Retro/Futuristic Media Panics: Paper, Glass, and Bodies in Gordon Dahlquist's Glass Books Trilogy

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Abstract:
This article focuses on Gordon Dahlquist's adventure trilogy consisting of *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters* (2006), *The Dark Volume* (2008), and *The Chemickal Marriage* (2012), and the representation of the fantastical technology of 'blue glass books', which upsets the faux-Victorian society into which they are introduced. These 'books', I argue, constitute an important focal point on which the different historical periods and styles that inform the trilogy converge. As such, the glass books figure new, disruptive, and scandalous media, which become legible in different generic constellations. I consider the novels as popular hybrids that mesh neo-Victorian, steampunk, and cyberpunk motifs of media users, readers, and reading experiences. In order to disentangle the generic mash-up, I organise my analysis around the new and familiar affordances and materiality of the glass books, which may be read as standing in for Victorian print and paper, draw on the retro-futuristic resonances of glass, and discuss science fictional screens' contiguousness with their readers' bodies. The resulting corrosive effect on the fictive readers' identities is offset by a return to neo-Victorian images of nineteenth-century object uses.

Keywords: cyberpunk, The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters trilogy, Gordon Dahlquist, materiality, media, objects, reading, sensation, steampunk, technology.

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In 2006, Gordon Dahlquist, a director and playwright in the off-Broadway scene before turning novelist, published the first volume of his Glass Books trilogy. *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters* was followed by the sequels *The Dark Volume* (2008) and *The Chemical Marriage* (2012). The novels are set in a fantastical version of the Victorian period, which combines nineteenth-century culture and society with a fantastical new technology, the eponymous glass books. Dahlquist conceived the first novel as a serial and, for its 2006 UK release, Penguin agreed to publish it in weekly installments delivered to subscribers by post (Dahlquist 2007b: n.p.). The one-volume

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edition was released the following year, and serialisation as an e-book began in 2013. Dahlquist himself spoke about his debut as a "genre novel" in the tradition of nineteenth-century swashbuckling adventures (Dahlquist in Hartman 2006: n.p.). This is also the language and context in which the novels were reviewed and discussed: as plot-driven, immersive fantasy and as mass-marketed popular romance (see Foden 2007: n.p.; Kachka 2008: n.p.). Marie-Luise Kohlke has observed that such popular cultural expressions of neo-Victorianism have rarely figured in criticism because of a high cultural bias valuing cerebral engagements and historical subtlety over mass-market entertainment (Kohlke 2014: 13). Conversation in neo-Victorian studies now increasingly includes such popular fiction aimed at a broader audience, a trend that my article seeks to further and extend to generically hybrid texts that broaden the meaning of the neo-Victorian.

The Glass Books trilogy belongs to this category of novels that aim to entertain their audiences with an intricately manufactured plot, cliff-hangers, romance, action, and the admixture of period detail. Dahlquist deliberately writes within this tradition and explains the historical premises of his work in a piece published on *The Guardian* online. In the article, paradigmatically titled 'Make 'em cry, make 'em laugh, make 'em wait', a phrase variously attributed to sensation novelists Charles Reade and Wilkie Collins, Dahlquist draws parallels between serial media consumption in the nineteenth century and today, and contrasts the prolonged waiting and anticipation of the next installment with the possibility of "immediate gratification" that characterises media access now (Dahlquist 2007b: n.p.). Deliberately positioning his books as popular entertainment within a particular generic tradition, Dahlquist traces the novels' neo-Victorian inspiration to serialised and sensational adventures and romances. In a later interview, he comments on the self-referential moment in the Glass Books trilogy, explaining that

> [i]t's more like a fable, so you're thinking about yourself reading while you're reading it. You're not sinking into an objective reality. […] Part of you is always aware you're reading a book. I don't want to say 'critical distance' – I think there's still an element of escape to the books and hopefully you get sucked into them – but you're aware of what you're doing. For me that's a really pleasurable thing. (Dahlquist in Diston 2013: n.p.)

