Exploring the Victorian Imaginarium:
Review of Antonija Primorac's *Neo-Victorianism on Screen: Postfeminism and Contemporary Adaptations of Victorian Women*

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In a year in which Covid-19 has dominated the public consciousness, and film and television production slowed around the globe, neo-Victorianism has nonetheless remained a strong presence on our screens. As the pandemic raged, competing adaptations of neo-Victorian novels by Julian Fellowes and Eleanor Catton were broadcast by ITV and the BBC. *Belgravia* (2020), created by Fellows, and *The Luminaries* (2020), directed by Claire McCarthy and written by Catton, offer different forms of neo-Victorianism, of course, but both were greeted as an escape from this turbulent period, with the former described grudgingly as "something to pass the time as the coronavirus curfew descends" (Mangan 2020a: n.p.) and the latter more positively as "glorious escapism, perfect for our times" (Mangan 2020b: n.p.). While recent events may have made these series seem more timely, in reality they represent a continuation of a cultural trend rather than a new development. The mainstream screen industry's love affair with the Victorian era is a long lasting one, but one that has become particularly heated over the last few decades, with waves of interest not only in adaptations of classic Victorian texts by canonical usual suspects but also in more self-conscious literary mash-ups, knowing original period dramas, and even playful neo-Victorian sitcoms. Since 2017, for instance, we have been

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treated to BBC Two's *Quacks* (2017), created by James Wood, and Channel 4/IFC's *Year of the Rabbit* (2019–), created by Kevin Cecil and Andy Riley, two engaging Victorian-set comedies, and last year's pre-Covid Christmas television season was dominated by the neo-Victorian, with new – and controversial – adaptations of *The War of the Worlds* (2019), *A Christmas Carol* (2019), and *Dracula* (2020)[1] appearing on both the BBC and international streaming platforms.

It is to this timely subject of screen Victoriana that Antonija Primorac's important, pleasingly polemical study turns. In terms of genre, the book's focus is impressively broad, defining "neo-Victorianism on screen" as "an umbrella term", which

> encompasses adaptations of Victorian texts that offer a critical re-visioning of Victorian narratives; screen adaptations of neo-Victorian texts; contemporary biopics of Victorians; and metaadaptations of Victorians (mash-ups and appropriations of more than one Victorian text, as well as original screenplays set in the Victorian era that play with and adapt received ideas about the period). (p. 4)

To make this expansive cultural terrain more manageable, Primorac sensibly applies two well-defined limits to her material. *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* thus focuses in detail on "the figure of the Victorian heroine and how she is represented for contemporary audiences" since this, according to Primorac's central argument, is "the pivotal image through which contemporary ideas about the period are dramatically tested" (p. 4). The study's temporal span is also narrowed down to the relatively recent screen past, paying attention to film and television productions between 1993 (when Jane Campion's *The Piano* was released) and 2016 (just before the book's production and when the first series of Daisy Goodwin's *Victoria* was broadcast on ITV).

As she admits, Primorac is not the first to deal with screen neo-Victoriana. *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* follows, to an extent, in the footsteps of the two other scholarly books devoted solely to neo-Victorian film and television cultures, broadly defined: Dianne F. Sadoff's *Victorian Vogue: British Novels on Screen* (2010) and Iris Kleinecke-Bates's *Victorians on Screen: The Nineteenth Century on British Television, 1994-2005* (2014). Primorac certainly draws on elements of these earlier,

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significant monographs. Sadoff's interest in screen Victoriana's "international or transnational niche markets" (Sadoff 2010: xv), for instance, is replicated here, as is Kleinecke-Bates's wide-ranging attention to varied sorts of productions. What distinguishes Primorac's approach is her ability to ask exciting questions about neo-Victorianism as a cultural and critical field. More specifically, in opening the pointed and readable introduction to *Neo-Victorianism on Screen*, Primorac notes how the "critical spotlight has, so far, been directed at fiction", while screen neo-Victorianism has endured a more "marginal status in the field" (p. 2). Using Imelda Whelehan's important 2012 chapter on 'Neo-Victorian Adaptations' as a starting point, Primorac rightly points out how problematic this "hierarchical approach" (p. 3) is, since, to quote Whelehan, "neo-Victorian literary texts are themselves adaptations" (Whelehan 2012: 272). *Neo-Victorianism on Screen*, as a result, "aims to address this imbalance" by "focusing solely on neo-Victorianism on screen" (p. 4).

