

**The Other (Neo-)Victorians:  
Review of Laura Helen Marks, *Alice in Pornoland:  
Hardcore Encounters with the Victorian Gothic***

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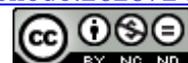
**Laura Helen Marks, *Alice in Pornoland: Hardcore Encounters with the Victorian Gothic*  
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Laura Helen Marks's provocative book seeks to explore the influence of late-Victorian Gothic on a series of X-rated movies, ranging from low-budget to costly productions. In doing so, she analyses the contradictory gender dynamics that drives these movies, and that characterises their source texts as well. Through its in-depth investigation of the dialogue between the porn industry and the world of our supposedly 'prudish' forefathers, *Alice in Pornoland: Hardcore Encounters with the Victorian Gothic* represents an important contribution to the analysis of a cinematic genre (neo-Victorian porn) that has been partially neglected in scholarly works. In truth, neo-Victorianism itself may be defined as inherently 'obscene'; that is to say, this artistic genre aims at depicting what is *ob skene*, 'off stage' in traditional depictions of nineteenth-century art and literature. Marks's study and approach to a cinematic genre 'that dare not speak its name' is, as it were, implicit in the treatment of contemporary rewritings of the Victorian Age, as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn have contended. According to them, to qualify as neo-Victorian "texts (literary, filmic, audio-visual) must in some respects be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*", in order to "advance an alternative view of the nineteenth century" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). The study of (and the research on) neo-Victorian culture entails a thorough

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reconsideration of stereotypes and canonical views of the nineteenth century that are debunked by those contemporary writers, filmmakers and artists who have decided to set and locate their works during the Long Nineteenth Century. In her ‘Preface’ to the volume, Laura Helen Marks writes that, after a first cautious approach to pornographic films (being formerly an anti-porn feminist), she realised that in many cases these texts could not only be interpreted in a less superficial way but could also “illuminate understanding of the Victorian, understandings of pornography, and the legacies of the Victorians in terms of sexual representation” (p. x).

By re-viewing nineteenth-century culture, neo-Victorian novels (and neo-Victorian porn movies and productions) foreground the analogies, rather than the differences, between *us* and *them*, demonstrating that many of the seeds of contemporary issues and anxieties were planted in the past. Therefore, neo-Victorianism and neo-Victorian porn narrate, describe, and implicitly investigate racial questions, colonialism, social discrimination, economic unbalance, female independence and sexuality without any of the expressive limits imposed during the Victorian age on many of its (most renowned) representatives, even as these same themes freely circulated in limited ‘circles’, groups and in publications such as the anonymously or pseudonymously published *The Lustful Turk* (1828), *The Victim of Lust* (1867) or the bestseller *My Secret Life* (1888) by ‘Walter’. What we have, basically, is an ‘uncensored’ version of the nineteenth century. This is one of the reasons why the negation of (assumed) principles of Victorian ‘morality’ and ‘respectability’ – which, in truth, were not so ingrained and indisputable (to the point that Matthew Sweet suggests that we have somehow ‘invented’ Victorianism) – have often titillated the interest of writers ranging from John Fowles to Antonia S. Byatt, from Sarah Waters to Michel Faber, as well as porn movies directors Shaun Costello, Nica Noelle, Wash West and Eric Edwards, among others. The fascination for nineteenth-century eroticism, which Marie-Luise Kohlke defines, by using a neologism, as “sexsation” (Kohlke 2008), represents one of the most pervasive and recurring neo-Victorian tropes, a trope which these contemporary filmmakers have taken quite literally.

As far as nineteenth-century Gothic is concerned, this literary genre, which combines horror and ‘penny dreadful’ stories, seems to be fit for the purpose of ‘porning’ because of its interest in extreme emotions and in bodily excess. Novels such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Dracula*, *The Strange*

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*Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which represent the main hypotexts (in Gérard Genette's definition) of Marks's study, have stimulated the curiosity of porn movies directors and screenwriters because, potentially, these nineteenth-century works already contained (and combined) provocative elements. As Marks notes,

[the] neo-Victorian Gothic impulse in porn [...] resulted in a mass of films that are problematic, contradictory, and above all revealing of the complex discursive threads running through this diverse medium – threads that tie back to the Victorians themselves. (p. xii)

As a matter of fact, these “discursive threads”, as the author defines them, are connected, in turn, with the inherent contradictions of Victorianism.

