Sensational Victorian Afterlives: Review of Jessica Cox's *Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction*

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Jessica Cox, *Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction*
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In *Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction* (2019), Jessica Cox explores the cultural and literary legacies of Victorian sensation fiction and its various afterlives in neo-Victorian novels. As the first book-length study to focus on neo-Victorian sensation fiction, it contributes significantly to expanding neo-Victorianism's field of enquiry and indebtedness to one of the iconic forms of nineteenth-century popular fiction. In her study, the author sets out to redress

> two significant gaps in scholarship to date: the pervasive and wide-ranging influence of the sensation novel on twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and culture, and the role of sensation fiction within neo-Victorian literature, culture, and critical discourses. (p. 2)

For this purpose, Cox examines a significant number of (neo-)sensation novels, placing a particular focus on subgenres of popular fiction, such as historical detective novels and Young Adult (YA) literature, while also including audio-visual and stage adaptations to further her arguments. Her aim is "to demonstrate the hitherto unacknowledged diversity of the legacy of Victorian sensation fiction" (p. 3), which has never fully faded.

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Admitting the difficulties in defining neo-sensation fiction, Cox rejects a (too) broad definition of the genre as encompassing "any work which draws implicitly or explicitly on the workings (plot, characters, tropes, themes, structure, effect) of the Victorian sensation novel" (p. 11). Instead, she suggests taking into consideration more distinct generic characteristics as well. She proposes that sensation fiction's central thematic concerns – "crime, secrets, identity, transgressive women, the family, and the apparently 'respectable' home" (p. 11) – must be present in neo-sensation fiction and argues that generic hybridity could also be "a defining feature of the form" (p. 11). These deliberations on a critical definition of neo-sensationalism are also reflected in the structure of her monograph, which covers a broad spectrum of topics and is subdivided into two parts. The first part is concerned with subgenres of the neo-sensation novel (the neo-Gothic, detective, and YA fiction), while the second part focuses on a selection of particular tropes (sexual trauma, archaeology, excavation, and inheritance) that contribute to the crucial thematic and genre mixing.

In her introduction, Cox laments neo-Victorianism's strong initial focus on 'literary' fiction and posits her contribution as "a significant intervention" (p. 3) in the field. Drawing on definitions of 'neo-Victorian literature' and 'neo-Victorianism' in critical studies by Dana Shiller (1997), Daniel Candel Bormann (2002) and Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2010), she calls attention to neo-Victorianism's repeated privileging of 'literary' texts at the expense, and even exclusion, of popular fiction (see pp. 5-6). In this respect, Cox revisits a distinction pointed out by Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss in 2014, who "discern a split between 'strong' and therefore more specific definitions" of neo-Victorian fiction, "which make self-reflexivity [...] a *conditio sine qua non* of the neo-Victorian reference to the nineteenth century, and 'soft' definitions which are more inclusive" (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014: 2, original italics), making a strong case for the latter. Cox also observes that scholarly criticism on the afterlife of the Victorian sensation novel follows a similar trend, as it focuses to a great extent on 'literary' fiction such as Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002) or Michael Cox's *The Meaning of Night* (2006) (see pp. 10-11). While acknowledging that these novels display elements of Victorian sensation fiction and can be regarded as neo-sensation novels, she draws attention to the "significant irony in the idea that its *primary* legacy lies in the award-winning literary fiction of writers such as

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Waters and Byatt, given the genre's own position as a key form of Victorian *popular* culture" (p. 11, original emphasis). Cox thus refocuses scholarly attention on neo-sensation as a form of popular fiction, which derives almost organically from the genre's history as popular entertainment for the masses rather than more sophisticated audiences. Cox uses the remainder of the introduction to identify a number of features of 'neo-sensationalism' and to elaborate on a case study of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), which is revisited multiple times in her monograph and which serves the purpose of "illustrating the diversity of the genre's legacy" (p. 4). As a highly prolific and influential Victorian novel, Collins's narrative is "a key source text" (p. 15) for neo-Victorian fiction and has spawned a substantial number of adaptations, which Cox skilfully incorporates into her analyses.

In her chapter on 'Neo-Gothic Sensations', Cox addresses various links and (dis)continuities between Gothic fiction and the sensation novel and identifies 'imprisonment' and 'haunting' amongst both genres' recurrent tropes. In convincing comparative readings of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and Daphne du Maurier's *My Cousin Rachel* (1951), she elaborates on hauntings and doublings as well as the strong intertextual links between both works (see p. 57). She argues that the idea of 'doubling' in both texts is not limited to the characters but includes a doubling of the text and its generic features as well. In fact, Cox maintains, "[t]he two novels' most significant doubles […] are the hidden subtexts, concealed beneath these narratives of popular fiction, which reveal the inequalities faced by women" (p. 56) – a topic often addressed in Victorian sensation novels as well as their neo-Victorian counterparts more generally.

