

Victorian negatives: literary culture and the dark side of photography in the nineteenth century, by Susan E. Cook, SUNY Press, Albany, 2019, 218 pp, \$ 95.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9781438475370 (hardcover)

It is a scholarly truism that photography appears crucial to the investigation of Victorian literature and culture. In the last decades, photography has proved extremely relevant for the study of the Victorian politics of memory and forgetting (Groth 2003, Green-Lewis 2017) and for the relations between the photographic imagination and the (mainly) realist novel (Armstrong 2000, Flint 2000, Novak 2008, Clayton 2015). While taking its cue from this important body of scholarship, Susan Cook's monograph focuses on the photographic negative, which produces a type of image that has received little attention in criticism, despite its rich material and figurative ramifications in Victorian texts.

Victorian negatives argues that "the development of the photographic negative [...] played an instrumental role in the representation of Victorian photography in literary culture" (xxi), and crucial to its argument are the concepts of image inversion and reproduction. Both aspects pertain to the material process of nineteenth-century photographic technology, as the negative image, while inverting the black and white offered in the positive, can also be endlessly (and perfectly) reproduced. On a metaphorical level, image inversion and reproduction operate in literary culture as powerful concepts that call into question epistemologically significant pairs like dark/light and original/copy. Cook's book is an exploration of the way Victorian literary texts grapple with this challenge, "at times expressing concern about and at other times interest in how negative technologies erode older ideas of representational truth as well as ideas of singularity and artistic control" (xvi).

Victorian negatives interestingly questions and unsettles also some dichotomies that apply to critical approaches to literary texts and to the study of visual culture. As for the former, throughout the book, Cook demystifies the separation between the study of art and that of life: the monograph opens with the anecdote of Charles Dickens declining to sit for a daguerreotype and goes on to explore the importance of the celebrity image, which relies on the technology of the negative for its reproducibility and appears both appealing and disturbing in that it "promises presence but then negates that presence" (xxviii). Celebrity images abound throughout the study: not only photographs of literary celebrities like Dickens, Oscar Wilde and Richard Mansfield (the actor playing Jekyll and Hyde in East London at the time of the Whitechapel murders), but also images of fictional characters, like the famous photograph of Irene Adler with the king in Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia". On the other hand, Cook's study also has the merit of working on visual culture by blurring the distinction between mainstream photographic technologies and the more marginal, experimental practices which gained popularity in Victorian culture and found their way within literary imagination. In the wake of recent criticism, which has emphasized the multiplicity of photographic technologies (Clayton 2015) and the continuities between photography and other early media (Leonardi and Natale 2018), *Victorian negatives* uses for each chapter a different negative-based photographic technology, thus effectively presenting Victorian photography as complex, heterogeneous and multifaceted.

In chapter one, Cook examines Dickens's use of a Daguerrean sensibility in *A Tale of Two Cities* and, to a lesser extent, *Bleak House*. *A Tale* is read alongside Dickens's responses to his own celebrity image, as they both "demonstrate a preference for control over the image, a resistance to the multiplication of that image, and an interest in the duality of past and presence" (4). The perspective of Daguerrean (as opposed to negative-based) photography,

with its unstable (that is, not neatly reversed) relation between light and dark, allows Cook to offer dexterous close readings not only of Dickens's imagery in the texts but also of the use of dark and light tones in the illustrations accompanying those texts and ultimately showing how *A Tale* negotiates between "the photographic present of its composition and the revolutionary past making up its subject" (25).

The focus on Dickens's symbolic economy of light and dark continues in Chapter two, which places *Little Dorrit* in the context of Victorian experiments with solarized images, which include qualities of negative and positive in a single positive image. Exposing "the contingency and mediation present in all photographic images as well as the instability of light itself" (39), solarization offers an interesting lens from which to observe how *Little Dorrit* challenges the distinction between light/dark, good/evil and reality/representation. Through a series of deft readings of literary and visual texts (most notably, the title page etching of *Little Dorrit*, 42-43), Cook illustrates that "Dickens uses light to radically question what we think we know about reality and representation" (44).