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In the following, I read the Glass Books trilogy as referencing and commenting on Victorian reading in images that link it to contemporary twenty-first-century digital media. This nexus of reading experience, media, and the media's materiality forms the basis of my analysis. I argue that the Glass Books trilogy can be conceived as generically hybrid fiction, presenting overlapping perspectives on media experiences knotting past, present, future, and fantastical technologies into the plot. The novels depict the multi-layered medium of the fictional glass books as the site where different generic and cultural ideas about media and their readers intersect, laying bare the continuity of assumptions about the dangers of different kinds of 'reading'. The novels' obsessive parsing of the new medium's dangers in different overlapping generic idioms inscribes the tone of "media panics" into the plot: these heated and polarised debates regularly draw on metaphors of seduction, prostitution, and contamination to amplify the negative influence of new media in society, their effects in general and on groups singled out as especially vulnerable in particular, providing a site for the negotiation of norms and boundaries (see Drotner 1999: 596, 604; Drotner 2016). Kirsten Drotner establishes a *long durée* of media panics from print in the eighteenth century to the computer in the present of the 1990s, which mobilise similar rhetorical and affective figures to contain the new technologies and single out users as the targets of moralising and disciplining discourses. Media panics have an imaginary component and may be understood as cross-fertilised by "media fantasies", which summarise the imaginary corollary of existing technologies and uses (Natale and Balbi 2014: 207-208). The plot of the trilogy capitalises on the disruptive elements that the fantastic new media introduce to the diegetic world as well as the resulting anxieties surrounding their effects and affects. The tone and images of such fantastic media panics appear as hyperbolised fiction in the Glass Books trilogy and will bracket my interrogation of their generic processing.

My argument builds on the relevance of the novels' generic hybridity, which not only superimposes the new media of the present onto a re-imagined Victorian past, but also filters this through the tropes of different modes, intermingling in a fantastic mash-up: the (neo-)Victorian, cyberpunk, and steampunk. Each mode engages with discourses on reading, media, and materiality inflected by historical and extrapolated futuristic perspectives. The title of the first book already articulates the fusion of elements that unfolds in the trilogy, evoking the print and paper 'book' and sleek futuristic

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'glass' screen. Thereafter, I turn to explore the material substrate of reading and engage with work on "thing culture" (Freedgood 2006: 8 and *passim*) and materiality in Victorian, neo-Victorian, and steampunk criticism, conceived as an antidote to the anxieties around immersive virtual media.

After an overview of the novels, this article first discusses the glass-books as neo-Victorian media in the context of Victorian discourses on sensation fiction and neo-Victorian memory. In the trilogy, this approach is anchored in metonymies and similes that tie the glass books to print and paper media, particularly the sensation novel and its readers. Thereafter, I read the glass books in relation to steampunk, tracing the significance of 'glass' as a multifaceted retro-futuristic material, before considering how readers' bodies are inserted as circuits among books. The storage of disembodied memories in objects is central to cyberpunk and tends to sideline the individuality of human actors. The literal dispersal of intimate experiences constitutive of identity can be related to the neo-Victorian reading of Victorian material culture as thing culture, which regards the relationship between nineteenth-century owners and their possessions as more authentic and long-lasting. The trilogy's hybridity allows for genre-crossing readings, in which each generic angle highlights a different facet of the novel's preoccupation with reading, media, and their disruptive effects.

1. Glass Book and Exploited Memories

The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters opens with the arrival of the main protagonist, Miss Celeste Temple, in an unnamed nineteenth-century European city. The existence of colonial possessions overseas, as well as steam railways, servants, opium dens, corsets, chaperones, and balls evoke a recognisably neo-Victorian setting. The text projects a world with a familiar real periphery, implying the existence of a colonial Empire and rival European powers that becomes vaguer the closer the narrative moves to the metropolitan spaces, which figure most prominently in the story's settings. Miss Temple is left to navigate the city alone as she arrives from the colonies to marry, only to find that her fiancé has broken off the engagement without giving an explanation. In her search for answers, she crosses paths with the other two main protagonists, Cardinal Chang, an assassin for hire, and Dr Svenson, a private physician and spy to a visiting German prince. Miss Temple's fiancé, Chang's mark, and Svenson's prince attend a mysterious masked ball outside the city at which the three main protagonists all

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independently witness the acts of a secret cultish gathering of industrialists, politicians, aristocrats, and high-ranking military officers (simply called the 'Cabal' in the novels). Using the new blue glass technology, the Cabal aims to subdue opponents and infiltrate high positions in the government.