In particular, Marks reflects on the implicit affinities between the Gothic and the pornographic, since they are both preoccupied with transgression, duality, and excess, thus suggesting a syllogism: if the neo-Victorian is, as Kohlke and Christian Gutleben argue, “*quintessentially Gothic*” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 4, original emphasis), then pornography is by nature quintessentially neo-Victorian. In this respect, Marks's argument is twofold: firstly, “the neo-Victorian Gothic functions for pornographers as a space for the reclaiming and reimagining of women, non-normative orientations, deviant sexualities, and racialized histories of trauma”; secondly, the neo-Victorian “mobilizes unstable gender and queer desires in ostensibly ‘straight, male’ hardcore films” (p. 7), affording unexpectedly subversive perspectives through which it is possible to interrogate the construction of pornographic desire, and the consumption of hardcore visual products at large.

Marks is well aware of the anti-/pro-porn critical binary, and of the (legitimate) debates raised by the entrance of Porn Studies into academia, in light of the accusations raised against the porn movie industry as presenting distorted images of men and women, and of sexuality. The author, however, seeks to study this phenomenon against the backdrop of prejudices, being interested in the contradictory issues raised by neo-Victorian pornographers. As a matter of fact, the very term ‘pornography’ is a Victorian invention (entering the English lexicon in 1857), and the mid-nineteenth century testified to the success of obscene literary and artistic materials, whose

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circulation took advantage from the presence of ‘new’ technologies such as photography, mass printing, and later cinema. Likewise, the success of today’s pornographic industry depends on modern technologies such as home tapes, cinema, television and the internet. Therefore, neo-Victorian porn does nothing but reinforce and give evidence to a phenomenon Victorian writers and artists such as Lewis Carroll, Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker and Oscar Wilde were already acquainted with, but could not describe in explicit terms. For this reason, “[the] mere act of porning, of inserting sex into a well-known narrative [...] asserts a critical intervention by highlighting the perceived gaps and silences in the original text” (p. 20).

Chapter 1, ‘Behind Closed Doors: Neo-Victorian Pornographies’, surveys and analyses those porn movies, set in the Victorian age, which appropriate its costumes, imagery and attitudes; at the same time, these visual texts shed light on the notion of ‘the Victorian’ as a repressed and yet transgressive space. After reflecting on the existence of a remarkable pornographic textual production (and consumption) *during* the Victorian age, with Holywell Street in London as the centre of the English pornographic trade, Marks focuses on Robert Sickinger’s movie *The Naughty Victorians: A Maiden’s Revenge* (1975), a loose adaptation of the Edwardian pornographic novel *The Way of a Man with a Maid* (1908), and then moves to a low-budget production entitled *Bedtime Tales* (1985) which, again, features a maid as the main object of sexual attraction. Whereas *The Naughty Victorians* visualises questions of race and femininity by disposing of the traditionally male vantage point, *Bedtime Tales*, apart from catering to the fascination with Victorian costumes, reiterates nineteenth-century sexual science, according to which women were depicted as prone to sexual excess (and therefore needed to be ‘cured’). Likewise, in the internet-based video entitled ‘Hysteria’ (2013), directed by and starring Ned Mayhem, we are offered a satirical treatment of Victorian medicine through a pornographic perspective. This internet episode finally turns the patriarchal perspective (according to which women had to be ‘subjected’ to male treatment) upside down, by having the female patient ‘mastering’ her doctor. Eric Edward’s *Memoirs of a Chambermaid* (1987) and Nica Noelle’s *Lesbian Adventures; Victorian Love Letters* (2009), albeit produced in two different periods in the history of porn, both use a ‘confessional’ tone reminiscent of Victorian ‘forbidden’ (male) texts such as

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*My Secret Life*. In these cases, we are offered an exclusively female perspective, so that the movies

eroticize the written word in a manner that frames literature as feminine and private, yet at the same time disrupt this boundary by visualizing it as part of deviant sexual practices playing out behind closed doors for our visual pleasure. (p. 48)

The chapter concludes with an analysis of movies that include (and treat very differently) racial themes: from Noelle's *Family Secrets: Tales of Victorian Lust* (2010), which fetishises race and interracial sex yet refuses to verbalise racial difference, to Ryan and Kelly Madison's *Get My Belt* (2013), a film that presents a series of fetish scenes in which a woman of colour (simply called 'Slave') is victimised by her male master. Inspired by Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) and set in nineteenth-century America, *Get My Belt* includes a sort of euphoric ending, in which the woman finally kills her abusive master and escapes on horseback.

