton, boosted through the expansion of the power loom industry (amongst others by the introduction of the Roberts Loom in 1830), and the invention of synthetic aniline dyes (1856), which diversified the range of colours of cotton, had an impact on cultural coding, and led to "the democratisation of Western fashion" (Forster and Christie 2013, 11) insofar as brightly coloured clothes became affordable for the middle classes. The great demand for these new materials points to a growing interest in ornament and show, which also became apparent in the Great Exhibition from 1851, housed in the Crystal Palace, whose iron-and-glass construction displayed the potential of new and entirely prefabricated surface material.

Industrialized Victorian Britain was 'the workshop of the world' producing materials, such as cotton, flax, hemp, and ceramics, as well as iron, steel, and copper, which offered new tactile and visual experiences—experiences that conveyed a new sense of presence and of being in the world. As suggested by Katharina Boehm, "understandings of the relationship between the self and the physical world were fundamentally reconfigured through rapidly advancing industrialization [and] the unprecedented growth of consumer culture" (2012, 3). In this reorientation in the world, surfaces played an increasingly important role. As a consequence, new emphasis was put on surface design. William Morris' elaborate textiles and wallpapers are a case in point. His "hypnotic mirrored design[s]" (Wells 1996, 53), such as African Marigold (1861) and Acanthus (1880), featured complex patterns of sinuous curves of leaves and meandering

branches, which were often regarded as mesmerizing, and established a new "aesthetics of surface" (Miller 2015). As argued by Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, the "surface beauty" (2015, 402) that characterizes Morris' work also suggests an ecocritical agenda inherent in the arts and crafts movement, which countered mass industrial production by drawing attention to "the unspoiled face of the earth" (Morris 1973, 91). As further suggested by Miller, Morris' surface aesthetics advocates "a significant shift in the conception of wealth away from underground treasures exhumed by delving into the earth (diamonds, gold, minerals) and toward surface resources such as sunlight and air—resources that are being observed or polluted by underground commodities and their extraction" (Miller 2015, 402). In this context, surfaces represent untouched, uncorrupted, unharmed (by human or mechanical intervention) areas that need to be preserved, (re-)constructed, and acknowledged as part of our (cultural and natural) heritage. While this nostalgic desire for 'unspoiled' surfaces is at odds with both technological advancements and material markers of class and gender identity, it confirms the important role of surfaces in Victorian culture.

Paradoxically, this desire was further fuelled by a growing scepticism towards matter in general. This becomes evident in contemporary discussions about a seemingly fringe phenomenon: the substance of ghosts. In Victorianism, ghosts would frequently be perceived as making an appearance during the popular cultural practice of séances. The presence of spectral bodies, however, posed an epistemological problem: on the one hand, they were said to become manifest as the touch of a hand or even full spirit bodies. On the other hand, contemporary accounts made it clear that these "spirit hands and bodies resembled—but could not actually *be*—flesh and blood" (Briefel 2018, 757). Thus, Aviva Briefel contends, "Victorian spiritualists […] found themselves tasked with redefining materiality as something that hovered between the tangible and the intangible" (757–758). While the physical manifestation of ghosts in séances would provide credibility to spiritualism, their ambiguous materiality led to a questioning of matter as a whole (758). If in Victorian times matter was perceived as potentially unstable and elusive, surfaces acquire an even greater significance, as areas that we can experience and identify through the senses. Surfaces, therefore, became all the more relevant to acknowledge the 'presence' of entities. At the same time, this makes surfaces potentially referential rather than absolute. Since we can neither truly know the matter of a surface nor the matter of what lies beneath, surfaces

might always be pointing towards something else. By this token, the surface reading of texts of all kinds as well as the reading of surfaces in Victorian culture, its products and practices might not be symptomatic, but go beyond the obvious all the same.

With its heightened interest in display, show, and appearance; growing 'thing culture'; an increasing desire for natural, untouched, yet touchable surfaces; and the rise of a new aesthetics of surface, Victorian culture offers a plethora of surfaces whose different forms and functions still need to be recognized. These include material surfaces produced in the context of growing consumer culture, human surfaces which were scrutinized with the help of (re-)emerging (pseudo-)sciences such as phrenology or physiognomy to distinguish the Dr Jekylls from the Mr Hydes in Victorian culture, and metaphorical surfaces which illustrated the increasing interest in the exterior of things and people but which were also used to reflect upon the potential and perils of surface readings. Furthermore, the critical stance towards matter in the nineteenth century, which is just one facet of a culture preoccupied with material things, led to a growing fascination with inanimate objects. This was reflected in various cultural productions at the time, including literature, which offered (critical) reflections upon the 'surface turn' and "transformed the ways in which readers thought about the object realm" (Boehm 2012, 3). It is the aim of this volume to further explore the poetics and politics of Victorian surfaces by investigating surface descriptions and surface readings in Victorian literature and culture. To illustrate the versatility of Victorian surfaces, this introduction will sketch some of the key issues and challenges pertaining to (re-)presentations of material, sensual, and metaphorical surfaces, which will be further examined in the chapters gathered in this volume.

