

## Section 4

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

Prof. Dr. Sibylle Baumbach (Innsbruck), Dr. des. Ariane de Waal (Innsbruck), Ass. -Prof. Dr.

Ulla Ratheiser (Innsbruck)

#### **Programme Outline**

Monday, 24 September 2018, 13:30-15:15

Sibylle Baumbach (Innsbruck), Ariane de Waal (Innsbruck) & Ulla Ratheiser (Innsbruck)

#### **Introduction**

Jan Rupp (Frankfurt/Heidelberg)

#### **Imperial Hauntings in the Durbar Room: Spurious Materiality in Neo-Victorian Biopics**

Heidi Liedke (Koblenz-Landau)

#### **The Semantics of Surfaces, Victorian Panoramas, and the Panoramic Gaze**

Monday, 24 September 2018, 15:45-17:15

Sophia Jochem & Cordula Lemke (FU Berlin)

#### **Gothic Cloth: Textures of the Unknown**

Franziska Quabeck (Münster)

#### **Dickens' Dirty Children**

Eike Kronshage (Chemnitz)

#### **“Red-hot applications on their vile skins”: Ironic Transparency in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent***

Tuesday, 25 September 2018, 15:00-16:30

Monika Pietrzak-Franger (Hamburg)

#### **Making Skin Legible: Readings of Victorian Culture**

Wieland Schwanebeck (Dresden)

**“Her fair cheek against his discoloured skin”: Twinship and Tactile Anxieties in Wilkie Collins’s *Poor Miss Finch***

Felicitas Meifert-Menhard (München)

**Touching Skins, Spreading Stains: Contesting, Affirming, and Penetrating Surfaces in the Work of Thomas Hardy**

## Abstracts

Jan Rupp (Frankfurt/Heidelberg)

### **Imperial Hauntings in the Durbar Room: Spurious Materiality in Neo-Victorian Biopics**

Queen Victoria's long reign saw the emergence not only of herself as the 'first media monarch', but also of a new royal material culture, exemplified by a plethora of memorabilia produced and disseminated on the occasion of her Golden and Diamond Jubilees. Just like her photo-graphic self-presentation as caring mother and domestic queen to fashion her role as Empress of India, countless statues, commemorative objects, consumer goods and textile fabrics stood in for the world-spanning Empire in late-Victorian times. Because of its de facto disunity and aporia of representation, the Empire could not do without the presence of material evidence. The queen herself famously commissioned a series of paintings of her Indian subjects to fathom her status as head of a colony she never set foot in. If much has been made of the Empire as an 'empire of the mind', constructed by metaphor, narrative and discourse, Victorian thing culture played an equally important part.

The proposed paper will revisit Victorian preoccupations with surfaces and materials to discuss *Victoria* (2016–, ITV) and *Victoria & Abdul* (2017, dir. Stephen Frears) as two latter-day, neo-Victorian variations on this theme. Both TV series and film are lavish epics capitalizing on period design, in keeping with the overall currency of material objects in contemporary popular and museum culture. Both biopics moreover go a long way towards humanizing queen and Empire. Historical realities are repeatedly glossed over by textile and architectural pomp and circumstance, as echoed in interviews with the two lead actors of *Victoria & Abdul*, who found themselves convinced of the fairy-tale of Anglo-Indian friendship once donning historical costumes and walking into Osborne House's Durbar Room. Both biopics present telling examples of Empire nostalgia in Brexit times and highlight the significance of Victoriana then and now, while at the same time calling for a critical account of the persuasive power and current valorization of aesthetic presence and affect.

PD Dr. Jan Rupp is currently stand-in professor at the Department of English and American Studies of Goethe-University Frankfurt and on leave from his position as researcher at the Heidelberg School of Education. He is the author of *Genre and Cultural Memory in Black British Literature* (2010) and a second monograph on representations of ritual in 20th-century 'pageant fictions' (2016). His research interests include cultural memory studies, narrative, ritual theory, and (neo-)Victorian studies. He has published widely on black and Asian British as well as postcolonial writing, including on didactic perspectives of the literature classroom, and has recently been interested in the intersection of world literature and environmental memory.

