Shannon Wells-Lassagne and Eckart Voigts (eds.)

Filming the Past, Screening the Present:

Neo-Victorian Adaptations

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Contents

A Case Study – Neo-Victorian Mashup: *Penny Dreadful*

Shannon Wells-Lassagne and Eckart Voigts

Neo-Victorian Adaptations – Introduction

As the pinnacle of success for the novel form, literature owes much to the Victorian period, both for creating new genres (like the detective novel or the Imperial romance) and reinventing others (the Gothic). Indeed, the Victorian novel is so well-known to contemporary English-speaking society, whether by choice or by way of school set texts, that the proximity of the Victorians, both in terms of narrative and of culture, has manifested itself in the popularity of the Victorian period and Victorian storylines in contemporary fiction, be it the reinterpretation of Victorian mores in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (John Fowles, 1969), the fictional recreation of stories from the period, as in *Arthur and George* (Julian Barnes, 2005) or the rewriting of Victorian narratives (*Dorian, an Imitation*, Will Self, 2002; *Jack Maggs*, Peter Carey, 1997; *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys, 1966). These fictions tend to emphasize previously hidden aspects of their original narratives or of the society in which they take place, questioning the gaps present in the conventional understanding of the period.

Likewise, film's debt to the Victorians has been considerable. While Sergei Eisenstein credited Charles Dickens with inventing the cinematic technique of montage, Christian Metz (in *Le Signifiant imaginaire*, 1975) affirmed that film is the novel's successor:

> Inasmuch as it proposes behavioral schemes and libidinal prototypes, corporeal postures, types of dress, modes of free behavior or seduction, and is the initiating authority for a perpetual adolescence, the classical film has taken, relay fashion, the historical place of the grand-epoch, nineteenth-century novel (itself descended from the ancient epic); it fills the same social function, a function which the twentieth-century novel, less and less diegetic and representational, tends partly to abandon (Metz; qtd. in Elliott 2003, 3).

Canonical Victorian literature was among the first to be adapted to the silver screen; it has historically been – and continues to be – among its most popular and profitable forays, from the endless variations on the myth of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to the prevalence of period dramas and Dickens, Brontë or Gaskell adaptations on the small or the large screen (and in the corresponding awards lists). It was through these adaptations that film came to be studied in an academic setting, and that the rapidly expanding domain of adaptation studies first staked its claim – and ironically, through François Truffaut's refusal of these same adaptations, in his article "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français" kicking off the New Wave, that film came to be seen as the seventh art.

However, research on film and television adaptations remains surprisingly rare in neo-Victorian studies, and is more often to be found in adaptation studies.[1] The reason for the relative absence of engagements with Victorian and neo-Victorian film lies in the literary bias that, among others, Antonija Primorac's monograph of 2018 has identified: "Neo-Victorianism on screen as a subject in its own right has rarely been dealt with independently; it is usually a part of a bigger argument about neo-Victorian afterlives" (Primorac 2018, 2). Primorac invokes Imelda Whelehan's suggestion of an unfortunate 'secondariness', a hierarchical bias against neo-Victorian screen narratives as adaptations that is exacerbated by a second bias against the superficiality often discovered to be at the core of so-called period or costume films (cf. Primorac 2018, 3). This volume seeks to show that this bias is unfounded and that both Victorian and neo-Victorian screen adaptations should be studied in their own right as they have ceased to rely solely on their status as appropriations and adaptations of 19th-century worlds and authors. Recent visualizations are significant as they create "a neo-Victorian imaginarium that enables a sensory immersion in a fantasy of the past" (Primorac 2018, 12).

The distinction made by New Wave critics between the "screenwriter's adaptation", too focused on fidelity to appreciate the possibilities of film, and the "auteur film", which might be based on a previous text, but whose focus is purely filmic, is once again similar to the distinctions apparent in studies of Victorian and neo-Victorian fictions. Though initially Victorian adaptations distinguished themselves from their neo-Victorian counterparts in their scrupulous attention to historical detail and respect for the source material, while neo-Victorian adaptations took greater liberties with conventional attitudes towards the period and its narratives, increasingly even adaptations of the most well-known Victorian texts have begun questioning these assumptions, as in Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* films, the BBC's *Sherlock* (2010-17) and *Ripper Street* (2012-16), ITV's *Whitechapel* (2009-13), or the Showtime/Sky series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-16), thus blurring the distinction between Victorian and neo-Victorian adaptation.

Indeed, the Ripperology of *Ripper Street* and *Whitechapel*, a major strand in neo-Victorian screen adaptation since the high-profile adaptation (2001) of Alan Moore's graphic novel *From Hell* (1998), has now clearly come to a post-Victorian stage that seeks to feed the demand for period gore with stories that expand the Ripperature universe – while addressing the ways in which our past reflects our present. The most recent movie in that vein, *Limehouse Golem* (2016), an adaptation of Peter Ackroyd's novel, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse*

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1   For an overview see Louttit and Louttit (2018).