# 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,

S. Baumbach (✉)
Department of English Literatures and Cultures, University of Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany
e-mail: sibylle.baumbach@ilw.uni-stuttgart.de

U. Ratheiser
Department of English, University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria
e-mail: ulla.ratheiser@uibk.ac.at

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

the book as well as cognitive reading, which they see as "attend[ing] to the material workings of the brain during the reading process" (9). They also understand "*surface as the location of patterns that exist within and across texts*" (11), which is related to practices of 'distant reading' (Moretti 2013) insofar as it advocates a broader view that facilitates the recognition of specific patterns, but, unlike 'distance reading,' does not move away from the text. Aided by "narratology, thematic criticism, genre criticism, and discourse analysis" (Best and Marcus 2009, 11), common patterns could be identified in texts, which would then allow for a reading of those texts across their individual boundaries. Further, they propose an understanding of "*[s]urface as the intricate verbal structure of literary language*," which directs readers' attention to the formal and linguistic elements of a text and advocates a close reading, a "willed, sustained proximity to the text" that does not stray too far from New Criticism (10). Another route they delineate is an "*[e]mbrace of the surface as an affective and ethical stance*" (10), which draws on Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation." Sontag argues that interpretations of a text often display aggressive contempt for that which is obvious, potentially leading to a destruction of the text in the interpretative process (2013, 6). Alternatively, she suggests approaching a work of art not to assign meaning to it but to experience its effect on us (14). Finally, Marcus and Best suggest "[s]*urface as literal meaning*" (2009, 12), which would entail reading a text "without construing presence as absence or affirmation as negation," as Marcus argues elsewhere (Marcus 2007, 75). This way, we "could see ghosts as presences, not absences, and [let] ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts *of*" (Best and Marcus 2009, 13).

By closely reading the various surfaces materializing in Victorian literature and culture, the contributions in this volume explore several of the routes delineated here. In so doing, they look into the surfaces of literary narratives, paintings, and film (in a nod to neo-Victorian representations) as well as natural surfaces such as skin or bark. In any case, they expressly direct their gaze to what is present rather than absent in a text, while also paying attention to the surfaces that become manifest on the diegetic level of the text, be they cloth, landscapes, or human bodies or faces.

### 3    SURFACES: PHYSIOGNOMIC PRACTICES

Surface reading is essentially the analysis of the things that can be done *sur* faces or *inter* faces—through the use and combination or interaction of different kinds of 'faces,' the faces of things, of landscapes, the earth, typefaces, and, of course, the faces of people. Human faces are probably the most intriguing and most frequently read surfaces that exist even though their legibility remained a matter of dispute (see Chap. 9 in this volume).

Metropoles like London offered a plethora of these surfaces. As noted by Sharrona Pearl, "[m]erely walking through the streets of London became a physiognomic experience" (2010, 29). In her article "Passing Faces," published in *Household Words* on 14 April 1855, Eliza Lynn Linton lays out a physiognomic catalogue of the species inhabiting the modern zoo that is on display in "the great picture-book to be read in the London streets" (Linton 1855, 264):

> Then we have horse-faced men; and men like camels, with quite the camel lip; and the sheep-faced man, with the forehead retreating from his long energetic nose, smooth men without whiskers, and with shining hair cut close, and not curling, like pointers; the lion-man, he is a grand fellow; and the bull-headed man […].
>
> The cat woman is a dangerous animal. She has claws hidden in that velvet paw, and she can draw blood when she unsheathes them. Then there is the cow-faced woman, generally of phlegmatic temperament and melancholy disposition, given to pious books and teetotalism. (Linton 1855, 262)

Linton's zoomorphic readings recall the basics of physiognomic theory, established by Aristotle and Giambattista della Porta long before the English translation of Johann Caspar Lavater's seminal *Essays on Physiognomy: Designed to Promote the Knowledge and Love of Mankind* (1789) led to a revival of physiognomic practices in the late eighteenth century. These practices were based on the assumption that (a) character is engraved in what is apparent rather than in what is interior in human nature and (b) all men are essentially surface readers. As Lavater suggests, "[there is] not a man who does not judge of all things that pass through his hands, by their physiognomy; that is, of their internal worth by their external appearance" (1853 [1789], 17). Though intrinsically ahistorical, the pseudo-science of physiognomy experienced a heyday as a powerful cultural tool in the nineteenth century.