Heidi Liedke (Koblenz-Landau):

### **“The Semantics of Surfaces, Victorian Panoramas and the Panoramic Gaze”**

While many Victorian readers would get lost in (supposedly) in-depth descriptions found in

Realist fiction, a – literally – superficial form of ‘reading’ and seeing was similarly popular at the time, namely virtual travel via the visit to panoramas. Huge canvasses brought even the most remote foreign settings home and enabled those Victorians who were interested to travel virtually and linger with their gazes on landscapes that, reduced to two instead of three dimensions, created a pleasurable ‘flat’ spatial experience. This paper is centered around the notion that the spatial turn that occurred from the 1990s onwards and often had 19th-century (con)texts as its object of scrutiny has to be complemented with a ‘surface turn’ (or, if a neologism is allowed, a ‘surficial’ turn, the term being a nod to expressions of awe on the spectators’ faces). In most discussions of the sociocultural contexts of Victorian England the concepts of space and time are foregrounded as bringing about a perceptual shift at that time, yet I will be arguing that the experience of surfaces had an equally important cultural and ideological function and should be regarded as part of the perceived “time-space compression,” to use David Harvey’s term. By looking at texts that either describe actual panoramas or are examples of the panoramic gaze, such as James Banvard’s *Description of Banvard’s Panorama of the Mississippi River* (1847) that describes his own painting of the Mississippi river on three miles of canvas and, by comparison, Charles Dickens’s descriptions of the Mississippi in his *American Notes* (1842), I will show that there is a direct connection between subjectivity and surface, surface and depth (see also Flint 2000: 236 ff.): experiences of panorama surfaces – oscillating between pleasure and fear, passivity and agency – root the observing subject more clearly in a ‘here and now,’ creating moments of ‘thereness’ and a perceived intensification of the gaze of the virtual traveller. While being related to Gumbrecht’s idea of ‘presence,’ ‘thereness’ is more clearly anchored in the semantics of surface descriptions and pays attention to the use of deictic markers and syntactical changes that capture its experience. As such, these panoramic accounts are valuable sources for an assessment of Victorian surface perception(s) and subjectivity.

### *Biographical note*

Dr. Heidi Liedke is assistant professor at the English Department at the University of Koblenz-Landau, Campus Landau (Germany). From 2018-2020 she will be a Feodor Lynen Research Fellow at the School of Languages, Linguistics and Film at Queen Mary University of London. She obtained her PhD in 2016 at the University of Freiburg with a dissertation that explored the experience of idleness in Victorian travel writing and idling as a mode of travel in its own right. Heidi’s research interests are Victorian travel texts, idling in literature, literary urban studies, the history of the ‘event’ and contemporary British theatre. She is founder and co-editor of the ejournal *Muße. Ein Magazin*. Recently, two of her articles on W. H. Hudson and Bruce Chatwin have appeared in *Recherches & Travaux* and *Textus*. Her monograph *Idleness, Travel and Idling Travellers in the Victorian Age* is currently under review with Palgrave Macmillan.

Sophia Jochem, Cordula Lemke (FU Berlin)

**Gothic Cloth: Textures of the Unknown**

In our paper we would like to show that the performative power of clothing has changed in the Victorian age, has become *unheimlich*, and we will explore how this affects the agency of the gothic personnel.

Clothing has always been a medial extension of the surface of the human body. From the Old Testament account of the first veiling of the body before God's gaze, clothes have been part of the social order both in concealing the body as a place of irrational desire and in upholding allegedly rational hierarchical structures. While the eighteenth century still has a rigid dress code which novels enforce through ridicule, the nineteenth century is no longer certain about the power of these symbols. With changing social structures the dress code had to be renegotiated. As has often been stated, even Queen Victoria's own dresses no longer reflected her position as a monarch but resembled the social norm of the middle classes. The unintelligibility of Teufelsdröck's 'Philosophy of Clothing' in Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, Emily Brontë's critique of Heathcliff's sartorial reinvention or George Eliot's arguably devilish weaver Silas Marner are just a few examples of how this new unease challenges straightforward readings of the body's surface extensions. These extensions have become part of the unknown and as such have acquired a life of their own. In our paper, we would like to show how clothing enters the novels of Dickens and Stoker as a gothic element that subverts well-known binaries of good and evil and how it forces the gothic personnel to reinvent itself.

