

Victorian Surfaces: Skin, Silk, and Show in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture

Surfaces 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 transgressed. While a number of technological discoveries during the Victorian era facilitated the penetration of the outer layer of the body, including ophthalmoscopy (1850), laryngoscopy (1857), and, most spectacularly, x-rays (1895), these medical advancements also instigated renewed attention to the body's exterior surface. Dermatologists marvelled at the "strange alphabet" that "has to be learned" in attending to the human skin's manifold means of expression (Green 1838, vi). Conduct books as well as popular lectures further promoted surface culture, encouraging Victorian ladies to assume responsibility for their most valued property, i.e. the "extent of surface twenty-eight miles in length that belongs to you, that requires your greatest care" (Fowler 1864, 28). Simultaneously, the advance of print and visual culture helped disseminate this growing attention to the surface, while producing a façade of its own that calls for closer examination. Towards the *fin de siècle*, this increased interest in exteriors and appearances culminated in the excessive worship of surfaces, supported by mass and consumer culture, in aestheticism and decadence.

Victorian and Neo-Victorian Studies have often been devoted to excavating hidden desires, the politics of gender, and imperial legacies that lie beneath Victorian surfaces. Texts, textures, and materials are commonly read as veiling deeper truths and latent meanings. In recent approaches, however, this tradition of "symptomatic reading" has increasingly been enriched by "surface reading" (Best and Marcus 2009), which foregrounds the density, immediacy, and complexity of surfaces. Taking these approaches as a starting point, we will further explore Victorian surfaces, their design and (cultural and ideological) function, ranging from the exterior of bodies and buildings and the texture of clothing and artworks to performance practices and media representations, including the outward show of royal and imperial power. Rather than suspending the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Kucich 2011), this section will serve as an arena to engage in, discuss, and critically reflect upon the practice of 'surface reading', to explore the dialectics of surface and depth in Victorian culture (cf. Shusterman 2002), and to probe the "current fascination with the legibility of Victorian surfaces" (Flint 2000, 21).

Papers might address, but are not limited to, the following aspects:

- Performance, e.g. the textures and materials of waxwork shows, stage practices, royal ceremony
- The body, e.g. skin as a canvas for the inscription of gender, class, sexuality, etc.; tattoo culture
- Fashion, e.g. Victorian materials and styles, sartorial norms
- Art and architecture, e.g. 'cluttered' surfaces; the significance of skin and fashion in portraits and cartes de visite; the Victorian nude; architectural surfaces and urban layers (cf. Armstrong 2008)
- Media, e.g. mass print and illustrations; royal images; the aesthetics of mass media
- Textual and poetic surfaces, e.g. "presence effects" (Gumbrecht 2004) and "surface tension" (Carr 2013) across different literary genres and their cultural function
- Maps, e.g. design, dissemination, and materiality of maps
- Language, surface, and cognition, e.g. perception of (background) surfaces; the reference problem
- Methodology, e.g. beyond 'symptomatic' or 'surface reading'; "amicable reading" (Mason 2016, 343)

Please send your proposal (300-350 words) for a 30-minute paper and a short bio to
Sibylle.Baumbach@uibk.ac.at, Ariane.De-Waal@uibk.ac.at, and Ulla.Ratheiser@uibk.ac.at.

The deadline for submission is **15 October 2017**.

Works Cited

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- Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. 2004. *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
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- Shusterman, Richard. 2002. *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.