Despite, the Victorians' partiality towards surfaces, scholars in cultural and literary studies traditionally have been drawn to what lies beneath and can be uncovered by moving beyond the exterior. As a consequence, texts and textures have been read primarily for what they may be hiding, leading to a practice that Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have described as "symptomatic reading," an approach which "encompasses an interpretative method that argues that the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses" (2009, 3), based on the conviction that meaning is essentially "hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter" (2009, 1). Whether resulting from the impact of Marxism and psychoanalysis (Best and Marcus 2009, 1), the rise of critical theory (cf. Felski 2011), or the "legacy of Hegelianism" (Fluck 2014, 53),

symptomatic reading, as integral part of a hermeneutics of suspicion, became the dominant mode of analysis in literary and cultural studies.

In the search for the "latent meaning behind a manifest one" (Jameson 1981, 60), surfaces have often been overlooked. While texts, textures, and materials have commonly been read as pointing to deeper truths, the design, forms, and functions of surfaces often remained unnoticed. Surfaces, however, are complex, versatile, and anything but shallow or static. They separate and mediate: they serve as (permeable) boundaries and thresholds between the inner and the outer sphere, the private and the public, the body and the world. They can be inscribed and decorated, veiled or exposed. For examining their density, immediacy, and complexity, a deeper engagement in surface reading is necessary.

Following Best and Marcus' clarion call for 'surface reading,' scholarship has drawn increasing attention to surfaces, including Joseph Amato's *Surfaces: A History* (2013), Glenn Adamson and Victoria Kelly's co-edited volume *Surface Tensions: Surface, Finish and the Meaning of Objects* (2013), and Rebecca Coleman and Liz Oakley-Brown's special issue on *Visualizing Surfaces, Surfacing Vision* (2017). Further studies have begun to focus on specific surfaces, such as skin, as "a surface for the sensing and expressive self" (Gilbert 2019, 2; also Connor 2004), glass, which as transparent surface was mystified as "invisible layer between the seer and the seen" while serving as both "barrier and medium" (Armstrong 2008, 3 and 11), and fashion (Hatter and Moody 2019), which functioned as a 'system of knowledge' in Victorian commodity culture and was critical for the construction of (gender) identity. None of these studies, however, have investigated the aesthetic and political significance of Victorian surfaces, as represented in literary and other cultural texts of the time, which is one of the key objectives of the present volume.

2 Attending to Surfaces

To disengage from the desire to uncover the political, cultural, or literary 'unconscious' beneath an exterior is not the only challenge when it comes to examining surfaces. As we primarily experience the world through sight, we tend to be bombarded with a vast number of visual stimuli, which exceed the amount of information that our minds are able to process by far. What we perceive, therefore, is highly selective. This leads to a paradox in perception: we often look without being able to 'see' or even recognize what we are looking at. Instead, what we frequently experience,

without being aware of it, are cases of inattentional blindness. Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons have best illustrated our inability to regard everything that is in front of our eyes in a, by now well known, psychological experiment featuring 'the invisible gorilla' (2010a), which reveals our tendency to miss unexpected, task-unrelated events. In this experiment, viewers are presented with a video of two teams of young adults, dressed in white and black T-shirts, respectively, who pass a ball between them. The viewers' task is to count the times the players in white pass the ball. What around half of the participants concentrating on this task miss is a person wearing a gorilla costume who, at one point in the video, crosses the playing field while the players continue passing the ball and even spends a moment at the centre of the field pounding his or her chest, before walking off screen. What this experiment reveals are "two things: that we are missing a lot of what goes on around us, and that we have no idea that we are missing so much" (Chabris and Simons 2010b).

Such instances of inattentional blindness occur frequently in our everyday encounters with surfaces. We tend to disregard the significance of surfaces and surface structures because we are geared towards a 'hidden meaning,' towards a distrust of the obvious, and to some extent, especially in academia, conditioned not to judge a book by its cover. As a consequence, "what lies in plain sight [and] is worthy of attention [...] often eludes observation" (Best and Marcus 2009, 18). This observation, which was the starting point for Best and Marcus' approach, is at the heart of this volume. It is the task of the individual contributions and the volume as a whole to draw attention to the invisible gorillas, to the surfaces that are visible but that we tend to miss, and to the things that we fail to process not in spite of the fact but rather *because* they are right before our eyes.