A closer examination of patriarchal structures informs the analysis of the second set of novels in this chapter, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and its loose adaptation *Sleep, Pale Sister* (1994) by Joanne Harris. Both novels evince an interest in the connection between women and art, and, more specifically, male artists' representations of the female body in art via which patriarchal control and the voyeuristic male gaze are exerted (see pp. 58-60). In this broader context, Cox focuses primarily on the idea of 'imprisoning' or 'arresting' women in art to overwrite (or overpaint) their autonomous identities. In *Sleep, Pale Sister*, the various paintings of Effie "all represent a patriarchal vision of womanhood which ultimately seeks to

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obscure her own individual identity" (p. 65). According to Cox, Effie is granted a certain amount of agency when she attempts to (at least temporarily) reclaim her sense of self; for instance, when she destroys the half-finished embroidery showing her as a version of Sleeping Beauty, which is understood "as a symbolic rejection of the masks male artists fasten on women" (p. 67). All texts discussed in this chapter highlight that Gothic tropes, some of them previously explored in Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben's edited volume *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century* (2012), constitute a significant feature of both past and present sensation novels. Cox's analysis picks up on and reinforces the prevalence of gender issues, especially as related to women's suppression in patriarchal Victorian society, in both neo-Victorian literature and scholarship. However, the strong focus on femininity comes at the expense of other topics, such as an exploration of the Gothic's/sensation fiction's toxic and queer masculinities. Nonetheless, the tropes identified by Cox – "the double, imprisonment, buried secrets, death" – all "offer productive ways of characterising the relationship between the Victorian sensation novel and its (ghostly) afterlives", while also "illustrating the continuities between Victorian sensation and subsequent popular *and* literary fiction" (p. 70, original emphasis).

The (neo-)Victorian sensation novel not only reworks and redeploys tropes of Gothic fiction but also those of detective fiction, a genre that characteristically serves as "a useful metaphor for the relationship between past and present" (p. 75), since detection involves retrospective discovery. After locating the rise of sensation fiction within the framework of wider cultural influences and developments in the nineteenth century, such as the establishment of the police force and crime journalism, Cox identifies several elements of detective fiction in the Victorian sensation novel, among them the female amateur detective. She argues that

> sensation heroines go some way towards subverting society's power structures and in their roles as detectives place under scrutiny those patriarchal forces which have formerly sought to contain them, paralleling women's rights protestors calling into question the laws which disempowered them. (p. 80)

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Drawing on various Victorian sensation novels, she suggests that these female detectives often operate in the male, public sphere and experience only a momentary empowerment, as they occupy "a paradoxical position: temporarily escaping from the confines of the feminine role, only to subsequently return to it in the narrative conclusion" (p. 81). Their return to the 'proper' domestic sphere and their motivations thus partially undermine "the proto-feminist implications of female detection" (p. 80) and reinstate patriarchal authority and control. In contrast, both popular and 'literary' neo-Victorian sensation-detective fiction tends to equip its female detective with greater transgressive potential. Cox identifies a number of character types, such as the criminal-as-detective, the author-as-detective, the journalist-as-detective, and the servant-as-spy/detective (see pp. 86-87), before she elaborates on the widow-as-detective in more detail. Examples of this latter figure, which Cox refers to as "widow-heroines", typically "assert an independence" derived from their one-time "marital status which remains largely unavailable to their Victorian forebears", although the widow still "remain[s] subject to the constraints imposed upon […] [her] by a patriarchal society" (p. 97). Cox proceeds to use her analyses of Tasha Alexander's *Lady Emily* mystery series (2005-present) and Emily Brightwell's *Mrs Jeffries* series (1993-present) as starting points to challenge critics' focus on the self-reflexivity of neo-Victorian fiction, suggesting that contemporary sensation-detective texts "frequently recognise and acknowledge their own status as popular fiction and their relationship with the works of Braddon and her contemporaries" (p. 98). In ignoring forms of historical popular fiction, neo-Victorian criticism, Cox argues, "threatens to replicate the literary snobbery of those who initially dismissed sensation fiction as unworthy of critical investigation" (p. 98). Accordingly, she calls for a wider recognition of how "historical detective fiction and period dramas represent primary points of engagement with the Victorian past" (p. 98) for a broader, non-academic, neo-Victorian reader-/viewership.

