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Review of Thomas Smits, *The European Illustrated Press and the Emergence of a Transnational Visual Culture of the News, 1842–1870* (2019)

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Reviews

Thomas Smits, *The European Illustrated Press and the Emergence of a Transnational Visual Culture of the News, 1842–1870* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020). 240 pp. ISBN 9780367247867

The advent of Victorian periodicals studies in the 1960s uncovered an immense terrain for explorations of nineteenth-century culture, richly complementing the more established disciplines of literary and historical research. The field's steady growth over the past fifty years has unearthed an incalculable superfluity of newspapers, journals, and magazines — metropolitan, provincial, illustrated, daily, weekly, monthly — that appears to offer privileged, even unique access to 'Victorian values', to the politics, fixations, and prejudices of the age of industry and empire. Many of these periodicals are now digitized in full or partial runs and widely available to both specialists and dabblers. Periodicals scholarship has focused especially on press reportage as a touchstone of *national* temperaments and aspirations. If, as Rachel Buurma observes, 'the Victorian period actually came close to inventing the periodical as the universal publication mode', that mode's universality has traditionally (and somewhat ironically) been understood as a dramatic extension of national identity and influence: British newspapers promoted a peculiarly British view of the world, constructing an imagined and decidedly domestic reading community that distinguished itself from, and competed fiercely with, versions of the national self projected by the German, French, or American presses.¹

Thomas Smits takes robust exception to what he calls the 'unnecessary and narrow national framework' (p. 9) delimiting much periodicals scholarship.

In his four-chapter, statistically-dense examination of European illustrated newspapers' trade in images, he demonstrates that an extensive international web of selling, buying, pirating, and copying illustrations 'connected publishers in the four corners of the earth' at mid-nineteenth century (p. 14). The three decades following the establishment of Herbert Ingram's enormously influential *Illustrated London News* (f. 1842), in particular, witnessed the widespread dissemination of illustrated newspapers — often in special 'colonial' editions, on thinner-than-standard paper — and of the high-quality engravings that graced their pages. The result of this vigorous system of image distribution and exchange was a 'flourishing, international audience' (p. 43) for illustrated news, 'while the development of a transnational network of publishers, draughtsmen, and engravers provided the necessary social infrastructure for the trade' (p. 67). Smits argues persuasively that the 'formation of a transnational visual culture of the news' between the 1840s and 1870s should compel historians of the press to look more boldly abroad, 'beyond the national level' (p. 3), to gain a fuller appreciation of the comprehensive traffic in images that in turn enabled the reach of European illustrated newspapers across the globe. The result of this proposed enlargement of focus is an often eye-opening account of how the illustrated press actually transformed its readers' perceptions of the world by 'Europeanizing' and consequently homogenizing visual depictions of newsworthy scenes and events: 'From the early 1840s onwards, images of the news began to speak a language that could be universally understood. [...] For the first

1 Rachel Buurma, 'Periodicals', in *The Encyclopedia of Victorian Literature*, ed. by Dino Franco Felluga, 4 vols (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), III, pp. 1260–68 (p. 1261).

time in history, millions of *readers* started *looking* at the same world' (p. 14, Smits's emphasis).

The repercussions of this provocative claim, however, are not satisfactorily teased out in *The European Illustrated Press*. Although he is largely successful in his efforts to 'undermine the pervading scholarly view of the national nature of illustrated newspapers' (p. 220) by emphasizing instead those periodicals' intriguing 'transnational entanglement[s]' (p. 113), Smits does not offer an argument, however speculative, for exactly *how* mass-produced news images (the vast majority of them woodblock engravings) would have been perceived and mentally processed as truthful or accurate representations of 'the same world' to readers inhabiting very different parts of the globe. Did a picture of the 1851 Great Exhibition in the *Illustrated London News (ILN)* mean the same thing to an *ILN* reader in Australia or New Zealand — crown colonies that 'ascribed enormous cultural and political influence' to the paper (p. 43) — as it did to a subscriber residing in the metropolis itself who had the opportunity to stroll through the Crystal Palace? A similar question could be asked of whether an image of Parisian revolutionaries at the barricades in an 1848 issue of *L'Illustration* might have been apprehended differently by a French reader than by a resident of one of the many countries or distant territories where that newspaper was aggressively retailed — the United States, Sweden, Russia, the Netherlands, Spain, or South America.

Smits diligently plumbs the digital archives to uncover the ways in which 'numerous actors organized in a network structure sustained the transnational trade in illustrations' (p. 71), and his insistence that 'we see *reproduction* as an essential part of the production process of an illustration of the news in this period' (p. 79, Smits's emphasis) is well taken, given that most illustrated newspapers in the nineteenth century copied significant amounts of their visual material from other illustrated

periodicals. But he is less authoritative on epistemological questions arising from the situational embeddedness of international readers able to take advantage of the novel 'transnational visual culture of the news'. Geographical, economic, and indeed temporal disparities ensuing from the lag-time between the publication of a paper in London or Leipzig and its arrival at a colonial outpost may have significantly influenced the way individual reader-viewers interpreted the world fabricated in pre-photographic illustrations.