Once Temple, Chang, and Svenson realise the Cabal's plan, they team up to thwart its machinations. As unlikely allies, the trio resembles popular superhero teams, in which each character commands a special skill and carries recognisable accessories and quirks. The intricate plot and large roster of antagonists grow more complex over the three volumes and are impossible to summarise succinctly. The plot consists of a string of confrontations between various members of the Cabal and the protagonists with chases, fights, and escapes in endless succession. The first novel ends with the main protagonists and their enemies assembled on board a dirigible, which crashes into the ocean with almost all the original villains perishing. Temple, Chang, and Svenson are separated and reach the shore from whence they make their way back to the city in the second volume, while the second tier of villains takes over the Cabal. In the third novel, the use of blue glass as a bioweapon causes mayhem in the city, and the Cabal (again) captures Temple, Chang, and Svenson to conduct an alchemical experiment supposed to resurrect its leader. However, Svenson manipulates the apparatus and blue glass books used in the procedure, thus foiling the last members of the Cabal. The happy ending is completed by Chang and Miss Temple leaving the city as a couple.

Quaint Victorian fashions, etiquette, and morals, an unnamed queen at the head of the state – in short, the novels' blurry geography and period setting create the atmosphere of a literarily familiar, yet strange fictional world, as the Victorian setting is disrupted by a fantastic technology called 'blue glass', which introduces possibilities that seem anachronistic when measured against the markers suggesting a faux-Victorian world and society. Blue glass is under the control of the proliferating group of antagonists, who weaponise its strange affordances as a medium. The 'glass', shaped into books and flat rectangles called 'cards', soaks up memories and makes them consumable and fungible.[1] The blue glass books can be used to directly record and store memories from a person's mind. In the process of 'writing' a glass book, committing one's own memories to a book comes at the price of losing memories, as they are "simply imprinted from the victim's mind […] or actually removed" (Dahlquist 2007a: 495), leaving behind a comatose body or, at the least, memory gaps. Others can then read, or re-live, these memories

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from the original 'owner's' point of view in an immersive and immediate reading experience. Depending on how many memories are consumed, via a single scene recorded in a card or a lifetime in a whole book, these may alter their readers' minds and intrude into their own memories. The more memories a book contains, the more dangerous is its effect on the reader's mind, as the stored experiences become enmeshed with, and indistinguishable from, the reader's own. Reading is then reconfigured as direct absorption through the retina and into the mind so that the reader's memories are enmeshed with those of a stranger.

The uses of blue glass multiply and branch out in the increasingly complicated plot of the trilogy. Over the course of the story, the novels present ever more creative and invasive uses of blue glass that all centre on its mediating properties. Apart from being used as recording devices in the shape of books and smaller cards, the glass also fuses directly with human flesh to produce cyborg-like telepathic creatures or "*living* book[s]" (Dahlquist 2007a: 596, original emphasis). The technology also works as a character-altering substance in a brain-washing procedure simply called the 'Process', and shards of glass are used as weapons to 'inject' emotions into victims. Blue glass books can even absorb a whole mind, so that the harvested mind may be transferred, through reading, to another body, thus holding the promise of immortality. For the readers, immersion in glass books is dangerous, addictive, and sometimes even lethal. Whether read as re-interpreting and updating the past to comment on the present, as rewriting it as alternative steampunk history, or projecting the consequences of new technologies through cyberpunk tropes into a post-cyberpunk fantasy, all these articulations ultimately respond to different constellations of dangerous media.