In her next chapter, Cox tackles Young Adult (YA) literature, a field that has not yet received extensive critical attention in neo-Victorian studies, apart from Sonya Sawyer Fritz and Sara K. Day's recent edited collection *The Victorian Era in Twenty-First Century Children's and Adolescent Literature and Culture* (2018). To elaborate on neo-sensation YA fiction, Cox adopts very broad and all-encompassing definitions of both YA

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neo-Victorian fiction, which "engages at any level with Victorian history, literature and culture" (p. 107), and YA neo-sensation writing, which comprises "works invoking the Victorian sensation novel as intertext, or via narrative conventions including themes, plot, character, structure, and style" (p. 107). Unsurprisingly, these extensive definitions prove highly inclusive of various forms of neo-Victorian YA writing. Before she focuses on two specific case studies, Cox notes similarities between YA fiction and sensation fiction, and also explores the history of YA writing and the literary marketplace for contemporary YA fiction, not least by considering J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) and its borrowings from Victorian and Victorian sensation novels (see p. 110). Her comparatively detailed engagement with these basic topics reflects the accumulated need for a more theoretical examination of (neo-sensation) YA literature within neo-Victorian criticism and constitutes an important step in remedying the dearth of criticism on the topic.

Cox selects her YA case studies from both the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, expanding the temporal focus of Fritz and Day's edited collection. Philip Pullman's *The Ruby in the Smoke* (1985), the first novel in the *Sally Lockhart* series (1985-1994), contains many characteristic features and tropes of the sensation novel, displaying Dickensian influences and using both penny dreadfuls and Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) as intertexts (see pp. 119-122). In her analysis, Cox looks more closely at the titular ruby, which she reads as a symbol of femininity and sexuality, and asserts that Sally's "rejection of it comes to symbolise female autonomy, marking her out as a feminist heroine for a modern YA readership" (p. 124). While *The Ruby in the Smoke* "updates the Victorian sensation narrative for a contemporary YA audience" in its resolution, Cox criticises that the text's "treatment of the issues of race and empire […] seems less progressive" (p. 125), even appearing to perpetuate harmful racial stereotypes. Despite its shortcomings in this respect, Pullman's novel, Cox contends,

> bridges the generic gaps between literary and popular fiction, presenting a convincing Victorian landscape, whilst demonstrating its own position as a self-consciously *neo*-Victorian narrative via meta- and intertextual references[.] (p. 129, original emphasis)

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This highlights the novel's complex engagement with the Victorian era. Mary Hooper's *Fallen Grace* (2010), Cox's second case study, also exhibits many of the sensation novel's typical themes and features (see p. 130). Cox professes that the various elements of (neo-)sensation writing in this text provide "a commentary on the relationship between past and present" (p. 131) as well as between sensation and neo-sensation fiction. Unfortunately, *Fallen Grace* is merely dealt with in a little more than four pages in this chapter, whereas Pullman's novel receives precedence with almost twelve pages, creating a slight imbalance and bias. In her concluding remarks on this chapter, Cox focuses on the paratextual apparatus provided in both novels to comment on issues of 'authenticity' of both historical/neo-Victorian (YA) fiction and Victorian sensation fiction for present-day readers (see pp. 133-134). According to Cox, Pullman's and Hooper's texts' complex engagements with Victorian culture and its literary productions, especially the sensation novel, provide pivotal insights into neo-Victorian practices; hence she implicitly advocates an increasing consideration of YA literature in neo-Victorian studies.

The first chapter of the second part of the monograph, '(Re)Presenting (Sexual) Trauma', is an updated and slightly expanded version of Cox's article 'Narratives of Sexual Trauma in Contemporary Adaptations of *The Woman in White*' (2014). In this chapter, Cox discusses Collins's *The Woman in White* and several of its screen and novel adaptations, observing neo-Victorianism's persistent interest in trauma, both collective/historical and individual, and looking more closely at the representation of (sexual) trauma suffered by the protagonists in Collins's source text and its adaptations. Cox maintains that trauma can manifest itself variously in physical and behavioural changes of characters as well as in narrative gaps and fragments at the textual level (see pp. 143-144). While sexual trauma is either not included or not articulated in Victorian sensation fiction (see pp. 148-150), neo-Victorian literature frequently does foreground this topic as part of its project of "revisiting, acknowledging, and working through the traumas of the past" (p. 152). Cox proceeds to analyse David Pirie's 1997 audio-visual adaptation, Fiona Seres's 2018 BBC adaptation (which was – for obvious reasons – not covered in Cox's 2014 article), James Wilson's *The Dark Clue* (2001), and Linda Newbery's 2006 YA novel *Set in Stone*. Cox demonstrates that, "although reworkings of *The Woman in White* include an insistent focus on sexual trauma, paradoxically,

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these acts are frequently obscured from the reader/viewer" (p. 153), almost replicating nineteenth-century texts' obliqueness on this issue.