As will be shown in the following chapters, nineteenth-century writers frequently drew attention to surfaces, either implicitly by foregrounding surface descriptions in their narratives or explicitly by referring to the significance of surfaces. As Oscar Wilde, for instance, stated in his manifesto for aestheticism, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891): "it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible" (Wilde 2008 [1891], 23). Such explicit praise of surfaces towards the fin de siècle connects to emerging discourses on the psychology of attention at the time, which help explain why and how we distribute our attention in everyday life. As emphasized by William James in his seminal work *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), attention is ultimately guided by our interests: "Millions of items of the outward order

are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no *interest* for me. *My experience is what I agree to attend to*" (James 1890, 402). Inevitably, this interest can be shaped by the narratives we consume, by those books that Wilde would deem "well-written" (Wilde 2008 [1891], 3).

The seemingly overt mystery, which is "the visible" (Wilde 2008 [1891], 23), however, was frequently overlooked or misconceived as a tendency towards superficiality. In an 1865 review, Henry James, for instance, criticized Charles Dickens' writing style, claiming that Dickens was "the greatest of superficial novelists": "it is one of the chief conditions of his genius not to see beneath the surface of things" (James 1865, 787). To truly regard the surface of things, however, is a rare talent. As John Ruskin, "the great seer of […] the commonplace" (Bloom 2006, 2), remarked, "[t]he essential value and truth of Dickens's writings have been unwisely lost sight of," partly "because he chooses to speak in a circle of stage fire" (Ruskin 1872, 25–26). This reference to the stage or "stage fire" points to aspects of performance which inform the 'show' of classes that comes to the fore not only in Dickens' novels: the vanity fairs of the time, which were supported by the open display of fashion and material culture, and the great pretence especially of the upper classes were issues covered in a number of nineteenth-century narratives. With his pronounced emphasis on the exterior, therefore, Oscar Wilde foregrounds the Victorians' preoccupation with surfaces and the abundant meanings and mysteries these hold in store.

This new attention to surfaces gave rise to some of the most celebrated narratives of the late nineteenth century, which continue to captivate readers until the present day. These include Arthur Conan Doyle's vastly popular Sherlock Holmes stories, which display "a minute precision of description" and thereby exhibit "a supreme attentiveness to the surface of life" (Ousby 1976, 154). Composed as 'attention narratives' (Baumbach 2019), these narratives, in the limited timespan afforded by the strict literary form of the short story, quickly bind readers to the text and engage them in various surface readings, training them to become observant of surface structures by closely following Holmes' faculties of observation and his "quick, all-comprehensive glances" (Doyle 2014 [1892], 204). Many of these stories expose the 'invisible gorilla,' often accompanied by explicit comments that point to instances of inattentional blindness. These comments are typically directed to John Watson as representative of the reader, who, as Holmes frequently reprimands, does not recognize what is

visible: "You see, but you do not observe" (Doyle 2014 [1891], 104). To make us see what is around us, to make us recognize and acknowledge our environment by paying attention to what is right in front of our eyes becomes an increasingly pronounced aim, especially towards the end of the century.

This is confirmed by Joseph Conrad's well-known credo, which precedes a novella whose title, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), points to an engagement with complex, racialized surfaces which were at the centre of attention in nineteenth-century discourse on appearance (see Chap. 4). As stated by Conrad, it is the writer's "task" "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is before all, to make you *see*" (Conrad 2007 [1897], 49). According to Conrad, this ability can only be achieved by arresting readers and binding their full attention to a specific surface, even if only for a brief moment: "To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distance goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, [...] to make them pause" (2007 [1897], 50). This increased attention to surfaces is often achieved by prolonged surface descriptions and practices of surfacing, which direct the reader's gaze to surfaces and hold it just there.

As the contributions to this volume will show, many Victorian writers and artists not only directed readers' attention to surfaces and surface structures but also engaged in various practices of surfacing, that is in foregrounding and thereby expanding and aggrandizing the surface of things (and people) while emphasizing the becoming, development, and also the consolidation of surfaces as well as the agents and motives that drive their construction, recognition, and acknowledgement. Through such practices of surfacing, attention is drawn not only to the design of surfaces but also to the ways in which surfaces are made and constructed, thus highlighting the poiesis of surfaces.