The glass books' point of reference is two-pronged. Firstly, glass books evoke our contemporary experience of electronic media and cyberpunk extrapolations of technologies that allow for the disembodied and parcellated storage of human memories as data. Secondly, the gendered discourse of glass book reading and the books' skeuomorphic shape suggest an underlying reworking of Victorian discourses relating to corrupting reading materials in the hands of young women, which overlap with fears about the influence of 'new media' and especially social media on its users. For the twenty-first-century reader, the glass books resemble electronic devices that provide access to immersive gaming experiences or the circulation of intimate dreams

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and desires in a post-privacy corporate-controlled economy. In the following, I disentangle the overlapping generic discourses that converge on the glass books, their materials, and reading. Thereafter, I relate the dissolvent qualities to the trilogy's emphasis on simple material tokens to identify characters, arguing that this investment in things draws on nostalgic views of Victorian thing culture and parallels movements in other non-literary neo-Victorian forms of self-expression.

2. Neo-Victorian Paper: Reading and Sensation

The glass books in Dahlquist's novels rework both Victorian reading and contemporary screen culture, by mapping one on the other in the mode of neo-Victorian, steampunk, and cyberpunk fiction. Considering Dahlquist's novels as neo-Victorian fiction highlights the connections the glass books make with paper, print, Victorian reading and contemporary consumption. This is a link that Dahlquist's publisher chose to materially highlight in the serial-publication of the first novel and which is apparent in the sheer heft of the one-volume editions, which run to between 500 and 700 pages each. Both materially and in terms of narrative, the books thus resemble Victorian triple-deckers with their immersive and meandering plots and a vast array of characters warranted by the financial and economic tenets of Victorian publishing. Serial and periodical publication required Victorian authors to regularly write a specific word count to a deadline and fabricate cliff-hangers to retain their readers' interest, a device that Dahlquist employs as well. This not only recreates a narrative device familiar from nineteenth-century popular fiction, but also allows the reader to mimic the affective position of a Victorian consumer of popular fiction, experiencing the frustration and suspense that comes with serial publication. Another narratological reference to Victorian fiction may be found in the use of variable focalisation. The chapters in the Glass Books trilogy are in turn told from the perspectives of Miss Temple, Cardinal Chang, and Dr Svenson in third-person narration. This alternation of viewpoints is reminiscent of sensation novels like Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), which imitates witness statements in a court case by collecting first-person accounts of the alleged crime. In Dahlquist's trilogy, together with serialisation and sheer length, these are "formal imitations" of the Victorian novel (Kohlke 2014: 30), enacting the neo-Victorian by reproducing structures as well as haptic and affective qualities of nineteenth-century popular fiction.

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Dahlquist's novels cast the glass media as being 'like' books; that is, they invite comparisons of blue glass to paper, even as their affordances exceed print and paper books. Such 'excess' in terms of immersion and sensorial engagement evokes the language and discourse of illicit and scandalous Victorian writing and sensation fiction, which the novels frame as dovetailing with today's concerns about digital media consumption. Kirsten Drotner's influential concept of the 'media panic' outlines recurring concerns that are articulated around new media contents and technologies, currently focused on social media in particular. In this vein, Burcu Korkmazer, Sander de Ridder, and Sofie van Bauwel conclude their survey of discourses on social media and gender by stating that

> [s]ocial media platforms are portrayed as unsafe and highly sexualized digital environments. This goes along with a victimization discourse where young people are presented as 'naïve' victims without any agency and misled by the so-called 'false intimacy' of a screen. (Korkmazer, de Ridder, and van Bauwel 2020: 334)

This discourse highlights the continuity of viewing 'new' media as a threat and their users as consumers and addicts rather than as creative participants.

