Reviews


*Visual Words* adds to the ever-growing critical literature of recent years concerned with Victorian visual culture and is one of a number of recent works focussing on the places and spaces in the period where the visual and the textual meet. These include Kate Flint’s *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (2000), Nicholas Frankel’s *Oscar Wilde’s Decorated Books* (1999), Lorraine Janzen Kooistra’s *The Artist as Critic: Bitextuality in Fin-de-Siècle Illustrated Books* (1995), Lindsay Smith’s *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites* (1995) and Richard Maxwell’s edited collection *The Victorian Illustrated Book* (2002).

Curtis makes the point on his opening page that ‘early in the century the line made by the pencil (the visual/artistic) and the line made by the pen (the textual) were united in the Victorian mind’ (p. 1), and his book explores aspects of ‘visual literacy’ (p.1) in the nineteenth century. The book has a few such assertions in it, which don’t always seem as proved by the evidence as they could be, and this early statement also unproblematically conflates ‘early in the century’ with ‘the Victorian’. The author’s aim in the book is to ‘look at literary history from an art historian’s perspective’ (p.3). Curtis is clearly interested in the visuality of the textual, the myriad ways in which writing comes to be represented in Victorian culture and the various meanings those representations carry, and he leads into the main body of the book with the suggestion that ‘there is in text and its reading something that lends itself to more pictorial modes of investigation’ (p. 4).

Chapter one, ‘Shared lines: pen and pencil as trace’, explores another of Curtis’s assertions; namely that ‘the textual, or written, line came to dominate [as the century progressed] while the drawn line diminished in value’ (p. 9). If this is a way of saying that engraving was on its way out by the end of the nineteenth century, then he has a point, but the engraved (and thus visual) line certainly had its strong moment in the Victorian period, as much of this chapter demonstrates. Curtis considers copy books, aimed at developing and improving handwriting, and the importance of drawing in design education, alongside discussion of the rise of illustrated journals such as the *Penny Illustrated Magazine*, the *Illustrated London News* and the *Graphic*. Undoubtedly the Victorians ‘read’ their culture through the visual as much as, if not more than, through the verbal. The revival of interest in calligraphy in the early-to-mid Victorian period (to which Morris, of course, contributed) is often associated with the Gothic revival, but here Curtis uncovers such quirky oddities as John Hemm’s *Portraits of the Royal Family in Calligraphy* (1831) and discusses some of the graphic representations of letters as visual ideograms/pictograms in *Punch* and Phiz’s title pages for Dickens’s novels. The Kelmscott Press makes a relatively brief appearance, considered as one of the
late-nineteenth-century ventures which attempted ‘to create high-quality publications stressing the union of drawn line and text’ (p. 35). Morris’s project was, in significant part, to reinstate the vitality and necessity of the visual as an integral part of the written text, but, as Curtis reminds us, by this point in the century the mass publications market was also highly visually aware, with cheap magazines like Comic Cuts selling nearly half a million. The use of ‘visual stills’, which the comic format employed as a narrative technique, anticipated the coming of cinema, and the chapter concludes by considering the ‘threat’ that photography posed to the survival of the graphic line and image.

The second chapter, on ‘The hieroglyphic image’, focuses on how paintings of the period incorporated and used text as part of their compositional design. The influence of literary texts on Victorian painting is well known – particularly Pre-Raphaelite painting – and much of this chapter is a discussion of Ford Madox Brown’s Work. Curtis’s interest is in how the textual is made a part of the contemporary in visual representations and he starts with discussions of two other modern-day scenes: William Powell Frith’s Derby Day (1858) and John Orlando Parry’s A London Street Scene (1835). The latter is not well known but deserves to be more so. It is a wonderful depiction of a wall somewhere near St. Paul’s Cathedral with every inch covered in (actual) billboard posters and advertisements. Curtis refers to Brown’s Work (started 1852; completed 1863) as ‘perhaps the consummate modern life painting of the period’ (p. 58) and his analysis of it is extensive and detailed. He extrapolates at some length from the image’s depiction of the installation of a waterworks main pipe to the numerous contemporary discussions about the need for fresh water supplies which were taking place in periodicals of the moment. Curtis’s point here – aside from uncovering some little-known references – seems to be that the debates that the painting depicts were also being discussed in other verbal/visual media of the time. Fair enough, but it doesn’t seem a terribly strong point in the context of the book as a whole. However, no detail of the actual image is left uncommented upon: everything from the biblical quotations on the frame to the significance of the flower symbolism to the detail of the bill posters on the wall to the left of the painting are given attention. Curtis also makes the case for the importance of Brown’s own comments on Work in the 1865 catalogue for the exhibition where it was first shown. Included in this catalogue is also a sonnet Brown wrote for and about the painting. Both are clearly a helpful guide for the viewer, expanding the possible ‘reading’ of the painting. Whilst I cannot claim to have read every interpretation of Work that exists, what is on offer here is certainly interesting, presenting the painting as an art work engaged in a highly-detailed mesh of inter-textual references, both within and beyond the frame of the painting itself.