Chapter three shifts our attention to detective fiction and to the uncertainty of vision and visual evidence in late Victorian culture. Starting from the oft-noted scarcity of photographic references in the tales that have as their protagonist the 'machine-like' reasoning skills of Sherlock Holmes, Cook locates the apparent contradiction between Holmes's rational mindset and Conan Doyle's well-known fascination with spirit photography in photography itself, "often a source of unease for the famous literary detective" (56). After considering some Holmes stories in which photography "obscures, distracts, or otherwise operates as a red herring in the case" (59), Cook focuses on "A Scandal in Bohemia", which is explored as an example of how the failure of visual evidence that is staged in the story appears rooted in the mechanisms of reproduction and inversion typical of negative-based photography.

Such mechanisms are evoked also in Chapter four, perhaps the finest of this study. Here Cook explores the photographic technology (or mistake) of double exposure, whose outcome in the resulting positive image is compared throughout the chapter to the possible stylistic effects (or mistakes) produced by the grammatical double negation. Introducing the late Victorian metaphorical connections between double exposure and imperiled reputation via two short stories by E. W. Hornung and Cyril Bennett, Cook then examines Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, arguing that "the double exposure is itself the great scandal of the text" (84), the only possible outcome being "a negation of Jekyll, Hyde, and the composite Jekyll/Hyde alike" (91). The last section of the chapter is devoted to Wilde's *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, "the story of a double exposure in reverse" (92), in which the individual and his representation form one image only in the beginning, before Dorian exchanges his position as "the original negative" (95) for a reproduction. Cook then goes on to read the novel's paradoxical and aphoristic style through the logic of double negation, and concludes with a consideration of how "the novel was used to expose its author, duplicating Dorian's exposure on an extratextual level" (98) in the Wilde trials.

Cook's exploration of late Victorian literary culture continues in Chapter five, exploring Thomas Hardy's fiction, (the absence of) post-mortem photographs and the visual material in the famous 1912 Wessex edition. While introducing the motif of the photographic lie in *A Laodicean* and the story "An Imaginative Woman", the chapter is at its best in the analysis of *Jude the Obscure*, where the lack of a post-mortem photograph of Jude and Sue's children is read alongside the well-established connections between loss and photography in theorists like Geoffrey Batchen, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, so that "the loss of the photograph is a kind of double negative" (120), "the absence of an absence" (121). Following this

metaphoric of absence, also the photographs of the fictional Wessex locations of the 1912 edition operate as “fictions of verisimilitude – lies of presence” (123), eliciting nostalgia and bereavement for a place and time that never were.

The book’s “Conclusion” offers some remarks on the significance of the photographic imagination in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, which “features photography metaphorically as a negative and as a celebrity image” (128). While the vampire’s famous elusiveness is read through the experience of the fan with the celebrity image, which “cultivates desire, but the desire is never fulfilled” (131), Cook also argues that Stoker’s novel gestures towards the negation of negative-based photography and the advent of digital technology.

Victorian negatives provides an illuminating exploration of the fruitful exchanges between the literary and photographic imagination in Victorian culture, thus contributing in a significant way to the thriving scholarly investigation of the interdisciplinarity of Victorian studies. Cook’s reading of the figural density of literary texts through the lens of negative-based technology may appear at times a little reductive, especially when she addresses two founding principles of Western imagination like light and dark by considering them as manifestations of the negative-based technology. Also, given the relevance of image reproduction throughout the study, perhaps one might expect the text to engage more deeply with negative-based photography and the Benjaminian loss of the aura, which is discussed only in the introduction. However, Cook’s analysis of canonical as well as less well-known texts, combined with her skills in close reading and with her attention to the visual culture in which the texts were immersed, effectively succeeds in proving negatives to be crucial material and metaphoric aspects for the understanding of Victorian literary culture. As a result, this valuable monograph appeals to scholars of literature and visual culture alike and provides an interesting read for anyone interested in the multiple languages of Victorian culture.

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