In the trilogy, the characters are not only adventurers but also compulsive readers, making sense of the glass books in terms of familiar Victorian media. When Miss Temple finds a book in the rooms of the Contessa, one of her enemies, it is described as being

> the size of a middling volume from an encyclopedia – 'N' or 'F', perhaps […]. The cover was heavy, as if the glass-maker had emulated the embossed Tuscan leather Miss Temple had seen in the market near St. Isobel's […]. She could see no words on the cover […] nor on the spine. (Dahlquist 2007a: 429)

In similar vein, reading a damaged glass book resembles "ink running on a waterlogged page, but in one's *mind*" (Dahlquist 2009: 283, original emphasis). In their atavistic naming as 'books' with covers and spines, concomitantly turning their users into 'readers', the glass media are tied to

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paper as the means to store information. Comparisons of blue glass books to print also defamiliarise ordinary glass, which is caught up in the transfer of properties to understand the new medium, evident in Miss Temple's discovery of an ordinary mirror: "She […] noticed a small rectangle of glass, no bigger than a page of poetry, hanging from a nail – a mirror" (Dahlquist 2009: 6).

Engaging with these books, each of the three protagonists emerges as a different reader. Cardinal Chang, the opium addict, is defined by his instinct and body. He inhales glass dust and is later implanted with blue glass as part of his enemies' attempts at resurrecting their dead leader in an alchemical procedure. Dr Svenson, by contrast, remains a distanced reader, who can recognise and understand the dangers inherent in the technology, experiment with them, and explain them in detail, not least for the benefit of the reader (see Dahlquist 2007a: 380-382). While these two modes represent opposite ends of engaging with the books, namely the visceral versus the cerebral reader, Miss Temple is the most prominent 'reader' of blue glass books, whose experiences are crucial to the plot and neo-Victorian inflections of historical gendered evocations of corrupting reading.[2] Among the trio of heroes, her place is defined by her accidental consumption of two forbidden and potentially lethal books, written from the memories of her two antagonists, Contessa Rosamonde di Lacquer-Sforza and the mad Comte d'Orkancz, which she only survives by sheer luck as she seems to be immune to its effects: while the Contessa's book contains her lurid erotic adventures, the Comte's has been produced just before his death.

'Reading' these books leaves Miss Temple's mind 'tainted' by the one-dimensionally evil writers, a contamination rendered as a violation of privacy and mental integrity: "She sensed her memories of the book like a stranger's footprints in her mind. They were everywhere" (Dahlquist 2007a: 442). Moreover, "[h]er mind teemed with false memories" (Dahlquist 2009: 21), endangering her own identity. The glass book memories threaten to overwhelm her sense of self:

> —*already*—beneath the surface of her mind, like tiny bubbles in a pot growing to boil. This was the Contessa's blue glass book of memories that Miss Temple had absorbed—and she shuddered to realize that each tiny bubble of memory found an echo in her flesh, each one threatening to expand to

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> prominence in her mind, until the memory blotted out the present altogether. She had peered into the shimmering depths of the blue glass and been changed. How many of its memories had she consumed—experienced in her own body—and thus made her own? How many acts that she had never performed did she now *remember*? (Dahlquist 2009: 8, original emphases)

The reading 'corrupts' by insinuating knowledge that is forbidden to Miss Temple according to Victorian standards of morality and makes her privy to the reasonings of her enemies. The Contessa's sexual memories are so vivid that Miss Temple "wondered if she had become the most thoroughly debauched virgin in all history" (Dahlquist 2007a: 433).

Reading as a bodily sensorial experience is foregrounded when Dr Svenson is asked to "taste" a book (Dahlquist 2013: 453), evoking reading as ingestion. Drawing on the same idea of somatic effects, inhaling blue glass dust leads to symptoms similar to consumption, that is, coughing up blue mucus (see Dahlquist 2013: 450). This metaphor of reading as (voracious) appetite and compulsive eating of poisoned foodstuff references the imagery deployed in Victorian diatribes against sensation fiction and its female readers, with the genre condemned for causing affective disorders and irregularities in readers' bodies. H. L. Mansel's oft-cited condemnation of the genre as "[p]reaching to the nerves instead of the judgement" (Mansel 1863: 481) casts these effects as immediate and uncontrolled intrusions. Serial publication additionally underwrote the image of insatiable appetites, as periodical installments and part-issues ensured an endless stream of exciting new reading material with authors outbidding each other to hook readers. Miss Temple is indeed overwhelmed, and the narrator frames this as the book "swallow[ing]" her (Dahlquist 2007a: 430). She initially appears as the vulnerable victim of intrusive blue glass memories that confer sexual experiences that she had not intentionally sought out. Her reading experiences seem to suggest sexual violence and even rape, but the story revaluates her experiences as she gains the upper hand over her memories. Eventually, Miss Temple makes use of her implanted knowledge to best her enemies, drawing on her accidental expertise. Thus, accessing knowledge that would have been forbidden to 'proper' Victorian women proves an albeit unsettling move towards Miss Temple's empowerment. The novels fashion her as an