Chapter three, ‘The art of seeing: Dickens and the visual market’ opens with a discussion of advertising in the period, suggesting that ‘adverts made literacy public’ (p. 105) and that through the development of typefaces for posters ‘text was, in the selling of advertising itself, a “graphic” visual commodity’ (p. 106). Curtis considers some of the adverts that appeared in the original serial parts of Dickens’s novels, noting where they deliberately engaged with the novel itself, including visual aspects of its production and publication. For example, Dakin and Co., who made tea and coffee, produced an advert which mimicked an
illustrated opening page of a Dickens novel. This chapter concludes with an account of popular Victorian portraiture, which Curtis regards as part of the 'Victorian passion for classifying all things, including the face' (p. 123). Dickens remains the main focus, with an account of how the author's portrait figured as an important feature of the marketing of his works in a way that established him as a literary author rather than a Grub Street hack turning out journalistic sketches. The reproduction of Dickens's portrait on all sorts of everyday objects (both during his lifetime but also continuing well into the twentieth century) is proof of the status of his image 'as a literary icon' (p. 135); in the final sentences we are reminded that Dickens's head appeared on £10 notes as recently as the 1980s.

Following directly on from chapter three, chapter four contains a more detailed consideration of the numerous 'Portraits of the author' that appeared throughout Dickens's lifetime. The range of images presented here is certainly fascinating, and Curtis argues that Dickens's position as the most photographed, painted and engraved author of the period is part of the novelist's savvy awareness of the 'necessity for the writer to create and maintain a visible presence in society' (p. 151). The many images of Dickens are also, Curtis suggests, about the need of the age for national heroes: 'in his own lifetime, Dickens's portrait came to represent all that was successful and morally upright in the Victorian period' (p. 153). The chapter moves through a discussion of the 'literary nationalism' that developed as the century progressed, in which Dickens came to signify as a kind of national cultural icon. It concludes with a more wide-ranging consideration of the representation of the writing hand – starting from the fact that many images of Dickens show him in the act of writing.

Chapter five, 'The empty biscuit tin', is the chapter I found the most engaging approaching the work via my own interests in the 'thingness' of books in the Victorian period. Curtis continues to sift through the assorted clutter of Victorian culture to consider the iconographic significance of the book as artefact. Noting that by the end of the century books had become part of the necessary furnishing of the well-dressed home, this chapter considers the library and the study as places where books were put on ostentatious display. On a grander, more public scale, Curtis also has a section on the (old) British Library Reading Room, which surely remains in the memory of all those who ever went there as one of the most wonderful spaces in which to experience books. Morris makes a reappearance in a section on book bindings, although it is rightly noted that his attention to making the book beautiful is focused on the interior rather than the exterior. For Morris 'the book's tactility, visuality and object presence could make great literature ultimately greater still' (p. 226). Further sections consider the representation of readers and reading in a number of paintings, picking up some of the same issues as Kate Flint in The Woman Reader, 1837-1914 (1993), and also the representation of the bible in the period. The chapter, and thus Curtis's book as a whole, concludes with a reflection on the way textuality is often not far from sexuality, and the ways in which 'book love' (or bibliomania) fetishises and sexualises the book. This is encapsulated in an image of Marcel Duchamp's breast-bound (literally!) cover of Le Surréalisme (1947).

As this review suggests, Visual Words is a detailed work, considering an eclectic
range of material. There's undoubtedly a tendency these days – no doubt liked by publishers – to have wide-ranging titles for monographs which actually are more limited in scope, and inevitably this work is highly selective in the choices it makes to consider how words are made material in the Victorian period. This is certainly a book which fits well with the current rebranding of the subject of Art History as 'Visual Culture'. Reading Visual Words is a bit like rummaging through Dickens's Old Curiosity Shop: you are bound to be surprised at what you find amidst all the Victorian bric-a-brac that speaks of the relationship between the visual and the textual in the period. The book is amply furnished with black and white illustrations, and although it is not always an easy read, and the price is likely to mean it ends up mostly in academic libraries, it is another example of the interesting range of titles coming out of Ashgate's 'Nineteenth Century Series' and of the publisher's commitment to scholarly monographs on visual culture.

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