Chapter 2, 'I Want to Suck Your...: Fluids and Fluidity in Dracula Porn', treats a selection of porn movies more or less explicitly based upon Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), a novel that – for its ambivalent characterisations and for its sexually-charged scenes – seems to be the ideal source of inspiration for X-rated productions. As Marks puts it, "[the] vampire is the quintessential pornographic monster: immortal, beautiful, forever young, and insatiable", a "predatory, sensual and seductive" creature, which combines the tensions between "active and passive" desires and urges (p. 68). The author here notices the presence of shifting (homosocial) discourses in various porn renditions of the vampire figure, including Shaun Costello's *Dracula Exotica* (1980), which features vampiric cross-gender mind control, and *Dracula Sucks* (1979), heavily edited by the director Philip Marshack for fears of censorship, in particular as regarded the explicit homoerotic content of the movie. As for *The Bride's Initiation* (1973), directed by Duncan Steward, in which Count Dracula kidnaps a newlywed couple so as to use them as part of a ritual to prolong his life, the content is in this case undeniably homoerotic because of the presence of fluids (blood and semen) that allude to same-sex desire. Indeed, in the process of 'porning' vampire stories, a great source of interest for

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filmmakers is the abundance (in the original texts) of orifices and bodily fluids, whose sexual allusiveness is self-evident. In *Dracula*, for instance, the implicit association between semen and blood in the scene featuring Mina, who is forced to drink blood from Dracula's chest, is almost a truism in Stokerian studies. Alongside the recurrence of racial issues in *Dracula* (and in its adaptations), since the Count is also said to represent an image of the rapacious Jew – significantly, his role is played by Jewish performers in many hardcore movies – another association that has been explored by pornographers is that between vampirism and sex work. In *The Accidental Hooker* (2008), directed by Brad Armstrong, the character named Vladdy is a black pimp who turns an Asian-American prostitute (Sylvia) into a vampire. After having had sex with her clients, Sylvia kills them. In this movie she thus “inhabits three identities – vampire, sex worker, Asian American – that irrevocably Other her. The film integrates the three almost invisibly as a way of highlighting parallels of Otherness” (p. 86). Of course, these are not the only movies that demonstrate the pervasiveness of the Dracula myth, proving that Stoker's vampiric text was rife with ‘unspeakable’ sexual content, and that its influence had (and still has) a huge impact on the porn movie industry.

Chapter 3, ‘I'm Grown Up Now: Female Sexual Authorship and Coming of Age in Pornographic Adaptations of Lewis Carroll's *Alice Books*’, treats the pornographic construction of female sexual agency in movies inspired by Carroll's Alice stories, arguing that through the presence of humour, sadomasochism and excess, these cinematic texts dramatise fantasies of female sexual maturation and authority. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) present the titular character as a naïve girl, whose body perpetually changes and alters, subjected to various forms of ‘paternal’ control, oppression and conditioning. This inherent ambivalence is projected onto neo-Victorian porn adaptations of Charles Dodgson's source text, which explore the tensions between innocence and sexuality. Alongside movies influenced by a Gothic aesthetics, such as *Through the Looking Glass* (1976, dir. Middleton), *Tormented* (2009, dir. Morgan) and *Malice in Lalaland* (2012, dir. Hypher), sexual pleasure and womanhood are central features of *Alice in Wonderland: A XXX Musical* (1976), directed by Bud Townsend. The latter movie deliberately negates and alters the cautionary approach to sexuality conveyed in the Alice stories, by presenting a girl who willingly

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embraces her sensual appetites and passions, to the point that her real ‘wonderland’ becomes in truth a ‘pornotopia’, a place in which uncensored desire and sex play a major role. Carroll’s hypotext has also inspired a great quantity of hardcore productions – *Alice in Fetishland* (2000), *Alice in Bondageland* (2000), *Fetish Fairy Tales 3: Alice in Summerland* (2005), as well as videos featured on the ‘Mistress Alice’ website – that may be included in the fetish and BDSM (Bondage, Dominance and Sado-Masochism) category. Also in these cases, the traditional patriarchal and Gothic paradigms of *Alice in Wonderland*, according to which women are victims of masochistic practices, are reversed or at least questioned, with Alice rarely being ‘subjected’ to dominance. In fact, “[while] in Wonderland she is helplessly resized and ordered about, in BDSM pornography the girls stage a takeover of Wonderland. The members of each ‘land’ are subject to Alice’s whims and punishments, not the other way round” (p. 108). In a way, these productions indirectly respond to Michelle Massé’s feminist-oriented denunciation of Gothic narratives as based upon masochism, with women as the favourite victims of male power and cruelty. It is therefore not accidental that in the last decades porn adaptations of Carroll’s novels have been produced and/or directed by women, such as, for example, *Alice in Wonderland XXX* (2011) by Wendy Crawford. These ‘coming of age’ porn renditions of Alice’s adventures of womanly initiation seem to move against the grain of attempts to check, survey, and control female sexual independence, imagining lands of wonder in which it is possible to explore desire, for women as well as men.