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emancipated reader, who manages to turn the Cabal's weapons against them and, at the same time, breaks out of the Victorian ideal of passive femininity.[3]

The popularity of sensation fiction in the mid-nineteenth century was at the centre of debates on the commodification of literature, and criticism of its alleged harmful effect on public morality, especially as regarded young female readers, often carried sexual overtones. As a site of 'media panic', the discourse on the sensation novel drew on fears of commoditised affect, seduction, and addiction. What was ultimately at stake in the sensation debate was the purity of the female reader and, mapped onto her body, the boundary of public and private life (see, e.g., Allan 2013: 95; Flint 1993: 51, 64, 275). The Glass Books trilogy recreates these Victorian concerns centred on the fantastic affordances of glass book reading that are especially realised by Miss Temple's 'corruption'.

The glass books not only exceed print because of the quantity of data stored in them, but also because they offer a qualitatively new mode of accessing that information. The experience of reading blue glass memories is characterised by unprecedented immediacy, which Dr Svenson experiences as mesmerising and disorienting.

> He set down his burning cigarette on the tomb next to him and looked into the card. It took a moment for the blue veil to part, but once it had Svenson found himself amidst a confusing swirl of images, moving rapidly from one to another without any logic he could discern. […] He pulled his gaze up from the card and exhaled. He was shaking, it was just as involving [as his previous blue glass reading], he had been as much outside himself as before. (Dahlquist 2007a: 188)

Glass-book readers are immediately involved in the experiences of another, offering the reader a new subject position: that of the original 'owner' of the experience. Stepping into another character's perspective also rehearses the narratological organisation of the novels, which tell the story alternating between third-person limited viewpoints. Reading another glass card, Svenson finds himself "standing and turning his gaze about" the scene (Dahlquist 2007a: 147), so that his perception of his surroundings is determined by the recorded movements and sense impressions that he cannot escape or transcend, imitating the same technique employed in the novel

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itself. Svenson recognises the possibilities in the glass books: "the limit was sensation itself – what travels, or adventures or thrills that one person had known could no[w] be imprinted onto one of these books for anyone to consume […], to experience *bodily* for themselves" (Dahlquist 2007a: 381, original emphasis). The doctor's use of "sensation" further draws a line back to the Victorian debates about sensation literature and the sensorial stimulation of readers through excitement and suspense.

The information that the blue glass contains and makes available is described as dreams, past experiences, and memories. The latter carry particular relevance in the neo-Victorian project of exploring the past through the present, and vice versa. In her study *Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*, Kate Mitchell highlights neo-Victorianism as an enterprise embroiled in "cultural memory […] and broader notions of mnemonic practice" (Mitchell 2010: 13). Akin to neo-Victorian re-vision, memories altered by blue glass reading potentially change and adapt to accommodate the present in which remembering takes place. The chaotic circulation of highly subjective snippets of experiences in the Glass Books trilogy suggests that neo-Victorian fictional approaches to representing the past may be as partial and fragmentary, relying on "the anecdotal, the subjective and the personal" over linearity and teleological retellings (Mitchell 2010: 30). The recorded 'memories' encapsulated in blue glass media do not so much ensure an ordered or nostalgic recollection as project the process of recall as chaotic, unstable, and separable from the experiencing body. The resulting confusion concerning chronological progression and point of view adds to the complexity of the story rather than clearing it up. Detached from the original 'owner's' mind and context, and reintegrated into another person's mnemonic identity, the boundaries between individual memories dissolve. In Dahlquist's trilogy, this postmodern animation of history as memory is hyberbolised and sensationalised as it is tied to the fantastical technology.