Franziska Quabeck (Münster)

### **Dickens' Dirty Children**

Dickens's worlds are dirty, since his criticism of England's urbanisation and industrialisation is present in all of his works. One cannot help but notice, however, that within his dirty worlds, his children are exceptionally dirty. Interestingly, a closer look reveals that within the group of child characters, clean or dirty bodies are not only a question of class. Nor does their outward appearance stem from a naturalised description of childhood. Childhood is dirty, but Dickens' children have not soiled themselves playfully. The layers of soot and dust that cover their bodies are emblems of their oppression and of their status as subjects to unjust or cruel treatment and conditions. Their inability to keep themselves clean marks them as victims on the very surfaces of their bodies. At the same time, their ability to shed the infestation of their lives, to come clean in the literal sense, is an indication of character and symbolically manifested in a rite of passage.

I would like to argue in this paper that for Dickens, a clean body has little to do with personal hygiene – it is an indicator of a person's control over their own lives. Stink and stench stand for unjust oppression not only in the too obvious descriptions of the unduly segregated poor in London's slums that are quite literally left to decay. Whether or not characters are dirty is also an indication of the modes of oppression at work in the social systems and personal networks that surround them. At the same time, rising from these ashes is depicted as a process of maturation. The cleansing of bodies signifies liberation and maturation as children are freed from those oppressive factors that visibly mark their bodies. Dickens' dirty child heroines and heroes first need to liberate themselves from the

incapacitating circumstances that govern their lives in the form of school masters, stepmothers and -fathers or simply conditions of neglect or poverty, which are clearly visible on their skins. Dirt and the absence thereof represents not simply degradation through poverty, but rather serves as an indicator to the formation of the self.

### *Biographical note*

I am assistant professor for British Studies at the University of Münster. I have an MA in Philosophy and a PhD in English literature. My doctoral dissertation was published as *Just and Unjust Wars in Shakespeare* with Walter de Gruyter in 2013. In February 2017, I received the *venia legendi* for English literary and cultural studies for a book (*Habilitationschrift*) on Kazuo Ishiguro, which is due to appear in 2018. I have published a number of articles on Shakespeare and contemporary Anglophone authors such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Irvine Welsh, Gregory Burke and Zadie Smith. I am currently in the process of editing a collection of essays on *Just War Theory in Literature*, due to be published with Palgrave Macmillan in January 2018 and I am also working on a new monograph on the idea/ideal of authenticity in 19th-century British literature and culture.

Eike Kronshage (Chemnitz)

### **“Red-hot applications on their vile skins.” Ironic Transparency in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent***

In the realist novel, surfaces tended to be transparent (figuratively speaking). Whatever they covered, was meant to be dis-covered. Therefore, physiognomies were visible facial surfaces which invited the skilled reader – i.e. the physiognomist – to read the otherwise indiscernible hidden depth of human character. The modernist novel, however, replaced both the realist idea of transparent surfaces with that of surface opacity, and the idea of coherent character (which physiognomics pretended to uncover) with that of character inconsistency. Thus, for the modernist novel the facial surface remained a signifier without a signified.<sup>1</sup> In Joseph Conrad’s fiction, we can witness the transition in form of a pervasively ironic treatment of physiognomics. Against the common critical notion of Conrad’s affirmative stance toward physiognomics (e.g. Pick 1986; Söder 1991; Jacobs 1968), and against the more nuanced and ambivalent interpretation of Conrad’s physiognomic position in recent criticism (cf. Baumbach 2007), I argue that Conrad’s fiction is a straightforward eschewal of any kind of traditional body semiotics like physiognomics or phrenology. My reading of *The Secret Agent* takes its cue from the dismissive statement of one of its characters, Karl Yundt, who criticizes Lombrosian criminology for not reading character through/from the surface, but rather branding it into the surface: Red-hot applications on their vile skins—hey? Can’t you smell and hear from here the thick hide of the people burn and sizzle? That’s how criminals are made for your Lombrosos to write their silly stuff about. (41; ch. 3) Through a series of complex ironic characterizations, Conrad includes physiognomic discourse primarily to

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<sup>1</sup> Very much in the sense of Tristram Shandy in Laurence Sterne’s novel, who claims in a famous passage that wherever he writes about a nose he means a nose and nothing else.

demonstrate its epistemological shortcomings and its dubious ideology that would lead, as the novel's ending clearly suggests, to eugenics. Therefore, I want to analyze his treatment of those surfaces that still signified in the novels of his literary predecessors, the realist writers of the nineteenth century, to demonstrate how exactly Conrad adopts a modernist perspective of surfaces as impenetrable, indecipherable, and illegible.