This revival was supported by the introduction of phrenology as a popular doctrine, which regarded the skull as an observable entity, claiming that its shape indicated an individual's cognitive abilities, and which was mainly driven by Franz Gall and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim. Though critics rendered this approach as "a piece of *thorough quackery* from beginning to end" (Gordon 1815, 227), phrenological treatises, such as Spurzheim's *The Physiognomical System of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim* (1815) and George Combe's *The Constitution of Man* (1828), "were the global best sellers of the day" (Poskett 2019, 2). Phrenology was a sign of its time insofar as it tied in with expanding material culture in the Victorian era, including the material realities of the printing press which facilitated the circulation of scientific theories across the globe and catered to an increasing fascination with empirical approaches in science, introducing what James Poskett has referred to as "material cultures of the mind" (8).

The popularity of these approaches is confirmed by physiognomic turns in both art and literature (cf. Hartley 2001). These developments were marked, for instance, by a turn from muscular or skeletal structures to surface appearances in art, which is recorded by publications of art anatomy manuals, such as Robert Knox' *Manual of Artistic Anatomy* (1852) (Woodrow 2005, 85), and by an increasing focus on characters' outward appearances in the Victorian novel respectively, which is particularly prominent in realist novels by Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens (cf. Kronshage 2017).

Especially in the growing metropoles of London and Dublin, particular attention was drawn to criminal physiognomies, which was further promoted by the publication of Cesare Lombroso's *Criminal Man* (1876). Lombroso's treatise inspired writers such as R.L. Stevenson, Bram Stoker, or Arthur Conan Doyle to endow some of their (foreign) characters like Hyde, Dracula, Dr Grimsby Roylott, or Tonga with distinctly bestial and atavistic features, which openly communicate their cruel disposition. As especially the latter example suggests, the act of physiognomic surfacing was also frequently employed in an Orientalist fashion to reaffirm English identity in opposition to a distinctly animalistic Other.

As artistic and literary creations of character confirm, physiognomy not only aids readings of surfaces but also informs their construction. In his *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater conceded that "[t]he art of dissimulation itself, which is adduced as so insuperable an objection to the truth of physiognomy, is founded upon physiognomy" (1853 [1789], 17). On the one hand, offering a legible text and on the other hand exploiting the

desire for (and trust in) surface reading, physiognomy proves to be both fair and foul, as it allows the refashioning of the surface of the human face to play not only one but many parts in the *theatrum mundi* of Victorian culture. Sound physiognomic knowledge was the key to actively engage in surfacing one's character or deliberately misread others. Instead of merely considering the surfaces provided by human bodies and faces, therefore, it is much more significant to consider the different ways in which faces are staged and read. After all, readers of facial surfaces often show superior physiognomic knowledge which they can also apply for their own self-fashioning (Sherlock Holmes, who is a master of disguise and a diligent reader of surfaces, is a case in point).

Like other kinds of surfaces, the human face offers an area that can mediate and is mediated. It communicates characteristic traits and emotions while also offering a 'text' that can be perused by others (and potentially also be altered). Attention, therefore, should be directed not so much towards the object and its legibility ('what' is read?), but rather to aspects of focalization and the hierarchy of reading ('who reads' and 'who is read'?). This connects to Graeme Tytler's observation that "physiognomy in the nineteenth-century novel is sometimes significant for what it tells us about the observer no less than about the observed" (2014, 270). Scrutinizing Victorian surfaces, how things are done *sur* faces, therefore, is much more significant than acknowledging representations of the human face as predominantly legible surfaces.

## 4   SURFACE AUTHORITIES: QUEEN VICTORIA'S SURFACES

The desire for, and heightened attention to, surface reading is also fuelled by political developments. For Best and Marcus, it was the presidency of George W. Bush that "may have hammered home the point that not all situations require the subtle ingenuity associated with symptomatic reading" (2009, 2). This—probably polemically advanced—idea that certain political positions or proponents encourage us to remain superficial can also be applied to the Victorian period and its preoccupations with exteriors. The queen's long reign saw seismic shifts in social, political, and cultural terms as well as a redefinition of the role of the monarch herself. It would be going too far to argue that Queen Victoria and her clever staging of the monarchy instigated her people's preoccupation with surfaces. However, leaving aside the influence of the Crown in this development would also mean ignoring its cultural force.

It was during the reign of Queen Victoria that the power of the monarch was reduced to a largely representative role. While the queen herself was not entirely content with this restriction and repeatedly intervened in political processes, she cleverly shaped and exploited her remaining prerogatives in the constitutional monarchy—her right and her duty to *represent* (Homans 2015, xxxii). Victoria was acutely aware of the power of representation and masterfully used it to her own advantage, thus consolidating the function of kings and queens to *appear* and to *act* like monarchs rather than *rule* like monarchs in a more traditional sense.

