

**Which Way to Go from Here?**  
**Conference Report on**  
***(Neo-)Victorian ‘Orientations’ in the Twenty-First Century***

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*(Neo-)Victorian ‘Orientations’ in the Twenty-First Century*

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The sunny seaside city of Málaga, Spain, provided a welcoming atmosphere for the conference *(Neo-)Victorian Orientations in the Twenty-First Century*. The conference aimed to investigate the concept of orientation as a critical tool to analyse time, space and relations between bodies in (neo-)Victorian fiction and other media.

As the main conference organiser Rosario Arias (University of Málaga) reminded us in her official welcome address, the conference concerns echoed those of the 2007 conference that took place in Exeter, UK, on *Neo-Victorianism: The Politics and Aesthetics of Appropriation*, showing that the field of neo-Victorian Studies is still expanding and renewing itself. The Málaga conference, Arias emphasised, thus offered an opportunity to “pursue new lines of enquiry, looking back to the past, to appreciate what has been achieved and look to the future”. The conference formed part of the ‘Orientation: Towards a Dynamic Understanding of Contemporary Fiction and Culture’ project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (Ref. number FFI2017-86417-P), carried out by Arias and a core and an associate team.<sup>1</sup> As the round-table devoted to the presentation of the project showed, ‘Orientation’ may be understood in various ways. First of all, it reminds us of Sarah Ahmed’s phenomenological study of the concept, to which many contributors referred. For Arias, orientation brings together temporality and space and

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thus enables her to further her ongoing research on the trace. But Orientation can also be interpreted in relation to retrospection, as Carmen Lara Rallo (University of Málaga) pointed out. The polytemporality of the trace and its application to the study of space allows for a renegotiation of the perception of time both as dynamic and as palimpsestuous. Martyna Bryla (University of Málaga) offered to look at Orientation and Orientalism, putting Edward Said in dialogue with Ahmed. In particular, Bryla drew attention to Said's theories on discourse and dominance, to the way in which the Orient is composed of layers of mental maps and of stereotypes. In terms of Orientation, the focus therefore is on the relation with the 'Other', offering a possible renegotiation of the dichotomy 'Us/Them', which also relies on affect, resulting in emotional cartography. Similarly, Laura Monròs Gaspar (University of València) considered Orientation in the context of mapping the active role of women in theatrical productions of classics in the nineteenth century. These various contributions shared the underlying concepts of the trace, polytemporality, relationships, connections and intertextuality.

### **1. The Keynote Lectures**

The first keynote lecture by Susana Onega (University of Zaragoza) offered a new perspective on a staple of intertextuality by renegotiating the concept of the palimpsest. As Onega argued, the palimpsest is not merely a metaphor for intertextuality, but may be used as a way to understand the multiple layers of history. Drawing upon Jacques Derrida's work on the one hand, and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's on the other, Onega suggested that the palimpsest entails a form of spectrality. She brought to the fore the necessary active participation of readers when confronted with intertextuality, identifying "a palimpsestuous relation to the text, a risky relation". Onega offered a queer reading of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), showing that access to the past is obtained through the palimpsest, the spectralisation of reality, and the fantasy of the living dead. For her, the encounter between the protagonists Charles and Sarah is marked by "surprisingness" and disorientation, as Charles is not prepared for this queer moment marked by apocalyptic terms. Onega suggests that the novel sheds light on our own post-situatedness, so that our way of engaging with the Victorians parallels our mentality. Therefore, the palimpsest might offer a move away from 'writing back' towards a more

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transnational view with multiple centres. As Onega claimed, the more critical and peripheral readings we do, the better to bring forth new perspectives. This resonates with a recent effort in *Neo-Victorian Studies* and elsewhere to look at forms of neo-Victorian fiction/media emerging from other areas than the Anglophone world.