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Monika Pietrzak-Franger (Hamburg)

#### **Making Skin Legible: Readings of Victorian Culture**

In late Victorian Britain, obsessed as it was with health and fitness, diseases, especially cutaneous diseases, were not only a sign of physical weakness but also an emblem of degeneration. It is therefore not surprising that they had a strong hold on the medical and popular imagination. Questions of legibility were inherent both to the medical study of skin diseases and their cultural significance. In times when their aetiology and pathology began to be better understood, the recognition of their symptoms was still considered as one of the Herculean labours. With the help of established and new technologies, ranging from illustration to X-rays, photography and microphotography, the medical and associated professions took pains to make skin diseases legible for practitioners. Similarly, though with the help of different technologies (e.g. wax modelling, painting), skin diseases were made visible for general public. At the same time, these specialist and general re-mediations required various interpretational skills in order for the diseases to be recognized. Their recognition, in turn, had a number of economic, social and political repercussions.

Using as foundation select archival materials – wax models, photographs and lithographs of skin diseases along with the late nineteenth century New Woman novels –, I will expand on the arguments I developed in *Syphilis in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2017). In my talk, I will 1) exemplarily show the various re-mediation processes that shaped the visibility of these diseases and 2) highlight the difficulties that were inherent to the various acts of interpretation that these materials necessitated. On the basis of this discussion, I will also 3) map out the history of critical interpretations that 1) and 2) generated. I will be

arguing that as much as both types of critical practice – symptomatic and surface readings of skin diseases in Victorian culture – have got their historical justification, it is only through their combination that the complex significance of these disorders can be understood. It is thanks to their combination that the various strategies of knowledge production, and with them, various types of agency and empowerment, become visible.

### *Biographical note*

Monika Pietrzak-Franger is Visiting Professor at the University of Hamburg, Germany, and currently DAAD visiting scholar at Deutsches Haus at NYU, having previously taught at the universities of Mainz, Siegen, Braunschweig and St. Louis. She received a Volkswagen Foundation scholarship for her postdoctoral project on *Syphilis in Victorian Literature and Culture*, for which she was also awarded the BritCult Award by the German Association for the Study of British Cultures. She has published on Victorian and neo-Victorian studies, gender, medicine and visual culture. She is the author of *Syphilis in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2017), *The Male Body and Masculinity* (2007), editor of *Women, Beauty, and Fashion* (2014) and co-editor of *Handbook of the English Novel* (2019), *Transforming Cities* (2018), *Neo-Victorianism and Globalisation* (2015), *Disease, Communication and the Ethics of (In)Visibility* (2014), *Reflecting on Darwin* (2014) and *Adaptations – Performing across Media and Genres* (2008).

Wieland Schwanebeck (Dresden)

### **“Her fair cheek against his discoloured skin”: Twinship and tactile anxieties in Wilkie Collins’s *Poor Miss Finch* (1872)**

In addition to numerous other scientific breakthroughs and technological innovations, the Victorian age also saw the inception of modern twin scholarship. Francis Galton’s pioneering research on twins merged several of his scholarly interests: questions of heredity, identity, and criminology, to which he contributed various publications, including a ground-breaking study of fingerprinting. The existence of (monozygotic) twins provided quite an epistemological conundrum for an eugenicist like Galton, as well as for Victorian science at large: to what extent are we bound by our genetic heritage, how can one distinguish with absolute certainty between two ‘identicals’, and where are the limits of ‘defining’, that is: of drawing exact semantic boundaries? In the Victorian age, questions like these are negotiated in the emerging genre of detective fiction, which often investigates twinship and which relies heavily on the semiotics of surface phenomena like skin and fingerprints. Moreover, the semantic operation of *detection* finds its equivalent in the act of reading as yet another process which must go beneath the surface to find truth.