Obviously, the spectacle of monarchy has always relied heavily on that which can be seen, on show, on the performance of power and magnificence. It was with the reign of Henry VIII, though, that the necessity to represent the Crown in "images of power—through the royal word, portraits, buildings and festivals" (Sharpe 2009, xxv) was thrown into sharp relief. The break with Rome demanded reassurance concerning the role of the king, who recognized how decisive the visual display of his power would be to secure his leverage. Henry VIII thus initiated this "new political culture that secured the Tudor dynasty and the English state" (Sharpe 2009, xxv), and would come to characterize the British monarchy to this day. Indeed, the need to publicly perform monarchic power seems to have grown inversely proportional with the waning political authority of the king or queen regnant.

When Queen Victoria came to the throne, she faced three fundamental challenges that directly impacted her representational strategy: in political terms, she had to adjust to the fact that the monarchy had hardly retained any actual power; in societal terms, it would be decisive for her success to win the approval of the middle class which had come to dominate social and cultural discourses; and in terms of succession, she had to prove her position as queen regnant since a female sovereign—400 years after the reign of Elizabeth I—was still considered an anomaly. By catering to these challenges in the images of herself which she projected and had circulated, the queen managed to secure her enormous influence.

Insofar as "constitutional monarchy is in many ways a feminised monarchy," as David Cannadine argues, it is "easier for a regnant queen to be sympathetically portrayed than a merely dignified king" (n.d., 29). Victoria capitalized on this non-threatening way of representation that her gender seemed to afford her, also by staging herself increasingly as middle-class wife and mother. Despite the fact that she truly occupied a singular position in her realm, the queen attempted and largely succeeded at "seeming

to be just like her subjects" (Homans 2015, xxxii). In so doing, her display of regality took a turn that stands diametrically opposed to the type of image that helped secure Henry VIII's power.

There are two dominant trajectories—one curving into the other—that invite a surface reading of the sovereign's display of regality. On the one hand, the manifold visual representations of the queen, designed to assert her monarchical powers, beg further scrutiny. These images range from romanticized paintings that depict an almost mythical girl-queen to photographs that show Victoria as hard-working matron. On the other hand, there is the surface of that which can be seen in these representations, that is the body of the monarch, staged in these representations to renegotiate the body politic of the sovereign.

Owing to the emergence of mass print and an increasing visual culture, Queen Victoria's image was more widely disseminated than any of her predecessors'. Her reign was so interwoven with the media that critics have characterized her as the first media monarch (Plunkett 2003, 1), who not only made ample and skilful use of this means of communication but also helped reshape the way in which monarchy could be represented. The royal image was "constantly available on a diverse assortment of media, ranging from engravings and magic lantern shows to street ballads and photographs" (Plunkett 2003, 2–3). But while some argue that the royal family "was far from having any self-fashioned representation" due to the large number of contradictory portrayals (Plunkett 2003, 3), others are convinced that Queen Victoria "performed the action of creating the nineteenth-century monarchy largely through representations. She could manipulate her image, to the extent that her culture made possible for her to do so" (Homans 2015, xxi). Thus, while painted portraits of the queen mostly adhere to the standards of royal portraiture, representing splendour and including royal insignia, the many photographs of Victoria appear ostensibly mundane. These depictions are part of a surface, an aesthetics of power in a new moulding, that invite a closer analysis of the visual dimension connected to Queen Victoria's reign.

Mostly refraining from competing with the beautiful queens of Europe, the monarch preferred "the plainest, almost rustic, clothing" (Schulte 2006, 11) in a great number of her portraits, deliberately stepping out of the social norms of royal attire and attuning to the standard design of middle-class family portraits. In drawing attention to the absence of glamour and markers of her unique position, Victoria invites a closer look at how she envisages the embodiment of the monarch. This is facilitated by

the fact that "being Queen never involves a stable identity between the office and the person. Seeming, appearing, or being represented are instances of the Queen's agency […]" (Homans 2015, xix). In displaying "her privacy for public consumption" (Homans and Munich 1997, 3), Victoria uses her agency to re-inscribe the political body usually on public display with a version of her natural body.