　　　Primorac's book, then, is a confident attempt to carve out a new sub-field in neo-Victorian studies. Its introduction sets out to define what is different and distinctive about screen neo-Victorianism in relation to its more prominent novelistic sibling. Situating her theorisation of screen Victoriana provocatively alongside the more literary focus of Ann Heilmann, Mark Llewellyn and Marie-Luise Kohlke, Primorac claims intriguingly that part of the reason why screen neo-Victorianism has been neglected or maligned lies in the complex dynamism of its adaptive relationship with the Victorian past. Neo-Victorianism on screen is "in dialogue not just with one (or more) adapted text(s), but also with previous adaptations of the said text(s), the related images and adaptations that depict the era, extending into the future towards new adaptations" (p. 11). Neo-Victorian screen cultures engage with the era in fluid, layered fashion, and do so with an emphasis on the visual, which in this context Primorac suggestively labels "spectral moving images of the past in contemporary popular culture" (p. 12). Screen neo-Victorianism creates, in fact, what Primorac defines as "a neo-Victorian *imaginarium* that enables a sensory immersion in a fantasy of the past" (p. 12, original emphasis). This "compendium" of "generated images" is moulded by generic visual representations and images of the past rather than a well-developed, academic "knowledge of the period based on the archival data (maps, blueprints, lithographs, paintings, photographs, life-writing, fictional and

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newspaper accounts)" (p. 12). The risk here, as Primorac points out, is that particular visual stereotypes and tropes come to represent the Victorians. As she states, however, the most "subversive adaptations often offer a deviation from and/or variation on an accepted generic aspect, trope, or a stereotype" (p. 12), and as a result this process is a "generative" (p. 12) rather than deadening one. To understand screen Victoriana one must, moreover, be able to trace the development of such visual tropes.

　　With its field-defining insights, the introduction to *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* is well worth reading in isolation, and it contains ideas and provocations to which future scholars of visual Victoriana will want to return. Of course, there is much more of Primorac's wide-ranging study to enjoy beyond this opening chapter, structured as it is into thematic case studies that consider "how the image of the Victorian woman is employed for contemporary debates on women's agency and gender roles" (p. 13). Chapter 2 (a version of which was published in a *Neo-Victorian Studies* special issue in 2013) deals with the screen afterlife of Irene Adler from Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. This is a relatively focused case study, but thanks to the mania for all things Sherlock that has emerged over the past decade or so Primorac has plenty to explore. Her main claim in the chapter is that the raft of Sherlockian film and TV adaptations between 2008 and 2016 "can be seen as sharing one peculiar characteristic: an overt heteronormative sexualisation of the character of Sherlock Holmes and a related transformation of the character of Irene Adler as his main love interest" (p. 28). More specifically, "the reduction in Adler's agency" and "her overt sexualisation" is related to a "postfeminist sensibility" and "neo-conservative trends present in mainstream, big-budget TV and film adaptations" (p. 29). This provides a clear argumentative line, but there is also enough room to explore the nuance and texture of these portrayals of "*the* woman" (Doyle 1994: 3). In the Guy Ritchie films *Sherlock Holmes* (2009; screenplay by Michael Robert Johnson, Anthony Peckham and Simon Kinberg) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011; screenplay by Michele Mulroney and Kieran Mulroney), Adler "is reimagined as feisty, sexually and physically active, a heroine with her own agenda", but ultimately is "tied down by the rules of propriety" (p. 37). Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss's TV adaptation *Sherlock* takes this even further, portraying Adler as a femme fatale and dominatrix and simultaneously denying her agency as a "crestfallen" damsel-in-distress in a

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hijab in the finale of 'A Scandal in Belgravia' (2012). These neo-Victorian screen texts achieve a sexed-up, "superficial liberation" by acknowledging sex and nudity but not the "agency and autonomy" of this adapted Victorian heroine.

Chapter 3 of *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* is an ambitious exploration of "the relationship between cultural nostalgia and cultural memory in neo-Victorian screen adaptations, with a focus on the overlap in their representations of Victorian gender roles and colonial space" (p. 56). Primorac covers a great deal of ground in this chapter, both conceptually and in terms of the examples she discusses. Moving through the gamut of heritage proper, post-heritage, anti-heritage and alternative heritage dramas, she explores, in turn, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996; dir. Jane Campion; screenplay Laura Jones), *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997, dir. Gillian Armstrong; screenplay Laura Jones), *Vanity Fair* (2004, dir. Mira Nair; screenplay Julian Fellowes, Matthew Faulk, and Mark Skeet), *Wuthering Heights* (2011, dir. Andrea Arnold; screenplay by Arnold and Olivia Hetreed), *To Walk Invisible* (2016, dir. Sally Wainwright; screenplay by Wainwright) and *Ripper Street* (2012-2016, created by Richard Warlow).

