FICHE DE COURS : The Industrial & Victorian Society

Place dans les programmes du lycée : la révolution industrielle est évidemment un chapitre privilégié en Première du cours de DNL.

Objectifs de contenu et linguistique : je propose ici de travailler à partir d’un tableau, Iron & Coal de William Bell Scott (1861). Très riche, il permet d’aborder de nombreux aspects de la révolution industrielle : progrès technique, transformation du travail, transformations sociales. Programmatique, il défend par ailleurs un point de vue engagé, et joue sur le symbolisme pour véhiculer un message caché, ce qui donne une dimension ludique à son étude en classe.

Travailler sur ce tableau peu connu permet, en plus de varier les approches de ce sujet, de mettre en place la méthode d’analyse d’une œuvre picturale, et d’aborder le lexique de la peinture.

Place dans le plan du cours : l’étude prend place dans le chapitre “The Industrial Revolution in Great Britain”. Elle en constitue une bonne synthèse sur une heure, ou deux si elle est complétée par un ou plusieurs autres documents. Elle se déroule soit en cinq questions (c’est le choix que j’ai fait ci-dessous), soit trois temps, qui constituent la structure du cours :

I – Technical and scientific progress

II – Social upheaval : the political commitment and biais of the artist

III – The hidden message : is industrial progress really synonymous with human progress ?
In 1848, three young artists founded a secret brotherhood dedicated to the renovation of art as they found it decadent: Millais, Rossetti, and Holman Hunt (PRB, willing to return to the art as it was made before Raphael). It was them versus the Academy (embodied by Sir « Sloshua » Reynolds), fighting against the loss of meaning in art, reacting against the representation of nature in the English school of landscape that had been flourishing for two centuries. It lasted until 1853, but had a huge further influence until the end of the century, so that they more or less consciously identified with the spirit of Victorian England.

Through the long reign of queen Victoria (1837-1901), Great Britain’s affirmation as a precocious industrial power led it to rule a mighty empire. It thus appeared clearly as the first nation in the world. This was made possible by the Industrial Revolution, causing deep economic and social upheaval, which many intellectuals, artists and politicians of the time were not ready to accept without further questioning. William Bell Scott (1811-1890) was one of them.

**Doc. 1 – *Iron and coal*, William Bell Scott (1811-1890), 1861**
1 – Find the constructing force lines of the painting.

Answer: Three parts, foreground, middleground, background, plus two groups, one with the three workers, whose hammers work as a decomposition of movement, the other with the little girl alone, staring at us, who seems to be playing a particular role in the painting. The oblique sun beam seems to be reinforcing her importance.

2 – Description of the Industrial Revolution: why can you say this painting is a comprehensive illustration of the Industrial Revolution?

This painting features everything related to the Industrial Revolution:

Bell Scott visited Stephenson’s railway-engine works to see a locomotive wheel being forged to give him his central action, but the painting as a whole is a composite showing the Tyneside industries (Newcastle):

- blacksmiths, hammers, anvil, workshop
- burning coal, red-hot metal
- steel factory, furnace
- a locomotive wheel
- a locomotive blueprint at the bottom right-hand corner
- barges carrying coal
- a train
- steam engine
- steam boat
- telegraphic wires identifying the century as one of expansion of means of communications
- a bridge Robert Stephenson’s newly completed High Level bridge
- steel construction work (the first iron bridge was built around 1750 on the Severn)
- an anchor (England’s the first fleet in the world)
- and other steel production on the foreground (an Armstrong gun barrel and a shell), that we will get to describe more precisely later
- noise and heat, stuffy, choking and restless atmosphere

W. Bell Scott himself seemed to feel that in the end he had packed too much into the picture:

“The canvas is as full as it can hold. Every thing of the common labour life and applied science of the day, is introduced somehow, besides a mottled sunbeam done so realistically that the flies are beginning to buzz in my studio”. . .
3 – The social setting: Who, do you think, is (are) the main character(s) of the scenery?

The workers are. Wealthy bosses and fat traders in top-hats, placed in the quiet background, suggest that they are but second-hand characters in this play. In-between, a miner, young boy. Inversion of social hierarchy. Disproportion. The workers are the real heroes of this time, which saw the birth and development of marxist socialism.

4 – The hidden message of the painting: What part does the child play?

On the foreground, the child stares at the observer. She connects the observer to the scene. Doesn’t seem to be entirely part of it. She symbolises the future generations. What is she sitting on?

A cannon shaft. The seal / brand reads “Armstrong”, and “Dieu et mon Droit”. Shells.

5 – Conclusion: What is the author’s opinion on the IR?

Is that a praise of the Industrial Revolution? The question seems open. William Buckland had written that iron and coal were:

“part of the dispensation of Divine providence. They increase the riches, and multiply the comforts, and ameliorate the condition of mankind” and were placed conveniently for these purposes as “part of the design, with which they were, ages ago, disposed in a manner so admirably adapted to the benefit of the human race” (Bachelor 140-141).

At first glance, the observer gets the feeling of an enthusiastic praise of the RI. Though, Scott bears an ambiguous look upon it: after further inspection it indeed appears ominous. Its stuffy atmosphere is almost restless. He uses both allegory and realism to criticise the meaning of progress.

Thus, the painting is a discrete reaction, and no real glorification, against the flaws of that new society. The PRB’s description of this new society of theirs is close to Charles Dickens’ (destruction, violence, moral decrepency). They express their fear of where productive industrial society is bound to lead people: as a matter of fact war, which is perfectly clear from Scott’s point of view.

W.B. Scott, along with other PRB painters, conveys, that’s true, a socially progressive message: indeed, they were inspired, supported and advised by Ruskin (see John Everett Millais’s Portrait of Ruskin, 1854). Still, they took part in that debate at a moment when the rise of marxist socialism (1848) put every other social feeling, especially romantic, on the reactionary side. William Morris, another artist of the time, close to the PRB movement (fighting against standardised society by going back to manual artcraft), is another example of such reactionary art (give an excerpt).

Their is a message of refusal. No artistic revolution, but formal reaction against strictly aesthetic production while the world was growing ugly. Their production had to bear moral meaning. More and more the PRB who began with realistic description of their time slipped into a reaction against the hideous and materialistic landscape of the last third of the century.