Whereas traditional cinematic transpositions of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) usually juxtapose the doctor’s morality and normativity to the corruption and immorality of his alter-ego, in many porn adaptations or, to use Roman Jakobson’s definition, in many “intersemiotic transpositions” (Jakobson 2000: 118) of Stevenson’s novella, the protagonist’s regression to primordial instincts is depicted as desirable and erotically alluring. This is the premise of Chapter 4, ‘Radically Both: Transformation and Crisis in Jekyll and Hyde Porn’, which discusses three different declinations of this tale of transformation, namely Tom DeSimone’s *Heavy Equipment* (1977), Wash West’s *Dr. Jerkoff and Mr. Hard* (1997) and Paul Thomas’s *Jekyll & Hyde* (1999). Whereas the first two movies, albeit differently, explore the deeply homosocial (and homoerotic) implications of Stevenson’s all-male tale, Thomas’s *Jekyll &*

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*Hyde* describes the history of Jekyll's sexually repressed daughter, giving prominence to the narrative silences of the original tale. Framing her analysis against the backdrop of the Labouchere Amendment Act, which prohibited and condemned sex between men, passed on the first of January 1886 (just four days before Stevenson published his novella), Marks underlines the fact that Stevenson celebrates undefined intimacies between men, which movies such as *Heavy Equipment* and *Dr. Jerkoff and Mr. Hard* depict in explicit terms: porn movie directors DeSimone and West "realize the queer implications of homosociality and duality, directly addressing gay identity and culture and eroticizing the desire for a unified queer self" (p. 120). However, if on the one hand *Heavy Equipment* is clearly indebted to Stevenson's story (the protagonist Chester is a nerdy young man, who turns into a muscular and attractive character), *Dr. Jerkoff and Mr. Hard* appears as more ambivalent and complex in suggesting that the 'nerdy' appearance of Dr. Jerkoff was just an artifice and that he always was Mr. Hard even before he decided to drink the transformative potion. This latter movie offers a positive alternative to Stevenson's tragic epilogue (by acknowledging a unified gay sexual identity). The location of the two movies is significant as well: from the repressed late-nineteenth-century London in Stevenson's tale, we move first to West Hollywood in the late 1970s (a pre-HIV/AIDS paradise) in *Heavy Equipment* and then to late-twentieth-century San Francisco in *Dr. Jerkoff and Mr. Hard*, a city in which gay identities are fully realised. As far as Thomas's *Jekyll & Hyde* is concerned, although the 'normative' character of Molly (Jekyll's daughter) turns into the sexually predatory prostitute Flora (who murders her clients), presenting a feminine re-reading of the original tale, the ending of the movie paradoxically re-states the Jekyll-and-Hyde paradigm, by having its female protagonist kill herself. Despite the differences between these hardcore productions, "there is a parallel moral thread running through each", since these visual texts assert that "duality of self or the desire to transform is not, in itself, wrong" (p. 140).

The fifth and last chapter of this study, 'Strange Legacies of Thought and Passion: Technologies of the Flesh and the Queering Effect of Dorian Gray', is devoted to the (more or less explicit) intersemiotic translations of a novel that is reputed as one of the cornerstones of queer and gay studies: Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). In truth, the novelist himself has become a sort of queer spectral presence haunting the artistic afterlives