The next keynote lecture was presented by Marie-Luise Kohlke (Swansea University), who looked at neo-Victorian biofictions from the 'periphery', namely Richard Flanagan's novel *Wanting* (2008) and the mock memoir *The Secret Life of Queen Victoria: Her Majesty's Missing Diaries* (1979) written and illustrated by Jonathan Routh. Kohlke raised the question of ethics, especially when considering the biographical choices made by the authors. She argued that to some extent biofiction writers can be described as "stealers of souls, making the dead dance anew". For her, the omissions, choices, and supplementations in the re-presentation of the Victorians manipulate readers' feelings and cognitive endorsement, thereby orienting the way they read and interpret the past. In the end, Kohlke argued, neo-Victorian biofictions are haunted by authorial choices made and not made. Kohlke's talk thus calls for further attention to reception as well as production contexts of neo-Victorian fiction, and especially biofiction, as well as to the way such fictions shape our understanding of the global nineteenth century and its inhabitants. She ended her talk with the poem 'Wanting' by Niall Casson (see *Still She Dances* in this issue), a direct response to Flanagan's novel that refuses the traditional take on Mathinna's story by not reinscribing her as dispossessed.

The third keynote by Patricia Pulham (University of Surrey) also tapped into the way in which the Victorian past is constructed and conveyed to us, opening with an extract of Jacob Rees-Mogg's much criticised new book, *The Victorians* (2019). Mogg's book makes Pulham following remark even more pressing: "it is time for neo-Victorianism to re-orient its relation with the Victorians and ask 'where do we go from here?'" Pulham stressed the uneasy position of neo-Victorian Studies within the academy, highlighting a tension between literary theory, creative writing, nineteenth-century and contemporary literature studies. Pulham's talk uncovered the various problems that increase this tension: the problem of value and 'authenticity', periodisation, and the prestige of disciplines long associated with difference and separation rather than continuity. Drawing on Pierre Bordieu's work, Pulham pointed out that nineteenth-century "cultural

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capital” problematically eclipses that of twentieth- and twenty-first century writers. Pulham called for a need to think of neo-Victorian Studies as trans-critical, thereby emphasising fluidity and continuity in a post-postmodern world rather than fragmentation and separation. This talk clearly contributed to the debate over our role as literary scholars and the way literary teaching and theory shape literature and certain monopolies.

The final keynote lecture was delivered by Ann Heilmann (Cardiff University), who focused on a Pre-Raphaelite icon, Elizabeth Siddal, whose death marked the beginning of her resurrection and rebirth in art and painting, starting with Gabriel Dante Rossetti’s *Beata Beatrix* (1870), described by Heilmann as a “moment frozen in time”. Looking at later biofictional neo-Victorian works, Heilmann wondered to what extent contemporary texts can re-orient Siddal with reference to her own work as an artist rather than just as a model to the Pre-Raphaelites. Heilmann articulated the paradox in our relation to Siddal, which stems from the voyeuristic gaze of the Victorians onto her body that finds a reflection in our own gaze, even as we try to recover her as an individual, away from her former objectifications. Siddal has now gained the status of mythical supermodel, and Heilmann looked at the way she is reinvented in neo-Pre-Raphaelitism, whether she is given a voice of her own (or not), and whether she is re-objectified in the process. Heilmann’s various case studies problematised the mediation of history, pointing out the importance of the medium used for re-orientation; hence her choice to focus on a wide range of sources such as novels, poetry and TV series. For Heilmann, resistance to the tale of the supermodel can only be achieved through resistance to the commodifying male gaze.

The four keynote lectures raised issues that were complemented by the varied and plentiful talks from international contributors. The following is a non-exhaustive summary of the main topics discussed during the symposium.

## **2. Looking at Various Media: Opening New Directions**

Heilmann’s lecture was supplemented by a talk on the series *Desperate Romantics* (2009) by José María Mesa Villar (Catholic University of Murcia) who discussed the filmmakers’ biographical choices in the context of the revival of the Rossetti and Siddal myth. The dialogue between the novel and visual media, such as the photograph, came to the fore in a paper

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on Helen Humphrey's *Afterimage* (1992) by Charlotte Boyce (University of Portsmouth). Other, less studied media were also covered. Sarah E. Beyvers (University of Passau) investigated videogames and the new forms of engagement with the Victorian this immersive medium provides its audience with. Charlotte Wadoux (University of Kent / Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3) explored a French graphic gamebook rewriting Sherlock Holmes, *Sherlock Holmes: La BD dont vous êtes le héros* (2013), in which readers are themselves turned into a kind of detective. Anna Gutowska (Linnaeus University) analysed the TV series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) as a transfictional object, which offers new modes of thinking about intertextuality and our relation to the palimpsest. Jessica Cox (Brunel University London) considered popular fiction by Victoria Holt to demonstrate continuities that blur the still debated boundary between 'Victorian' and 'neo-Victorian', daringly suggesting that "there are no neo-Victorian texts, only neo-Victorian readers".

