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The Transformative Power of the Arts in Victorian and Edwardian Culture and Society

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Introduction

The Transformative Power of the Arts in Victorian and Edwardian Culture and Society

Luc Bouvard and Christine Reynier

- 1 In the Victorian era the British industry thrived and new technologies developed. As railway lines extended their network, they found their way into William Turner's oil painting *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway* (1844), Anthony Trollope's novel, *The Way We Live Now* (1875) or Charles Dickens's short story 'The Signalman' (1866); the steam thresher contaminated Thomas Hardy's pastoral world in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) just as in Edwardian times, industrially produced ware displaced the ancient craft of pottery, as described in Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902). These few examples suffice to show that new technologies as well as industrial and scientific processes attracted Victorian and Edwardian writers and artists and were represented in many of their works. It could even be argued that they occasionally led to the creation of new art forms, such as 'the Condition of England novels', which illustrated the 'Condition of England question' raised by Thomas Carlyle in *Chartism* (1839) in response to the plight of the urban industrial worker.
- 2 This one-way influence of society over the arts is what the present issue of the *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* proposes both to examine and to question by first positing that the arts also have a transformative power which they exerted over Victorian and Edwardian culture and society at large. It means not only to gauge the impact that the new scientific or technological inventions of the time may have had on the arts but also to understand how the arts appropriated these discoveries and transformed them into aesthetic creations while being transformed by them; it also raises the question of whether and how the arts have in turn transformed the social and cultural environment of Victorian and Edwardian Britain. If the arts interact with society, through the representation of its various facets (authority, domesticity, respectability, gender, animals, nature, Empire, poverty, illness, war, etc.), what sort of transformative power can they exert? In what ways were the arts instrumental in transforming the Victorian and Edwardian social reality?

- 3 Finally, it means to see if the circulation between science, technology and the arts had an impact on the circulation between the arts themselves or, in any case, if the changes in the society and culture of Victorian and Edwardian times may have been reflected in some way in the dialogue between the arts. At a time when new art forms were emerging—namely, photography and cinema, following the discovery of such new techniques as the calotype, the daguerreotype; phonographs and wax cylinders, the animatograph, the magic lantern, the praxinoscope, the diorama or phantasmagoria—processes of hybridization and cross-fertilization were indeed at work: the arts interacted with each other, modifying each other, renewing the old forms and creating new ones. In other words, analysing the transformative power of the arts in Victorian and Edwardian times means to highlight the social as well as the intermedial dynamics of the arts and give a somewhat renewed vision of the period.
- 4 The interconnections and interactions between the arts and society, and between the arts themselves are therefore the focus of the articles collected here, which are the outcome of a SFEVE (Société Française d'Études Victoriennes et Edouardiennes) conference organized by the research centre EMMA (Études Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone) at Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 in spring 2018. While dealing with the multifaceted transformative power of the arts, the selected papers broach several art forms: painting, photography, music, cinema, literature, and they all show the various interactions at work as well as their possible impact on the way Victorian and Edwardian society at large functioned and reflected itself in those art forms, through scientific progress, car mechanics, the Empire, or the Society of Authors.
- 5 'Victorian Arts and the Challenge of Modernity: Analogy, the Grid, and Chemical Transformations' opens the first section of this collection devoted to the interactions between science, technology and the arts. In this wide-ranging essay, Francesca Orestano plunges the reader into the Victorian and Edwardian worlds and their artistic and technological wonders. Adopting an original and efficient retroactive method, she focuses first on the Edwardian and Modernist art critics and writers before coming to those of the Victorian age. Through a close analysis of some texts of both periods, she isolates the key concept of analogy, materialized by the structure of the 'grid' (Krauss) that, as she argues, operated in the early twentieth century, and traces its source in the nineteenth century. In a double-barrelled argument, she shows how closely connected science, especially chemistry, and the arts have been throughout the periods concerned and how they have ceaselessly interacted with each other; by doing so, she traces unquestionable continuities, rather than discontinuities, between Victorian, Edwardian and Modernist times, bringing a most valuable complement to recent studies pointing that way (Sherry, Coste *et al.*).
- 6 The second article, 'Better Than the Real Thing: Processed Reality in Victorian Art and Fiction', focuses on the technological processes and their interactions with the arts. There, Béatrice Laurent delves into the paradoxical and composite nature of realist painting, photography and fiction, investigating and highlighting the very nature of these aggregations, colligations, amalgamations or superimpositions and showing how complex and varied they were. 'The transformative power of the visual arts in the mid-nineteenth century', she argues, 'lay in their capacity to hide their composite nature and to pass as homogeneous highly colligated pictures', thereby shaping a new vision of 'reality'. She thus demonstrates that the realism in Victorian Art was due to the artists'

desire (Pre-Raphaelite W.H. Hunt, Royal Academician W.P. Frith, as well as photographer H. P. Robinson) to offer a consistent, rational vision of the outside world even if this entailed a sort of manipulation through various technical processes (montage, painterly tricks, superimposition). The author illustrates her ideas by well-known artistic or literary references, showing how complex and contrived realism was in its effort to produce verisimilitude. In so doing, her article navigates from the visual arts to fiction, and conversely, to show that the same artistic strategies were at work in both worlds, and analyses the mutual inspiration between Victorian fiction writers and visual artists.