In many adaptations of Collins's novel, the individual characters are unable to fully articulate their experiences of sexual abuse and trauma. In David Pirie's adaptation, for instance, Anne Catherick may be able to commit her experiences to a diary, yet her "literal burying of the narrative of sexual abuse" (p. 155) prevents the wounds inflicted upon her from fully healing. Similarly, in Wilson's *The Dark Clue*, Marian records "her reflections on the event [i.e., rape] rather than a description of what actually occurs" (p. 157) in her journal, excising the actual assault from the narrative. Even if sexual abuse is frequently addressed in neo-sensation novels, it is more often than not only referred to via "significant narrative gaps", thus "raising important questions about neo-Victorian articulations of trauma" (p. 160) and the limits of addressing and reworking it. This insight seems distinctly at odds with the greater sexual explicitness often attributed to neo-Victorian works, and might in part be explained by writers'/adaptors' reluctance to expose victims to symbolic re-violation on page or screen. Curiously, however, Cox's analysis elides any attempt at explaining this tendency to renewed obfuscation. Nonetheless, neo-sensation fictions "represent (even as they obscure) what remains largely hidden in the Victorian novel […] and portray the lasting effects of these traumatic legacies" (p. 162), as Cox expertly shows. Implicitly, then, neo-sensation fiction invites audiences to draw parallels between historical abuses and systemic sexual violence against vulnerable groups in today's societies. In expanding her article and including the 2018 BBC adaptation of *The Woman in White* in this chapter, Cox validates the observations made in her 2014 contribution by drawing on a further audio-visual example that reinforces the persistent trend of inserting sexual trauma into adaptations of Collins's popular novel. Yet, precisely because such a substantial part of this chapter has been previously published, it might have been interesting to see other forms of trauma discussed as well.

The next chapter, 'Excavating the Victorians: Digging Up the Past' offers a slightly different kind of interpretation, which is probably due to the fact that the geological and archaeological tropes Cox employs in her case studies can hardly be found in Victorian sensation fiction, although they "appear particularly suitable as a symbol for the central concerns of (neo-) sensation fiction" (p. 169). She starts from the premise that the Victorian

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sensation novel's focus on the discovery and unravelling of "secrets parallels the archaeological process" (p. 172) of excavating what is hidden, and she sees the detective figure, elaborated on in a previous chapter, as "anticipat[ing] the role of the archaeologist-detective in the neo-sensation novel" (p. 173), even if this later type of investigator is usually concerned with a more remote past. In her two case studies, Cox predominantly focuses on the neo-sensation novel's propensity for commenting on the past's simultaneous distance and proximity to the present, as well as the analogy between excavations and neo-Victorianism's wider concerns regarding what might be termed historical recovery projects.

In her analysis of Elizabeth Peters's *Crocodile on the Sandbank* (1975), which is described as a parody of the Victorian sensation novel, Cox highlights how the novel recycles but also departs from certain sensation fiction topics, such as the orphan protagonist who inherits a fortune, family drama and romance (see pp. 178-181). She uses various events in the novel to illustrate that the archaeological trope is suggestive of "the distinction between nineteenth-century popular and literary fiction" (p. 181); for instance, she regards the museum with its "privileging of certain cultural objects over others" as analogous to neo-Victorian "attitudes towards popular and literary fiction", whereby popular forms, such as the neo-sensation novel, are "construed as unworthy of 'exhibition'" (p. 182). Moreover, Cox points to "the necessity for approaching history with care" (p. 182), reflecting broader considerations about verisimilitude in historical novel writing and drawing attention to anti-factual additions to or potentially distorting elements of the historical record in literary returns to the Victorian past. Her analysis of Victoria Holt's romance novel *Shivering Sands* (1969), which is linked particularly strongly to the sensation genre, follows a similar trajectory. The buried secret in the narrative and the use of the archaeological trope are deemed "a useful metaphor for the neo-Victorian project and the manner in which it rewrites and reimagines the (fragmentary) Victorian past" (p. 186) through recovered selective traces. Altogether, this chapter points not so much to the legacies of the Victorian sensation novel as to the neo-sensation novel's capacities to reflect fundamental neo-Victorian concerns, most notably our attempts at 'unearthing' the Victorian past and our implicitly superior relationship to the period on account of our greater 'knowingness' and hindsight.