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of his book, in particular because his famous trial took place not many years after the passing of the Labouchere Amendment Act and of the 1889 Cleveland Street Scandal, when an all-male brothel (among whose clients were respectable members of the aristocracy and of parliament) was raided by the London police. The two films analysed by Marks, Armand Weston's *Take Off* (1978) and Wash West's *Gluttony* (2001), offer a counter-history of gay cinema and its legacy. Moreover, both movies dramatise an interest in what Marks terms the "technologies of representation", which serve as "an important conduit of sexuality and subjectivity" (p. 146). *Take Off* is set in the 1970s; its protagonist Darrin – after making his wish to stay forever young, at least on screen – becomes the eternally youthful protagonist of a series of porn movies that range from gangster pictures of the 1930s to the film noirs of the 1940s, from the Marlon Brando-inspired movies on teen rebellion of the 1950s to the productions set during the summer of love of the 1960s. In *Gluttony*, constructed as a faux documentary, the undergraduate student Cyril Vane is in search of an eternally young and mysterious porn star named Dorian, who appears in a series of hardcore movies-within-the-movie. Through the use of digital effects, West recreates the changing style and look of porn movies from the 1960s to the 1990s, offering viewers an alternative history of X-rated productions featuring the ageless Dorian. Apart from their explicit sexual content, these productions implicitly turn into melancholy reflections on corporeal decay, in particular in view of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. For instance, *Take Off* is literally haunted by the tragic death of its protagonist, actor Wade Nichols, who committed suicide after being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in 1985, whereas *Gluttony* is characterised by the nostalgic view of a more 'innocent' period in (homo)sexual relationships, before AIDS was discovered and its consequences became evident (a fact that successively convinced the gay porn movie industry to promote medical research, control, and safe-sex education).

Marks's study closes with a brief conclusion, entitled 'Fueling the Lamps of Sexual Imagination', which could be alternatively read as an ideal opening and premise to *Alice in Pornoland*. Marks seeks to address the value and importance of Porn Studies, stigmatising anti-porn campaigns and political decisions such as the 'Utah resolution' (2016), which has raised further suspicions on porn consumption by suggesting a connection between sex addictions, sex trafficking, and child pornography. Although she is

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aware of the paradoxes and incongruities of pornographic materials and messages, the author underlines the value of what she calls a “porn literacy” (p. 177) that, by advocating safe and happy sexual intimacy, understanding of content and non-judgmental education, offers a proper decoding of porn that, as in the case of this study, can even become an occasion to offer a scholarly analysis of otherwise ‘forbidden’ visual texts. Just like the many monsters described in late-Victorian novels, porn thus “metamorphoses, escapes, changes direction, and [...] speaks back, and in that speaking back it develops a more dynamic outlaw ethos” (p. 179).

All in all, Laura Helen Marks’s study is a well-grounded and mature investigation of the dialogue between late-nineteenth-century Gothic and porn cinema. However, although there are no major bibliographic or critical limits, my impression is that the author sometimes restricts and circumscribes her investigation only to the porn film industry (thus inadvertently replicating the discrimination to which porn has been subjected in and out of academia), without ‘opening’ her discourse either to other traditional movie productions or to novels. For instance, she does not mention neo-Victorian texts that openly describe heterosexual and homosexual intercourse such as, say, Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) or Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). Additionally, Faber’s novel, by including the story of a murdering prostitute (narrated and written by Sugar, its protagonist), replicates some of the plots of the porn movies discussed by Marks, such as Thomas’s *Jekyll & Hyde* or *The Accidental Hooker*. Likewise, in treating *Dracula*, she ignores the impact of Hammer Film Productions like *Dracula* (1958), *The Brides of Dracula* (1960), or *Taste the Blood of Dracula* (1970) – characterised by a strong sexual subtext – on porn movie directors, who probably had a first-hand experience of these movies rather than of Stoker’s original novel. The same discourse may be applied to director Victor Fleming’s sexually allusive film rendition of *The Strange Case Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, dated 1941 (with Hyde, played by Spencer Tracy, brutalising his sexual ‘slave’ Eva, played by Ingrid Bergman), which undoubtedly represented a major source of influence for future hardcore directors. As for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it certainly owes its ‘porning’ to classical heterosexual productions such as Albert Lewin’s famous 1945 movie version, among others. Furthermore, not only does Marks ignore the queer-centred depiction of Dorian Gray in the recent TV series *Penny Dreadful* (which includes explicit homosexual and

heterosexual, especially Gothic, sex scenes between Lily, Dorian and Justine) but also ground-breaking teleplays such as John Gorrie's 1976 BBC production, which was among the first to focus on Dorian's homosexual desire, thus paving the way for the future gay porn reworkings of Wilde's novel. Nevertheless, apart from these minor omissions, *Alice in Pornoland* demonstrates the importance and critical fruitfulness of the dialogue between canonical Victorian novels and neo-Victorian porn translations of these texts. In reading against the grain of nineteenth-century paradigms, neo-Victorian hardcore productions prove the flexibility and fluidity of those paradigms, suggesting that the self-imposed limits of nineteenth-century narrative were inevitably and inherently destined to be questioned and transgressed.

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