The body of a queen regnant first moved into the centre of attention with Elizabeth I, who famously stated in her first speech before her coronation, "And as I am but one body naturally considered, though by His permission a body politic to govern" (20 November 1558) (Elizabeth I 2002, 52). As Ernst Kantorowicz describes in his extensive study *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), a medieval theological concept was productively employed here to define the legal position of the sovereign. The conceptual separation of the monarch's body into a human (body natural) and a superhuman (body politic) dimension allowed for a legal existence beyond the physical reality of the queen's natural, female body—and thus also for the anomalous condition of being a female monarch.

Emphasizing the queen's body politic, the body-that-never-dies, called into being by divine appointment, seemed of utmost importance to secure Elizabeth I's claim to power. With an altogether different political situation in the nineteenth century, it seems worthwhile enquiring to which extent the concept of the two bodies was still meaningful in representations of Queen Victoria. Arguably, in that she presents herself primarily as a private woman, that is wife, mother, and widow, the images of Queen Victoria draw attention to her natural rather than her political body. While this public display of her "maternal body as representing monarchical authority" could potentially be problematic in the strictly gendered spheres of the nineteenth century (Auslander Munich 1987, 265), it could also be seen as a fruitful strategy. It seems as if "Victoria conquered a realm in which her political and natural bodies merged" (Schulte 2006, 12), a theory that might be supported by the shift in the actual power of the monarch in the nineteenth century. In that the transition to a constitutional monarchy was completed during Victoria's reign, portraying the actual political power of the monarch moved into the background (Cannadine n.d., 28–29), allowing for, or even demanding, a foregrounding of the natural body.[1]

---

[1] Focusing on the queen's natural body, however, was in itself by no means apolitical. Particularly the frequent depiction of the natural body of the queen in her role as mother also

Thus, reading on the surface of contemporary representations of Queen Victoria allows us to extrapolate how the sovereign reenvisaged constitutional monarchy in times of increased middle-class influence and her role as a female sovereign without any political powers beyond those of representation.

## 5    SURFACE READINGS

The contributions to this volume engage in surface readings at least in a dual way: on the one hand, they approach various kinds of 'texts,' be they novels, films, paintings, cultural practices, or historical documents, by focusing on their surface; for what they evidently have to offer and what we can perceive when approaching these texts from the outside—whatever this may be. On the other hand, all contributions pay attention to the materiality of surfaces within their respective texts, analyzing the ways in which surfaces are constructed and received and exploring to what extent they meant to mean more than protective shells to valuable interiors in the Victorian (or neo-Victorian) context.

Heidi Liedke's discussion of the Victorian panorama and the panoramic gaze introduces the broad spectrum of Victorian surfaces. In a triangular setting, she traces the connections between the panoramic painting as text, the scenery it depicts, and the ways in which experiencing both, the painting and the actual landscape, can be translated into narratives. Liedke demonstrates how these panoramic accounts become key to understanding how surfaces could come to signify in nineteenth-century culture. Equally combining the panoramic with the particular, Felicitas Meifert-Menhard's discussion of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) explores the surfaces *in* and *of* the novel. Reading them as contact zones, boundaries as well as sites of inscription or patterning, Meifert-Menhard offers a close analysis of the corporeal surfaces, textual surfaces, and topological surfaces of the novel.

In an inversion of the panoramic gaze, the following three chapters turn to a surface that is literally closest to the human experience—skin. Pamela Gilbert explores the representation of race in nineteenth-century culture and literature and illustrates how during this time the construction

conveyed a very specific message: that of a strong dynasty that will not only secure the next lines of monarchs but also come to populate courts all across Europe and hence expand British influence abroad.

of race came to hinge on skin colour with 'white' perceived as default category. She demonstrates how the ambiguity of mixed-race characters in Victorian narratives, such as Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1861), Wilkie Collins' *Armadale* (1866), and Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897), is primarily marked by this discourse and their deviance in terms of the colour of their skins. Wieland Schwanebeck's contribution also focuses on the significance of skin in Victorian literature by looking into how its tactile dimension is afforded relevance. He argues that in Wilkie Collins' novel *Poor Miss Finch* (1872) the 'essence' of a character is located not only in their appearance but also in what the touching of their skin might reveal. From a more global perspective, Monika Pietrzak-Franger delineates how Victorian hermeneutics of skin came into being, relying on multimedial and transmedial knowledge made available during this period. In so doing, she draws our attention to ways in which the discursive construction of this surface shaped contemporary readings of skin and its disease.