### 3. Re-Orienting Our Relation to the Past

A great number of presented papers revolved around historiography, focusing especially on the representation of the Other and on postcolonial neo-Victorian fictions. Both Jaine Chemmachery (Université Paris-Dauphine – PSL) and Susanne Gruss (Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nürnberg) showed the ethical problems raised by the turn to 'Victorian subalterns' by looking respectively at Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* (2003) and at biofictions revolving around the figure of the Ethiopian Prince Alemayehu. For Gruss, the problem arises from the fact that 'Victorian' is too often used as a shorthand for 'Empire', but also because writers 'sex up' the Victorian as exotic queer Other. Eulalia Piñero Gil (Autonomous University of Madrid) also looked at Saartje or Sarah Baartman's afterlives and the way in which she functions as a form of revenant that infiltrates our present to tell the stories of marginalised women. As was suggested in the discussions, the numerous appropriations that are being published (be they ethical or not) beg the question of the extent of their capacity to activate a necessary haunting as part of our engagement with the past. Such reflections once again highlighted the problematics of biofiction tackled in Kohlke's lecture.

Papers also engaged with the revision of key historical narratives and events such as the search for the North Pole. In her paper on Richard

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Flanagan's *Wanting*, Maria Jesus Cabarcos (University of A. Coruña) drew connections between considerations on the Orientalised Other and North Pole expedition narratives. Cabarcos argued that Flanagan's take on British colonialism is ambiguous, partly re-inscribing the colonial ideologies it supposedly sets out to criticise. In contrast, Ingibjorg Austsdottir (University of Iceland) demonstrated the possibility to truly write back by focusing on popular fiction revisiting Scottish explorations and the narrative of women waiting for the return of their menfolk from expeditions. Austsdottir showed how historical and neo-Victorian novels today constitute platforms for challenging dominant cultural narratives, thereby pointing out how history is always already fictional. Petr Chalupski (Charles University) looked at the way in which novels on Arctic exploration, particularly Ian McGuire's *The North Water* (2016), discuss ethical questions of good and evil by entering a dialogue with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902).

#### **4. Orientation and Female Voices**

Numerous papers were devoted to the representation of women in neo-Victorian fiction. Ana Chapman (University of Málaga) and Leopoldina Pedro Mustieles (University of València) both investigated the trope of voice in, respectively, Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) and *Penny Dreadful*. While Chapman used Jacques Derrida's concept of hospitality to analyse the immersion process at play in Faber's novel, which articulates the voiceless of the nineteenth century, Mustieles focused on the limitations of the liberation plot in *Penny Dreadful*. Ashleigh Taylor Sullivan (Swansea University) gave a paper on the haunting persistence of the Victorian Gothic by looking at the impact of *Jane Eyre* (1847) on Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* (2009), showing how the domestication of the Gothic in the Victorian era is incorporated into the neo-Victorian project, in which women and houses are always haunted by preceding women.

Sarah Waters's novels provided the focal point for multiple papers during this symposium, with presenters approaching her work in a wide range of ways. Elsa Adán Hernández (University of Zaragoza) focused on *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and the way in which the Victorian past is used as a tool to bring marginalised women to the foreground, looking especially at performativity and the process of queering in the novel. Akira Suwa (Cardiff University) discussed Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden* (2016),

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a Korean film adaptation of *Fingersmith* (2002), demonstrating the way in which new possibilities for neo-Victorianism open up in a global context, especially through representations of heterotopia and the double colonisation critiqued in the movie. Olga Dzhumaylo (Southern Federal University) also talked about *Fingersmith* and its intertextual dialogue with Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1839), arguing that Waters makes something new out of Dickens by bringing a sensory, immersive experience of being a woman in the nineteenth century to the reading process. Finally, Laura Dominguez Morante (independent scholar) considered *Fingersmith*'s use of pornography in terms of Maud's self-construction, which is achieved through a process of annihilation and (re-)creation, thus epitomising the rewriting of the past as a liberating narrative.