Wilkie Collins’s novel *Poor Miss Finch* (1872) is a paradigmatic text that tackles all of these aspects, even though it is often side-lined in favour of the author’s far better-known works like *The Moonstone* (1868). Usually dismissed as a melodramatic, neo-Gothic pot-boiler, *Poor Miss Finch* is one of the era’s definitive twin novels, and crucially, its central conflict plays out on the level of skin and tactile sensations. As twin brothers Oscar and Nugent Dubourg vie for the hand of Lucilla Finch, a blind heiress, their rivalry comes to a head when Oscar, to cure himself of epilepsy, begins a silver-nitrate treatment that turns his

skin blue, which leads to his withdrawal from the world and to the ‘evil twin’ usurping his place. Oscar’s paradoxical fear that blind Lucilla can ‘see’ his ‘darkness’ in spite of her disability carries strong overtones of the racist discourse of imperialism, and it also points to the underlying anxiety that a person’s skin will betray their inherited criminal nature – a proposition which *Poor Miss Finch* and other Victorian tales of twinship and detection struggle to dispel.

#### *Biographical note*

Wieland Schwanebeck is an Assistant Professor of English Literature at the Institute of English and American Studies at TU Dresden. His fields of interest include impostor characters, Gender and Masculinity Studies, the twin motif, British film history, and Alfred Hitchcock. He regularly teaches Shakespearean drama, Victorian literature, popular genre fiction of the 19th and 20th century, and British cinema.

His most recent publications include *Reassessing the Hitchcock Touch* (editor, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) the Metzler *Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (co-edited with Stefan Horlacher and Bettina Jansen, Metzler, 2016), and numerous articles which have appeared in journals such as *Adaptation*, *Anglia*, *Clues*, and *Literature/Film Quarterly*.

His Post-Doc project (tentatively entitled *Mis-Conceptions*) chronicles the history of the twin motif in English literature from the Shakespearean age to the 20th century.

Felicitas Meifert-Menhard (München)

#### **Touching Skins, Spreading Stains: Contesting, Affirming and Penetrating Surfaces in the Work of Thomas Hardy**

One of the most memorable images in Thomas Hardy’s 1891 novel *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is that of Alec D’Urberville’s blood seeping through the ceiling and spreading rapidly into a large red stain as it is noticed by the landlady Mrs. Brooks: “[...] her eyes glanced casually over the ceiling till they were arrested by a spot in the middle of its white surface which she had never noticed there before. It was about the size of a wafer when she first observed it, but it speedily grew as large as the palm of her hand, and then she could perceive that it was red. The oblong white ceiling, with this scarlet blot in the midst, had the appearance of a gigantic ace of hearts.” (Ch. LVI) Typically invested with deep Hardyan symbolism, the red stain on white ground is also an indication of the novel’s preoccupation with surfaces as sites of inscription and projection (Tess’s body is another significant surface in this con-text, as it is continually inscribed and re-inscribed with dominantly male projections and fantasies). But surfaces in *Tess* are not only visual, they are also postulated as offering the possibility for physical contact, both productive and destructive: Tess is calmed, for example, by resting her cheek against the flank of the cow she is milking at Talbothay’s Dairy (Ch. XVII), but the skin of her horse Prince is brutally pierced by the shaft of an oncoming mail-cart, foreshadowing both Tess’ penetration during the rape by Alec and her stabbing of Alec at the end of the novel. As Tanner remarks, “[o]ne of the great strengths of Hardy is that he knew, and makes us realize, just how very much the surfaces of things mean.” This paper will argue, by way of reading surfaces in *Tess* and other selected novels of Hardy, as well as by reference

to some of his poetry, that his work is indeed preoccupied, even obsessed, with showing, reading and negotiating surfaces, and that it also creates intricate *verbal* surfaces, patterns and exteriors which are an integral aspect of Hardy's poetics and aesthetics.

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#### *Biographical note*

Felicitas Meifert-Menhard completed an accelerated B.A. degree in English and Philosophy at Wellesley College, Massachusetts in 2001 before continuing her studies at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) in Munich, graduating with an M.A. in English and American Literature in 2004. Her PhD thesis, entitled *Conflict-ing Reports: Multiperspektivität und unzuverlässiges Erzählen im englischsprachigen Roman seit 1800* ('Multi-perspectivity and Unreliable Narration in the English Novel since 1800') was published by WVT in 2009. She subsequently held a postdoc position in the ERC research project *Narrating Futures* from 2009 until 2012. Her second monograph *Playing the Text, Performing the Future: Future Narratives in Print and Digiture* was published by De Gruyter in 2013. She is currently assistant professor at the chair of Modern English Literature, LMU Munich. Her main research fields are narratology, Romanticism, and media studies.