Similarly concerned with the surface of the human body, the contributions by Franziska Quabeck as well as by Cordula Lemke and Sophia Jochem turn to various forms of skin covering and their social significance. Quabeck's discussion shows how surfaces acquire significance in specific discursive environments. Her analysis of Charles Dickens' novels highlights how the absence or presence of dirt on the body of children predicates social inclusion or exclusion. Lemke and Jochem's chapter explores how clothes as sites of inscription acquire meaning in the Victorian context. By looking into Charles Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) and *Dombey and Son* (1848) as well as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), they delineate the significance of textiles in ascribing characters to social strata and directing their colonial gaze.

Gazing of a different kind is the focus of Eike Kronshage's chapter on Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907). He examines how the flâneur in the novel experiences the cityscape and its many human faces primarily as a surface that he attempts to read. The fact that this process proves fragile could be seen as part of a wider discourse on the reliability of surfaces towards the end of the Victorian period. The unreliability of surfaces is further emphasized in Jan Rupp's discussion of the neo-Victorian biopic *Victoria & Abdul* (2017). As Rupp serves to show, the material splendour depicted in this film suggests surface reading as a mode of consumption which credits Victorian materiality as much as twenty-first-century visuality.

Coming full circle from the panoramic vision at the beginning of this collection, the final contribution by Kate Flint makes palpable how fruitfully microscopic attention to detail can be employed when looking into the surface structure of bark. With her discussion of tree bark as afterword to the chapters collected in this volume, Flint provides a framing, an outer layer, for the multifaceted discussions provided in the individual chapters. In this, she directs our attention to the surfaces *in* and *of* her contribution as well as of the other texts and demonstrates how worthwhile attention to surface is.

## References

Adamson, Glenn, and Victoria Kelly, eds. 2013. *Surface Tensions: Surface, Finish and the Meaning of Objects*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Amato, Joseph. 2013. *Surfaces: A History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Apter, Emily, and Elaine Freedgood. 2009. Afterword. *Representations* 108: 139–146.

Armstrong, Isobel. 2008. *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830–1880*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Auslander Munich, Adrienne. 1987. Queen Victoria, Empire, and Excess. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 6: 265–281.

Austen, Jane. 1833 (1813). *Pride and Prejudice. A Novel*. London: Richard Bentley.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulations and Simulacra*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Baumbach, Sibylle. 2019. Mind the Narratives: Towards a Cultural Narratology of Attention. In *Narrative in Culture*, ed. Astrid Erll and Roy Sommer, 37–56. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.

Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. 2009. Surface Reading: An Introduction. *Representations* 108: 1–21.

Bloom, Harold. 2006. *Charles Dickens*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.

Boehm, Katharina. 2012. Introduction: Bodies and Things. In *Bodies and Things in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, ed. Katharina Boehm, 1–16. London: Palgrave.

Boucicault, Dion. 1861. *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana: a Play, in Five Acts*. New York: printed, not published.

Briefel, Aviva. 2018. Materiality. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46: 757–759.

Cannadine, David. n.d. Sixty Years a Queen. Some Historical Reflections on the Reign and the Jubilees of Elizabeth II. In *The Queen: Art & Image*, ed. Paul Moorhouse, 19–29. London: National Portrait Gallery.

Carroll, Lewis. 2009 (1865). Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. In '*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'* and '*Through the Looking-Glass'*, ed. Peter Hunt, 9–113. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chabris, Christopher, and Daniel Simons. 2010a. *The Invisible Gorilla*. New York: Crown Publishing.

———. 2010b. *The Invisible Gorilla*. http://www.theinvisiblegorilla.com/gorilla_experiment.html. Accessed 16 Sep 2021.

Coleman, Rebecca, and Liz Oakley-Brown. 2017. Visualizing Surfaces, Surfacing Vision: Introduction. *Theory, Culture & Society* 37: 5–27.

Collins, William Wilkie. 2008 (1872). *Poor Miss Finch*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 2008 (1866). *Armadale*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Connor, Steven. 2004. *The Book of Skin*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Conrad, Joseph. 1990 (1907). *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Conrad, Joseph. 2007 (1897). Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. In *The Portable Conrad*, ed. Michael Gorra, 47–52. London: Penguin.

Crary, Jonathan. 1992 (1990). *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press.

Debord, Guy. 1967. *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Fredy Perlman. Detroit: Black.

Dickens, Charles. 1974 (1848). *Dombey and Son*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Dickens, Charles. 2003 (1839). *Nicholas Nickleby*. London: Penguin.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. 2014 (1891). A Scandal in Bohemia. In *Sherlock Holmes. Selected Stories*, ed. Barry McCrea, 102–123. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 2014 (1892). The Speckled Band. In *Sherlock Holmes. Selected Stories*, ed. Barry McCrea, 203–226. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Elizabeth I. 2002. *Collected Works*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Felski, Rita. 2011. Suspicious Minds. *Poetics Today* 32 (2): 215–234.