These films and TV series tend to amplify female agency and sexuality, but do so at the expense "of the introduction of Orientalist imagery and Orientalist understandings of colonial space as being sexualised" (p. 62). Primorac's case studies in this chapter also demonstrate screen neo-Victoriana's tendency towards genrification; Armstrong and Jones's adaptation of Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*, for example, alters "a generically-multifaceted novel in line with its film genre – costume drama set in the Victorian period" (p. 68). In Primorac's extended analysis of the series, *Ripper Street* turns out to be more multifaceted and progressive, particularly in the way that it engages with "neglected aspects of working-class London history" (p. 81). The opening episode of Series 2, 'Pure as the Driven' (2013), is particularly pertinent to the chapter's focus on Orientalism as its "[d]ialogues […] continuously highlight and ostensibly criticise Britain's imperialist pretensions abroad" (p. 82). As the chapter concludes, however, this critique of imperialism is not matched in the drama's response to its female protagonist who is presented as "an unknowable mystery, exoticised and turned into a spectacle" (p. 85). Primorac's explanation of this discrepancy is a convincing one that loops back to the importance of genre expectations; she argues that "neo-Victorian

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costume drama as a genre […] cannot sustain more than one critical take on the past at the same time for fear of risking a breach with the perceived generic framework of 'authenticity'" (p. 85).

In Chapter 4, *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* returns to a more focused theme, examining how "the image of a tightly-laced, corseted female figure […] becomes an accepted visual shorthand for the notion of the literally and metaphorically repressed Victorian woman" (p. 101). This "image" is traced through a dizzyingly diverse range of neo-Victorian sources, from *The Piano* (1993) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), through Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* (2005, screenplay by John August, Caroline Thompson and Pamela Pettler) and *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007, screenplay by John Logan), and on to Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (2001, screenplay by Luhrmann and Craig Pearce) and the TV adaptation for BBC Two of *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2011, dir. Marc Munden; screenplay by Lucinda Coxon). Primorac explains how these familiar "elements of historical costume […] all serve as instant signifying triggers […] used to metaphorically and metonymically represent embodied Victorian female subjectivity" (p. 99). The chapter demonstrates how the trope derives from both the visual art of the period and aspects of contemporary popular culture. Primorac's extended readings of corsetry in *The Piano* and *The Crimson Petal and the White* are particularly engaging, noting in the case of the former example that the film "unexpectedly reveals the protective and subversive potential of women's restrictive clothing" (p. 115), functioning, for instance, as "a temporary shield against marital rape" (p. 119). In the latter TV adaptation, "clothes" – particularly the protagonist's angelic "jacket with appliquéd wings" – "play an important [and empowering] part in narrating Sugar's flight from her caged existence" (p. 124).

Primorac saves some of her most ambitious arguments for Chapter 5, in which she discusses screen neo-Victorianism's "postfeminist revisioning of Victorian family relationships […] that denigrates or erases […] mothers and their role as their daughters' authority figures" (p. 133). The focus of this chapter falls on slightly more recent screen neo-Victoriana, from Andrew Davies's 2008 adaptation of Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999) to Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010, screenplay by Linda Woolverton), James Bobin's *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (2016, screenplay by Linda Woolverton), and *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016, created by John Logan). In

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her analysis, Primorac reveals how these adaptations "imply […] a rejection of traditional, heteronormative family roles and structures, offering instead either gender role reversal or deconstructed, queer 'families of choice'" (p. 134). The chapter's extended consideration of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* turns away from the rather predictable disappointment of many critics with Burton's and Bobin's films, focusing instead on Alice's "relationship to authority figures, and the role played by clothes and the idea of re-fashioning" (p. 136). Primorac argues convincingly that the films' postfeminist heroine does assert her own agency, and that this self-assertion "is made more dramatic by the frame of restrictive Victorian rules and limited gender roles" (p. 142). This challenge to heteronormative, mainstream values is also evident in Logan's influential series *Penny Dreadful*; Primorac makes a link back to the *Alice* films, noting that here mothers are "associated with […] limited Victorian gender roles and repressed agency" (p. 148), while the show's interest lies in the "queer deconstruction of traditional familial bonds and structures and its championing of families of choice" (p. 148). Importantly, however, this queer revision of established values does not bridge the gender divide. Here Primorac's reading chimes with the discomfort felt by other scholars, including Marie-Luise Kohlke (see Kohlke 2018) and Claire Meldrum (see Meldrum 2015), about this neo-Gothic drama's gender politics. The show's male characters "get to express their sexuality, form queer relationships and families of choice without any repercussions for their sense of self or their bodies' wellbeing" (p. 155), while its women are either placated or punished, with their challenges to the status quo often ending in death.