## 5. City and Detection

Last but not least, the theme of the city in conflation with that of detection was very much present during the conference. Eliana Ionoaia (University of Bucharest) focused on two neo-Dickensian American novels, Dan Simmons's *Drood* (2009) and Matthew Pearl's *The Last Dickens* (2009), both engaging with Dickens's unfinished last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) to represent London as a hellish city and Dickens as a ruthless self-made man. Kym Brindle (Edge Hill University) also looked at novels involving enigmas as she focused on contemporary crime fiction offering a pastiche of Golden Age detective fiction. While approaching neo-Victorian fiction from this angle may seem surprising, Brindle argued that such pastiches highlight key tropes such as class division, gender oppression and, above all, sensation. These pastiches unashamedly relish violence, causing Brindle to wonder whether neo-Victorianism contributes to our society's desensitisation to violence.

Violence, of course, is a key trope appearing in numerous neo-Victorian crime TV shows today, especially in reimaginings of Jack the Ripper's killing spree. Elisavet Ioannidou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) looked at the city and the metaphors of the maze and the labyrinth to discuss neo-Victorian relations with the past. She focused especially on the series *Ripper Street* (2012-2016) and its labyrinthine way of engaging with the Ripper murders, which again provides a hellish vision of the city. Ioannidou sees a progressive shift in the series from a unicursal labyrinth to a multicursal maze, which tropes intertextuality. The paper by

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Barbara Braid (University of Szczecin) also tackled urban palimpsests in her investigation of Alan Moore's *From Hell* (1989) and of the TV series *Whitechapel* (2009-2013). Looking at the influence of dark tourism on these fictions, Braid demonstrated the way that Whitechapel is construed as a lingering wound in the body of London. Her paper tackled the problematic trauma and loss that lie at the centre of Ripper literature, thus questioning the possibility for neo-Victorian fiction to heal past wounds.

## 6. Future Directions

The symposium gathered researchers from all over the world and at various stages in their careers in Málaga's dazzling May sunshine. An afternoon reception in the university's beautiful botanic gardens added to the atmosphere, while regional wine and tapas aroused culinary curiosity and appreciation. A real sense of 'neo-Victorian community' emerged from these intense three days. The conference was the occasion of a collaboration between researchers at various stages: a large number of PhD students were present, from Spain and elsewhere. The conference highlighted the multi-faceted nature of the neo-Victorian project and the field of neo-Victorian Studies, providing us with new ways of considering what may be called the emergent 'neo-Victorian canon' while offering new areas and tools for future reflection.

Indeed, the conference contributed to further map neo-Victorian studies, underlining landmarks in the field such as the importance of the representation of the city, the articulation between postcolonial and neo-Victorian theory, the multiple uses of the concept of palimpsest and of the genre of biofiction. The association between sexual orientation, queer theory and neo-Victorian fiction has tended to focus on Sarah Waters – though other readings of the latter's works were offered too as we have seen.

Nevertheless, the conference also mapped new directions for neo-Victorian studies. Sarah Ahmed's concept of orientation certainly proved to be a useful conceptual framework for new directions and perspectives on our engagement with neo-Victorian fiction and other media. Also, if a lot has been written on Darwin's explorations and responses to Darwinian discourse in neo-Victorian literature, there is much less criticism of narratives focusing on Arctic explorations – other than Franklin's, which is often discussed in relation to *Wanting* or Dan Simmons's *The Terror*

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(2007). The conference also reinforced the growing interest in popular fiction and media, looking at new materials, from Golden Age detective fiction to historical novels set in the 1920s and the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), thereby calling for an opening up of our so-called neo-Victorian canon.

### **Notes**

1. For more detail on this project see: <https://orionfiction.org>.