Flint, Kate. 2005. 'Seeing Is Believing?' Visuality and Victorian Fiction. In *A Concise Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Francis O'Gorman, 25–46. Malden: Blackwell.

———. 2018. Visuality. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36: 931–937.

Fluck, Winfried. 2014. Surface Readings and Symptomatic Readings: American Studies and the Realities of America. In *Towards a Post-Exceptionalist American Studies*, ed. Winfried Fluck and Donald Pease, *REAL*, 41–65. Tübingen: Narr.

Forster, Sam Vettese, and Robert M. Christie. 2013. The Significance of the Introduction of Synthetic Dyes in the Mid 19th Century on the Democratisation of Western Fashion. *Journal of the International Colour Association* 11: 1–17.

Frears, Stephen, dir. 2017. *Victoria & Abdul*. Universal Pictures.

Gilbert, Pamela. 2019. *Victorian Skin: Surface, Self, History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Gordon, John. 1815. The Doctrines of Gall and Spurzheim. *Edinburgh Review* 25: 227.

Hardy, Thomas. 1998 (1891). *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hartley, Lucy. 2001. *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hatter, Janine, and Nickianne Moody, eds. 2019. *Fashion and Material Culture in Victorian Fiction and Periodicals*. Brighton: Edward Everett Root.

Homans, Margaret. 2015. *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837–1876*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

———, and Adrienne Munich. 1997. Introduction. In *Remaking Queen Victoria*, ed. Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich, 1–12. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

James, Henry. 1865. Review on *Our Mutual Friend*. The Nation, December 21, 786–787.

James, William. 1890. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Jameson, Frederic. 1981. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Kantorowicz, Ernst. 1957. *The King's Two Bodies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kronshage, Eike. 2017. *Vision and Character: Physiognomics and the English Realist Novel*. London: Routledge.

Lavater, Johann Caspar. 1853 (1789). *Essays on Physiognomy: Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*. Translated by Thomas Holcroft. London: Tegg.

Linton, Eliza Lynn. 1855. Passing Faces. *Household Words* XI (264): 261–264.

Marcus, Sharon. 2007. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Marryat, Florence. 1897. *The Blood of the Vampire*. Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz.

Miller, Elizabeth Carolyn. 2015. William Morris, Extraction Capitalism and the Aesthetics of Surface. *Victorian Studies* 57: 395–404.

Moretti, Franco. 2013. *Distant Reading*. New York: Verso.

Morris, William. 1973. Useful Work Versus Useless Toil. In *Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. A.L. Morton, 86–108. New York: International Publishers.

Ousby, Ian. 1976. *Bloodhounds of Heaven: The Detective in English Fiction from Godwin to Doyle*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pearl, Sharrona. 2010. *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth Century Britain*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Phillips, Natalie. 2011. Distraction as Liveliness of Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Characterization in Jane Austen. In *Theory of Mind and Literature*, ed. Paula

Leverage, Howard Mancing, Jennifer Marston William, and Richard Schweickert, 105-122. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press.

Plunkett, John. 2003. *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Poskett, James. 2019. *Materials of the Mind: Phrenology, Race, and the Global History of Science*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Ruskin, John. 1858. *The Elements of Drawing; in Three Letters to Beginners*. New York: Wiley & Halsted.

———. 1872. The Roots of Honour. In *'Unto this Last:' Four Essays on the Principles of Political Economy*, 17–42. New York: John Wiley & Son.

Schulte, Regina. 2006. Conceptual Approaches to the Queen's Body. In *The Body of the Queen: Gender and Rule in the Courtly World, 1500-2000*, ed. Regina Schulte, 1–18. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Sharpe, Kevin. 2009. *Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Sontag, Susan. 2013. Against Interpretation. In *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, 3–14. London: Penguin.

Stoker, Bram. 2008 (1897). *Dracula*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tytler, Graeme. 2014. *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wells, N.M. 1996. *William Morris*. Leicester: Brockhampton Press.

Wilde, Oscar. 2008 (1891). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. London: Alma.

Woodrow, Ross. 2005. Lavater and the Drawing Manual. In *Physiognomy in Profile: Lavater's Impact on European Culture*, ed. Melissa Percival and Graeme Tytler, 71–93. New York: Delaware University Press.