THE NEW WOMAN

BY MEHREEN SHAHID

Stereoviews, or views, were a popular form of home entertainment around the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a period of more than forty years. During this time, views were mass produced and widely distributed, featuring a broad range of subjects ranging from the scenic to the dramatic.

While these views were originally created as entertainment, they now also demonstrate important historical information about the time period and social changes in progress. How women were depicted in views during this period sheds light on the emerging participation of women in what was then considered typically 'male activities'. Melody Davis' new book Women's Views: The Narrative Stereograph in Nineteenth-Century America, is a facinating illustrated study of historical gender roles as observed through the lens of stereo card views.

Comedic views depicting a reversal of gender roles were popular and certain titles/ themes were copied and printed by multiple publishers, illustrating the mass appeal of the subject matter. One such title dealt with the reversal of gender roles was "The New Woman." Davis states, "The New Woman had a defined birth year, 1894, when the term first appeared in print as a

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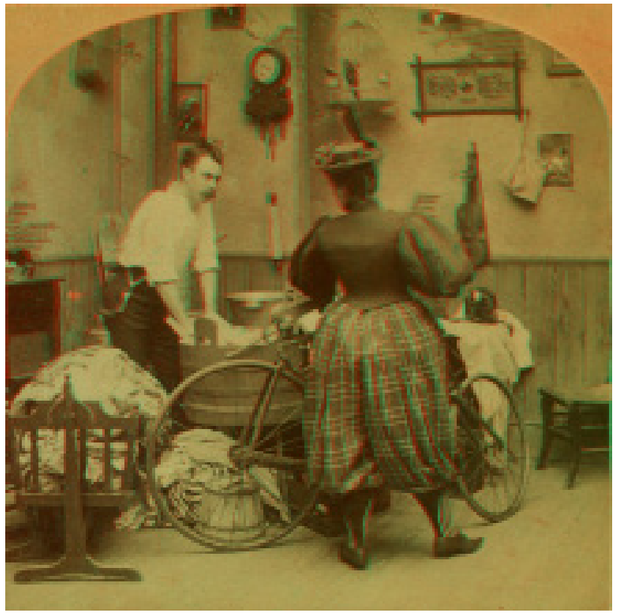
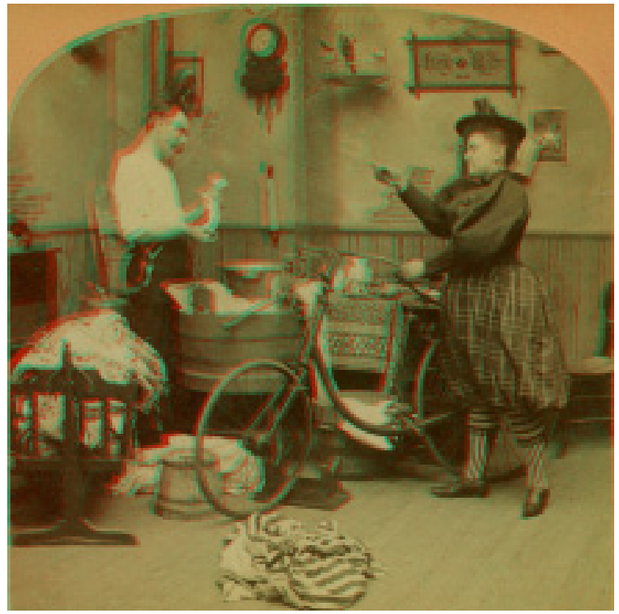
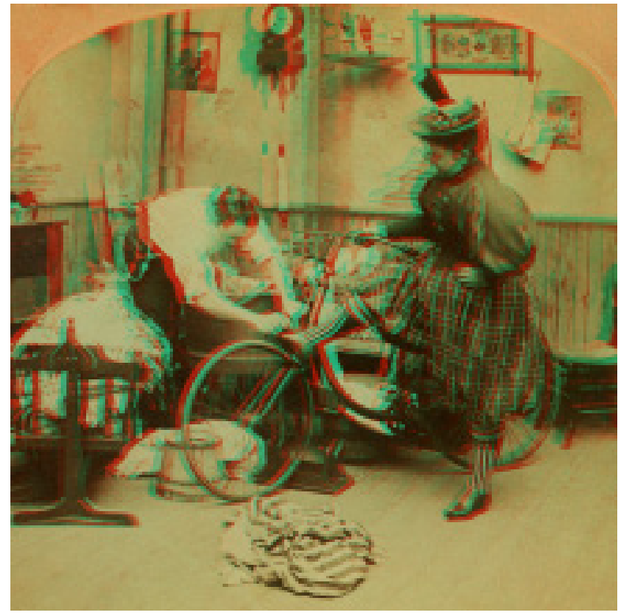