- 7 Technology and the arts are also at the centre of Elodie Raimbault's essay, 'Technology and the Cinematographic Writing of Trauma in Kipling's Motoring Short Stories', which focuses on the relationship between literature and a nascent artform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: cinema. The article takes an original angle as it does not tackle the now hackneyed subject of the dangers of the railway but the motorcar as the vehicle bringing about potential disturbances on various levels (mechanical, spatial and personal). Her article particularly favours the parallel between the entertaining modernity of the car and the advent of the cinematic art. Analysing Rudyard Kipling's novels and short stories, Raimbault shows that the automobile is intimately linked to mystery and mystification, be it on a comic or a fantastic mode. The simultaneous developments of the car and of cinema encourage Kipling to combine them so as to achieve the fascinating spectacle of movement itself, occasionally bringing about the Freudian uncanny, the driving activity possibly resuscitating the dead from the landscape as the car races along. Cinematic features (slapstick, pantomime, intertitles) and tricks (the jump cut and the flashback) are revisited to that effect. Finally, the uncanny relationship between the car and mental disease is also offered to our reflection.
- 8 The second section of this issue addresses the interactions between the arts and politics in Victorian and Edwardian culture and society. Society can be apprehended through various social objects, representatives of a specific culture at a specific time, that can advertise and commodify culture. Picture postcards and gardens are such representatives of Victorian and Edwardian culture. In 'Orientalism and the British Picture Postcard Industry: Popularizing the Empire in Victorian and Edwardian Homes', Gilles Teulié approaches the Victorians' keen interest in what was described as the 'Orient', whose fantasized nature found its way to European artworks but also led to the commodification of the Orient through the picture postcard industry. The article particularly focuses on how popular culture permeated Victorian and Edwardian society, and through the transformative power of the arts, contributed eminently to the consolidation of the Imperial project. More specifically, the article studies the activities of the Raphael Tuck & Sons enterprise, which, in 1904, could boast a production of 15,000 different postcard designs. The essay is rich in details concerning these activities linked to the picture postcard which was both an indicator and a vector of the popularization of the Imperial project; it raises interesting questions about what selling and buying picture postcards means in relation to this very project.
- 9 Delving into William Robinson's books as well as his chronicles and articles for *The Garden*, Aurélien Wasilewski, in 'Social Undertones in William Robinson's Crusade Against "Architects' Gardens": a "Costly Ugliness to Our Beautiful Home-landscapes"', then investigates Robinson's art of gardening which changed the face and the fate of

English gardens supporting as it did a natural style of gardening rather than the artificial forms of architects' landscape gardening. As Wasilewski argues, these aesthetic changes brought by the 'artists planters' had an economic impact on the art of gardening together with a political reach. Gardening became nature-friendly, labour-saving and on the whole, adapted to the Victorian middle-class amateurs. Responding to Darwin's theories, Morris's theses, or such events as the 1867 French *Exposition universelle*, gardening also comes out as being deeply embedded in the society and culture of the time.