That said, there is much to value in Smits's exhaustive descriptions of the actual mechanics behind the reproduction and diffuse propagation of news images. Original illustrations were replicated and marketed in various ways. Some were copied by hand, so that penny papers, for example, could remain cheap by commissioning artists and engravers to redraw and re-engage images first published in major illustrated newspapers. Others were duplicated from *clichés* — metal copies of wood engravings — via electrotypes or stereotype. From the early 1850s, the newly invented technique of photoxylography allowed the printing of an illustration directly onto the woodblock for quick cutting around the lines by low-paid *facsimile* engravers.

At the heart of this network were the Big Three of European illustrated newspapers, supplying huge numbers of images and often the physical apparatus for their reproduction: the *Illustrated London News*, *L'Illustration*, and the *Illustrirte Zeitung*. All three 'had subscribers all over the world, making their audiences far less national than scholars have previously assumed' (p. 3). All also advertised themselves widely in provincial, national, and international presses, distributing thousands of copies not only across the UK, Germany (Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire), and France, but also to far-flung colonial settlements: 'While around 40,400 different copies [of imported British newspapers] reached the Australian colonies in 1851, this number

had risen to a spectacular 1,330,000 copies by 1862' (p. 41). Although in the 1850s and 60s state suppression through censorship, rising expenses in mailing and distributing, and competition from newly established illustrated newspapers at the local level increasingly challenged the hegemony of these pioneering weeklies, they remained 'central node[s] in the transnational network that traded illustrations of the news' (p. 86).

Another virtue of Smits's study is his use of case studies to meticulously unpack the operations of reproduction by focusing on historical moments and events. His discussion of *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper's* prevalent borrowings from *L'Illustration's* images of the Crimean War in Chapter 3 is perhaps the most evocative section of the book, in that it poses the question of how the ekphrastic interplay between picture and text had the potential to change the meaning of an illustration once it had been reproduced from an original. Although *Cassell's* 'translated captions and articles, often word for word' from *L'Illustration's* coverage of the war, 'and its editors imitated the French emphasis on eyewitness accounts and objective reporting' (p. 132), the English paper also displayed its own ideological leanings by purchasing 27 of the 29 images *L'Illustration* produced of British troops: 'These numbers imply that Cassell bought images that he thought his British readers would like' (p. 156), in essence manipulating French pictorial reportage to provide his home readership with a gratifying sense of British military grit. Further, 'although most of *L'Illustration's* images retained their original meaning in their re-published form, *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper* deliberately altered the meaning of some of them by changing their captions or by writing new articles to accompany them. [...] When the French combination of image and text was thought to be offensive to a British audience, *Cassell's* editors nationalized the image by selective translation and adding

new, often fictional, descriptions' (pp. 157, 163).

Reproduction, in other words, did not always mean slavish replication. More-or-less subtle revisions to captions and descriptive text, along with highly selective decisions on the part of editors about which illustrations to purchase and publish and which to exclude, indicate that the transnational trade itself was a process often mediated by distinctly national interests and biases.

Smits's case study of the Dutch *Hollandsche Illustratie* highlights the occasional contradictions and absurdities that could result from a largely unregulated trade in images. Not infrequently, pictures were out of sync with the printed texts that were supposed to describe the people, scenes, or events illustrated in them, incongruities arising from the unrestrained, ungoverned commerce in used images: 'The Dutch publication got all its illustrations from *le Journal Illustré*. However, this French title published second-hand, and sometimes very old, images from multiple titles, including the French *L'Illustration* and *le Monde Illustré*, the British *Illustrated Times*, and the German *Über Land und Meer*' (p. 113). The extraordinary pervasiveness and relative opacity of the transnational trade in illustrations is similarly revealed in an investigation of the Hungarian *Képesújság*, which 'contained images that were first published in the *Illustrated London News*, which the French illustrated newspaper had probably resold. [...] [O]n 12 May 1848 the *Oberungarische Illustrirte Zeitung* published an image of the Chartist demonstration on the Kennington-Common. The illustration was originally published in the *Illustrated London News* (15 April) but also appeared in *L'Illustration* (22 April)' (p. 98).

A good deal of detective work in the newspaper archives is required of Smits to uncover such instances of the free-and-easy regurgitation of news imagery. On occasion, his preoccupation with numbers and statistics is a bit distracting.

A case study of images produced for the 1867 Universal Exposition in Paris, for example, leads to the minute calculation that, 'of the total 760 illustrations in [...] 25 smaller [illustrated] newspapers, 36 per cent depicted national pavilions, 14 per cent entertainment, 13 per cent national exhibitions in the palace, 8 per cent exhibitions of companies, and 7 per cent ethnographic images' (pp. 196–197). This sort of fascination with specific

data will probably be of less interest to newspaper historians than the book's important reminder that future studies of illustrated periodicals aspiring to a truly comprehensive understanding of image- and news-production (and reproduction) will need to attend more rigorously to the complexities of transnational trade.

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