The increased attention to surfaces required a new kind of seeing and led to the emergence of "a new kind of observer" (Crary 1992, 94), capable of what John Ruskin called "*the innocence of the eye*; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify, as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight" (Ruskin 1858, 22; cf. Crary 1992, 94). This mode of perception distinguishes a surface reader from a suspicious reader. It characterizes a reader who is wholly committed to approach the surface not as the outer shell that covers a more complex entity beneath, but *as*

surface, as an area which demands to be seen or touched and acknowledged in its specific structure and design. This 'innocence of the eye' was also explored in children's literature, which became a new and widely popular category of fiction in the nineteenth century. Many of these narratives, however, introduce and at the same time probe this 'new kind of observer.' Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), for instance, is a case in point: Alice seems to seek an opportunity to engage in surface reading, criticizing a book for its lack of images and conversations ("what is the use of a book […] without pictures or conversations?", Carroll 2009 [1865], 9), before plunging down a rabbit hole into a subterranean wonderland. Furthermore, Alice's persistent urge to turn the real into images signifies a desire for surfaces that is symptomatic of the age. Due to the technological innovations at that time, Victorians had hitherto unparalleled opportunities to encounter "constructed images" through advancements in mechanical reproduction and new ways of dissemination (Flint 2018, 932). These images which were increasingly (mass) (re-)produced, such as photographs or engravings, could not only be viewed in books or periodicals but were also put on display in newly established museums, art galleries, in advertisements or shop windows and became a firm and very visible part of Victorian culture.

The consideration of Victorian surfaces requires the consideration not only of aspects of production, that is, how surfaces were made, but also of reception, that is, how they were perceived or read by both Victorian readers and characters in Victorian novels who enact specific modes of surface reading as part of the narrative. As Kate Flint has emphasized, Victorian fiction frequently explores the dichotomy of surface and depth in that it aims to meticulously represent "the visible details of a crowded material world," while inviting readers to question that which is visible on the surface only (2005, 37). By the same token, the widespread fear of getting lost in a book and being absorbed by narratives inspired reflections upon surface versus deep readings of literary texts, which can be traced in several novels of the time. The dangerous lure of books that demand deep reading is a recurring theme, for instance, in Jane Austen's novels: The inability of Catherine Morland, the protagonist of *Northanger Abbey* (1818), to distinguish between fact and fiction satirizes this anxiety about excessive, deep reading, which especially women were believed to be prone to. In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), on the other hand, different modes of reading are juxtaposed with each other to contrast a restrictive hyperfocus arising from excessive attention with mental quickness and cognitive flexibility

which also allows room for distraction. While Austen's "over-attentive" Mary Bennet represents "a cautionary figure for the dangers of reading too much" (Phillips 2011, 112) and remains a rather static figure throughout the narrative, Elizabeth Bennet, "swift of thought and quick of tongue" (Phillips 2011, 113), displays a much more energetic and less absorbed way of reading, "with an eagerness which hardly left her power of comprehension" (Austen 1833 [1813], 179; cf. Phillips 2011, 115), which could be described not necessarily as skim but as surface reading in a novel that focuses on describing the significance of the exterior, the picturesque, of surfaces and surfacing in early nineteenth-century society.

In this context, the question arises to what extent different surfaces afford different modes of (surface) reading. In the physical world, the surface of things is the first and most easily available encounter with any given object or creature. But what is the surface of a text? Is it the more or less pretty lines of ink on paper or parchment, the printed letters in black on white, the deep furrows of runes or hieroglyphs etched in stone, the spoken word, or just the soundwaves? And what constitutes the surfaces of paintings or photographs which materialize on the canvas, on paper, or on a pixelated screen but also contain surfaces of landscapes, objects, or people portrayed? What is the surface of a performance or any other cultural practice? This, by no means exhaustive, list of questions entangled with the idea of surface reading will necessarily have to inform any strategy of reading (on) the surface, pointing at once to the materiality of our encounters with surfaces while simultaneously questioning it perpetually.

Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood highlight this catch about the surface of a text:

> Literal reading is of course a metaphor: we cannot stick to the letters of the text, even metaphorically. The aspiration to take the text as manifestly manifest is as close to the letter as we can get and still be able to see anything. It is perhaps also material, in that the various 'presences' of the text, rather than its absences, are investigated as nearly physical or fully physical: deictically here, in and on the text. (2009, 139)

Best and Marcus suggest various ways of surface reading that are indeed largely metaphorical. For them, surface is that which "is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; […] what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*" (2009, 9). This would pertain to "*[s]urface as materiality*" (9), which encompasses the history of