- 10 Richard Salmon is also interested in the mutual influences between art and politics as he reviews the birth and the developments of the British Society of Authors under the aegis of the novelist and historian Walter Besant from 1884 onwards, starting from the consideration that the late nineteenth century was a crucial juncture for various forms of collective association. In 'Transforming the Art of Fiction: Walter Besant, Professional Service and the Society of Authors', Salmon reviews the historical claims of writers to their copyrights, a concept that finally came to fruition only in the late Victorian period, drawing inspiration from the French Société des Gens de Lettres, established as early as 1837. The essay is rich in historical information from this specialist in Victorian Literature who published *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession* in 2013 and is about to put out the sequel examining the influence of Walter Besant's Incorporated Society of Authors on late-Victorian literary culture and technologies of writing. Arguing that 'union and united effort are better than individual effort', Besant concluded that a Society must be formed to defend authors' interests against exploitative publishers and inadequate laws. Besant's influence on the early development of the Society of Authors is well documented and the author wishes to bring further evidence that the conception of professional identity which shaped his activity during its first two decades had to be further explored. The article thus follows two distinct, but interrelated, aspects of Besant's work for the Society during this period: the various types of professional association and their functions which Besant and his friends envisaged, as well as the Society's service in relation to the emerging genre of the literary manual, which triggered a memorable debate on the 'art of fiction' between Besant and Henry James. Salmon corrects some of the assumptions concerning Besant's so-called opposition to James suggesting that Besant's rationale for teaching the 'art of fiction' is more nuanced than critics influenced by James's response to the lecture often say it is. To follow or not to follow rules and regulations in the art of fiction, such was the question, and James validated the capacity of the mind to create experience. Salmon puts these well-known arguments in a new perspective.
- 11 The next section deals with the interactions between various artforms as well as art and life. In her essay, 'The Transformative Power of Impressionism in George Moore's Art Criticism', Fabienne Gaspari discusses the idea of the transformative power of Impressionist painting, through the prism of George Moore's art criticism written between 1886 and 1895. The Anglo-Irish writer analysed the radical transformations brought about by this pictorial movement and the article examines how Moore responded to the disruptive nature of works by Whistler, Monet and Manet. Gaspari picks up from Jonathan Crary's arguments to analyse various examples of Moore's writing on his perceptual response to various impressionist pictures. She first shows that the urban space mutations generated by technological advances created new ways of seeing reflected in this new art. She then suggests that, in a very insightful way announcing more recent studies in Impressionism, Moore's texts both focus on the

shock produced by this painting and analyse its impact on the observer's body, as is revealed in his own *Confessions of a Young Man*. Moore's writings try to transform the impression of disorientation felt in front of these pictures into an essential component of aesthetic experience. This feeling is finally defined as being central to Impressionist literature as the article studies to what extent Moore's ideas on the epistemological uncertainties characteristic of what he called 'modern painting', blending with the response to more modern media (cinema, the microscope, photography, X-rays) which were then radically altering perceptual modalities and the production of images, influenced the field of literature at the turn of the century.

- 12 In 'H. G. Wells's and E. M. Forster's Transformative Arts: Theoretical Divergences and Formal Connections', Laurent Mellet addresses the double transformative powers of the arts this issue is interested in. He focuses on two major Edwardian writers, H. G. Wells and E. M. Forster. While their opposing views of the transformative power of the arts is often emphasized (Wells being convinced that the arts can change society and Forster believing mainly in their aesthetic power), Mellet claims, through a careful analysis of their novels and essays, that they can also be related and compared. In a way, Forster sends back a reverse but complementary image of Wells, the one defending first of all the intermedial power of the arts but also their ability to change life while the other defends first and foremost the social impact the arts can have without excluding their power of 'teasing the medium'. Mellet thus complicates the reading we may have of the two novelists, both exemplifying in the end, according to him, a common liberal and democratic aesthetic.
- 13 In the last section devoted to the transformative power of intermediality, the transformative power of the arts is understood as the malleability of the work of art in its various subsequent adaptations: how poetry was turned into photography, how a painting has been endlessly recycled by various art forms. The transformative power of the arts here becomes synonymous with the dynamics of intermediality, as theorized by Bal, Mitchell or Louvel. In 'Illustrating Victorian Poetry: The Dynamics of Photographic *Tableaux Vivants*', Gwendoline Koudinoff tackles the word-image relation and offers an analysis of three Victorian photographers' *tableaux vivants*, focusing on their relations with the poems they draw their inspiration from and the transformations they impart to these texts. In the course of this exploration, Julia Margaret Cameron's *tableaux vivants* are shown to depart from Alfred Tennyson's poems or Gustave Doré's engravings in their defence of women; Henry Peach Robinson's work is revealed to give both a conventional but also an experimental rendering of Tennyson's poems, revisiting them through Pre-Raphaelite art; as for Lady Hawarden's photographs, they appear here to expose the sensuality and ambiguity of Christina Rossetti's poetry. The intermedial interweaving of photographs and poetry results in a dialogue now deeply anchored in the Victorian arts now questioning the Victorian ideals and conventions.
- 14 Adopting both a synchronic and a diachronic method in 'Tracing Ophelia from Millais to Contemporary Art: Literary, Pictorial and Digital Icons', Laurence Roussillon-Constanty focuses on an emblematic painting of Pre-Raphaelite art, John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851-52), and shows how it has travelled through art history, art forms and media, gathering in the process archival and survival power. Various artistic media, such as painting and photography in the Victorian era, films, music and digital images in more modern times, have indeed helped to circulate, construct and

reconfigure Ophelia's image, heightening its haunting power. The 'versioning' (Silver XVI) or production of multiple versions of this iconic image thus testifies to the enduring transformative power of the arts in Victorian times and beyond.

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