11923. Have lunch ready at one, Charley. 1897, B.W. Killburn



11924. Don’t get the clothes too blue. 1897, B.W. Killburn



11925. He stoops to serve. 1897, B.W. Killburn

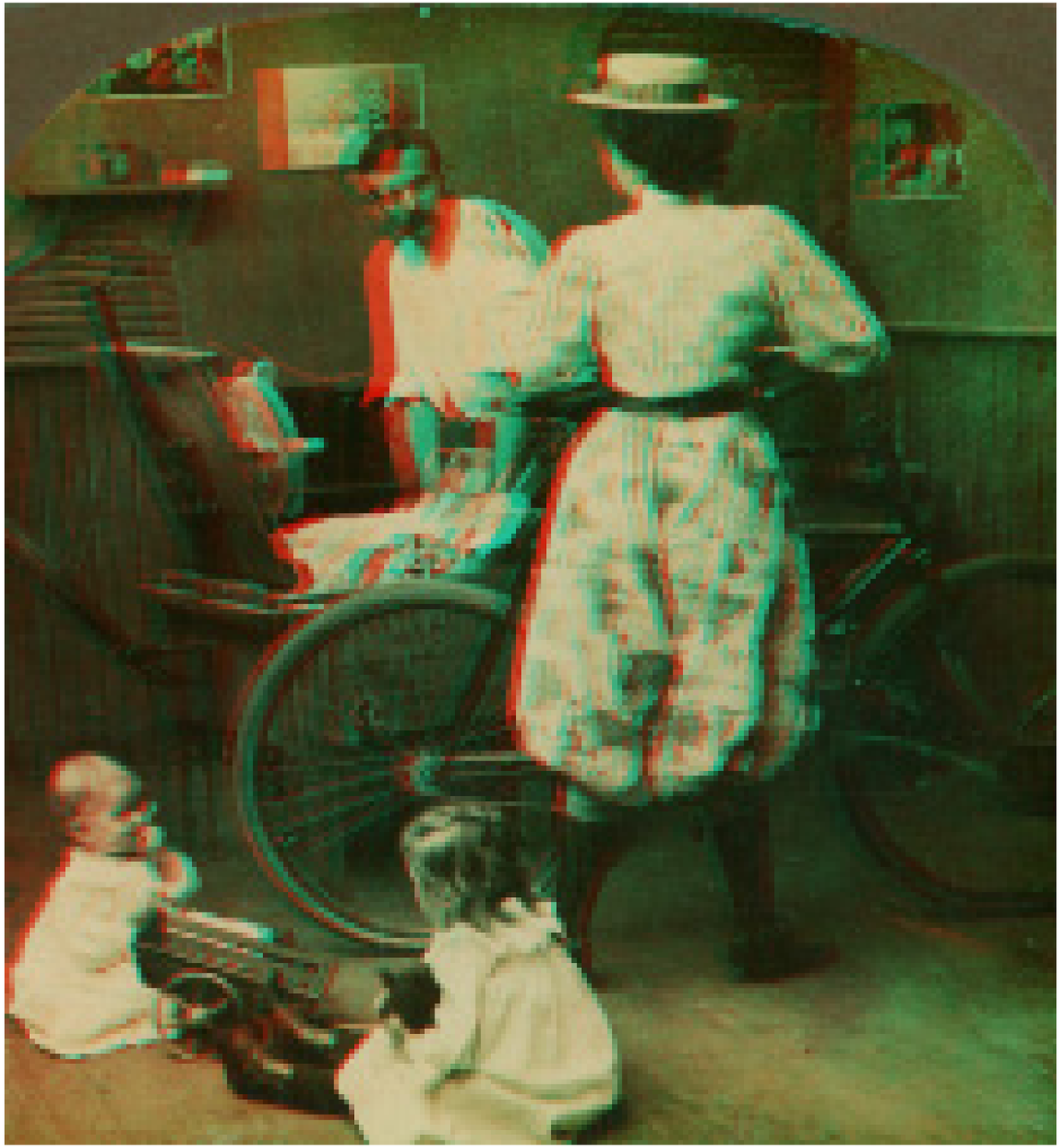
moniker to describe socially progressive, female characters in works such as Thomas Hardy, Grant Allen and Henrik Ibsen,” Variations on this theme were prolific and aimed to provoke sales of the cards and satirize the role of women, and men, in the home.

Victorians found a pleasure in creating and distributing views that revolved around the caricature humour created in giving men’s roles to women and vice-versa, as evidenced in views such as “Sew on Your Own Buttons — I’m Going for a Ride.”

Cycling during this time had a distinctly male association. Davis states that by the mid-1890s, four million Americans were riding bicycles, 25 to 30 per cent of that number were women. New clothing styles allowed women to participate in the new craze. “The bachelor girl of the 1890s discovered that bloomers, unlike skirts, did not get devoured by bicycle chains,” says Davis. “It was risky, but the young girl of late 19th-century was ready to take the plunge. Breeches were held in general opinion, as an article of clothing that not only defined men but made him”, adds Davis. Pants aligned with adult male power, sexuality, dominance and independence. Women who wore pants belonged to niche classes, such as actresses and tableaux-vivant models. They could cavort in tights or pants, almost flaunting lose morality, but ordinary women who wore pants were seen as dominant, castrating, immoral, available, out-of-control or just plain silly.

The invention of the pneumatic tire made bicycling more comfortable and even more attractive to women. Davis states, “The bicycle was a practical, economical vehicle; it was also fun and liberating”. “The sporting woman began to appear on the scene in terms of popular imagery in the late 1880s. She was less intimidating than the suffragist and feminist and an easier companion than the intellectual woman, who raised fears that the masculine monopoly over the higher faculties of reasoning might be at risk.” The pen-wielding minds of the comic genre were smitten with the visual possibilities, and whole issues of publications were devoted to “wheelers,” “scorchers” and “pedal pushers,” often drawn as attractive women riders.

Domestic narrative scenes provided other opportunities for the reversal of roles. In some views the male is seen doing domestic chores such as washing and tending after the children. The woman, on the other hand, takes on new powers and is dressed to go out, thus asserting her new freedom. In the production of



"Have Dinner at One, Dear". © 1897 by William H. Rau

these views, the stage was set and actors hired to portray the scene. The same set and actors were also used in cards depicting the commerciality of the enterprise, showing that the popularity of views extended past the narrative to 'behind the scenes', much like today's cinema.

Whether the depiction of women in these images helped advance their real world evolution from domestic subordinates to liberated equals remains unknown, but it just might have set things in motion by planting the seeds in the minds of female viewers.

Melody Davis' Women's Views: The Narrative Stereograph in Nineteenth-Century America, is illustrated with more than one hundred stereographs and includes a 3D viewer.
The book is available: info here.