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In the following chapter, Cox looks at the 'inheritance trope', which informs a substantial number of (neo-)sensation novels. Cox starts with an examination of the inheritance theme in various examples of Victorian sensation fiction, which she argues "persistently exhibits a concern with the inheritance of wealth, property, title, and names, as well as physical and mental health and characteristics" (p. 196). While usually drawing on the idea of poetic justice in its narrative outcomes, the Victorian sensation novel also reflects wider cultural concerns and anxieties of the period, with the inheritance trope "serv[ing] as a means of exploring a range of issues […], including social hierarchies, identity, madness, and women's rights" (p. 197), especially prior to the Married Women's Property Act of 1882. Further, Cox suggests that the inheritance trope informs the past-present relationship in neo-Victorian writing more generally (see pp. 198-199). In this respect, the neo-sensation novel "offers itself as an important metaphor for understanding the (literary) legacy of the Victorians and contemporary culture's relationship to the period" (p. 202), which is often conflicted, being based on simultaneous fascination and alienation. Like (neo-) sensation novels, Cox observes, neo-Victorian criticism too is preoccupied with the idea of inheritance, hinting at "a tendency to construct the relationship between contemporary and Victorian cultures and identities in terms of a familial connection" (p. 206). In her analysis of Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (1989), Cox points to the ordered narrative structure of Palliser's novel, which reflects both Victorian and contemporary desires for order at odds with the text's disruptive 'secrets' (such as a respectable woman's prostitution and implied incest), effecting a blurring of boundaries between 'literary' and popular narrative (see p. 208) that plays to both potential audiences. Yet while reprising various sensation themes, *The Quincunx's* mathematical structure, ambiguity, and narrative gaps also depart from its nineteenth-century counterpart's conventions (see p. 210). The ambiguity of the ending, according to Cox, "suggests a broader analogy with contemporary culture's perceptions and understanding of the Victorian past" (p. 211), as it allows multiple divergent interpretations and conclusions, more in line with postmodernist indeterminacy.

In her concluding chapter, Cox elaborates on an example of neo-sensation writing that was published in the Victorian era itself: Austin Fryers' (William Edward Clery's) parody *A New Lady Audley* (1891).

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Controversially, Cox proposes that this text "points to the paradoxical possibility that neo-Victorianism emerges in the Victorian period itself" (p. 219). Cox sees this text as providing a metaphor for the sensation novel's legacy and afterlife in subsequent centuries, in that Braddon's original characters are absent, whilst the house, Audley Court, and its premises continue to exist, having undergone improvements and modernisation (see p. 222). Cox also highlights the ancestral home's reaffirmation of (neo-) sensation's "association with the Gothic" (p. 223). She concludes with the assertion that, while the legacies of the Victorian sensation novel appear "complex and diffuse", its "echoes […] are evident throughout the literary and cultural landscape of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (p. 225). Not least, as evidenced by previous chapters, that "cultural landscape" has expanded to include stage and screen production, but, curiously, not the graphic novels one might also have expected.

Cox's monograph constitutes an important intervention in and valuable contribution to the field of neo-Victorian studies, demonstrating sensation fiction's lasting influence on present-day cultural consciousness. In the individual chapters, Cox repeatedly points to the manifold legacies and (cultural) afterlives of the Victorian sensation novel, most notably of Collins's iconic text. Arguably, among the most exciting aspects of Cox's study is her implicit positioning of Collins's novel, rather than, for instance, Charlotte's Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), as the potential 'ur-text' for neo-sensation fiction (and perhaps even neo-Victorianism) and its varied hauntings and reincarnations. Additionally, Cox's chapter on YA neo-sensation fiction opens up an important avenue for future research. Not only does it demonstrate neo-Victorian YA novels' indebtedness to the nineteenth-century sensation genre, but Cox further lays the groundwork for theoretical deliberations on neo-sensation fiction's crucial relevance to a young-adult readership, who may in time become enthusiastic consumers of adult neo-Victorian fiction also. Cox's third major innovation can be found in her proposed expansion of 'neo-Victorian' to include texts written in the *fin de siècle*. Throughout the monograph, Cox consistently embeds her analyses of (neo-)sensation novels in the broader context of neo-Victorian writing to point out both continuities and divergences between the two, while providing inspiring and compelling interpretations in her comparative case studies of Victorian and neo-Victorian sensation fiction.

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