The study is brought to a close by a shorter chapter which considers the representation of the greatest female icon of the Victorian period, Queen Victoria herself. While Chapter 6, playfully sub-titled 'No Country for Old Women', is not exactly a fully-developed conclusion, its focus on the nation's heroine in a book about the representation of Victorian women suggestively brings together several strands of the argument. Primorac claims that, given the Queen's cultural prominence, "there is a surprisingly small amount of neo-Victorian screen texts that re-vision or reimagine this iconic monarch" (p. 178). Those that do tend to focus on Victoria's early years and her courtship with Albert. Works such as *Victoria & Albert* (2001, dir. John Erman) and *The Young Victoria* (2009, dir. Jean-Marc Vallée; screenplay by Julian Fellowes) provide a feminist reading of aspects of the

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Queen's early reign but also end up reasserting traditional gendered and familial expectations. This narrative is even more obvious in one of the most recent examples of screen neo-Victoriana surveyed here: Goodwin's *Victoria*. In the latter series, Jenna Coleman's Victoria is portrayed as "the ideal postfeminist subject: she is a young, sexy, vibrant heroine who relishes her freedom and agency *but not for too long*: she *chooses* to give them up for marriage and motherhood" (p. 182, original emphasis). As Primorac points out at the close of the chapter, this preference for romance plots and youthful sexiness over the Queen's familiar, staid, older image in neo-Victorian dramas underscores "the deep entanglement between postfeminism and neo-Victorianism on screen" (p. 187).

One of the great strengths of Primorac's *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* is the way it pursues this general argument about the interrelationship of postfeminist thought and screen neo-Victorianism through its engaging discussion of an impressive range of textual examples. The influence of postfeminism and aspects of the contemporary entertainment industry certainly help explain how neo-Victorian screen texts seem often to fall short of our ideological expectations, especially in relation to how they represent female agency and experience. Such a conclusion – firm and convincing as it is – rather counteracts the dynamism and generative qualities that Primorac sets out as defining features of screen neo-Victoriana in her introduction. Indeed, it is striking that in the sections that read neo-Victorian adaptations alongside their neo-Victorian literary source texts, the study ends up reinforcing hierarchical ideas of literary primacy and value against which the opening phases of *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* had argued so effectively. In Chapter 5, for instance, Primorac claims that the subversive potential of Sarah Waters's *Affinity* is blunted by Andrew Davies's mainstream, costume-drama-style adaptation which "heteronormativises Sarah Waters' text, taking away the queer critique of Victorian gender roles together with its critique of class relations" (p. 165). Davies's adaptation is clearly not the most radical of neo-Victorian texts, but this privileging of literary fiction is an undercurrent that surfaces elsewhere in *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* and, to an extent, undercuts its attempt to recognise "the relevance of critical discourses on popular culture to the field" (Cox 2017: 109).

While it is important to acknowledge the different economic, generic and aesthetic contexts and characteristics of screen cultures – and it is

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entirely understandable Primorac would do so in attempting to define neo-Victorian screen studies as a distinct area of study – I would argue there is some merit in considering the neo-Victorian as a coherent field of cultural endeavour that pays attention to popular visual culture, literary fiction and much else besides.[2] Neo-Victorian screen adaptations are, of course, entangled in a rich network of images of the period derived frequently from twentieth- and twenty-first-century film and television. It seems slightly limiting, however, to suggest they hardly ever draw upon the archival, academic or literary in constructing their own particular vision of the Victorian past – or indeed that their audiences are entirely unaware of such contexts. *Neo-Victorianism on Screen*, then, not only valuably defines and deepens our understanding of the field of neo-Victorian screen studies; it has also prompted further reflection, at least for this reviewer, on how the neo-Victorian field as a whole might move beyond "the discourses of postmodernism and historiographic metafiction" that have defined it for the past decade or more (Cox 2017: 109). As this monograph and other recent journal publications attest, screen texts, including those that have continued to pour out of film and TV studios over the past few years, are here to stay as a part of that broadened field, and neo-Victorianists working on them will surely return to engage with many of the insights that Primorac provides in her rigorously-argued and wide-ranging work.

Notes

1. *The War of the Worlds* was directed by Gilles Coulier and Richard Clark, written by Howard Overman; *A Christmas Carol* was directed by Nick Murphy and written by Steven Knight; and the *Dracula* miniseries was created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat.
2. Several neo-Victorian scholarly monographs have already favoured a more open approach to neo-Victorian cultures; see, for instance, Ho 2012 and Tomaiuolo 2018.

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