3. Steampunk Glass: Victorian Futures

'Steampunk' was a tongue-in-cheek coinage by K. W. Jeter in *Locus* magazine in 1987, formed on the model of the then burgeoning genre of cyberpunk (see, e.g., Cherry and Mellins 2011: 6). Both subgenres of speculative fiction explore the impact of technologies on society, in a proleptic (cyberpunk) or analeptic (steampunk) mode. Highlighting the

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'glass' in the title of Dahlquist's novel allows for further generic links leading to the media and surfaces of cyberpunk and steampunk. William Gibson's seminal cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* opens with a reminder of reality's constant mediation through screens. The "television sky" above Chiba provides a metaphor that runs through the opening chapter and highlights the omnipresence of screen media and their glitches, when the sky seems to be "tuned to a dead channel" in the novel's famous first sentence (Gibson 1995: 13, 9).

In steampunk maker culture, brass welder goggles, pince-nez, and monocles are a staple in cos-play displays, and Datamancer's iconic steampunk laptop features a working screen seamlessly integrated with the object's metalwork (see https://datamancer.com/about/). Although brass is the signature material of steampunk DIY culture, glass and its mediating qualities, while less visually prominent, are equally important to illuminate steampunk's material fantasies: the goggles evoke the subculture's central figures of the Victorian scientist and inventor/tinkerer. In the Glass Books trilogy, Doctor Lorenz, the Cabal's leading scientist, is constantly wearing the stereotypical pair of goggles, as are his victims undergoing the blue glass-powered 'Process': strapped to a table, they too are wearing goggles that leave behind a distinctive scar-like imprint around their eyes as a sign of their allegiance to the Cabal (see Dahlquist 2007b: 287). Goggles and lenses suggest an embodied version of steampunk's inherently slanted vision, one that is always slightly off, intentionally altered and tinged by the anachronistic perspective on the past. Drawing on Isobel Armstrong's work, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn trace the metaphorical work of transparent and reflecting glass surfaces in neo-Victorian fiction. They argue that glass figures as a representation of "doublings" and "double-views", literally reflecting neo-Victorianism's preoccupation with the past and/in the present (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 144).[4]

The combination of a familiar neo-Victorian setting with a fantastic technology generically places the trilogy in the orbit of popular steampunk. Indeed, the ending of the trilogy in *The Chemickal Marriage* reads like a nod to one of steampunk's arguable nineteenth-century progenitors, Jules Verne. To escape the restrictions and conventions on land, Miss Temple decides to live with her eventual lover, Cardinal Chang, "[o]n a ship without destination" (Dahlquist 2013: 512). Their relationship, she asserts, "cannot exist in the world. In *this* world. […] There is no *place* for it" (Dahlquist 2013:

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511, original emphases). With the ocean functioning as a utopian space of escape from the societal conventions on land, the text evokes Captain Nemo and his exile on board the Nautilus in the serialised *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas: A World Tour Underwater* (March 1869 – June 1870),[5] an intertext that might be read as reinforcing the novel's steampunk credentials. In Jules Verne's text, one of the Nautilus' surprising features are the sliding walls of its saloon that reveal large windows on each side. Aronnax goes from "bending over the showcases" displaying marine specimens in the saloon to "lean[ing] against the windows" and watching the sea life outside, marvelling at the "transparency" of the sea water around them (Verne 1994: 100, 102).

The 'glass' in the glass books suggests a material history that ties the fantastic glass technology to Vernean and Victorian projections of the future and steampunk's appropriations of these ideas. In her book *Victorian Glasswords*, Armstrong traces the Victorians' obsession with glass and argues that a

> scopic culture developed from the possibilities of just three vitreous elements combined and recombined, the glass panel, the mirror, and the lens. […] [I]n the nineteenth century glass became a third or middle term: it interposed an almost invisible layer of matter between the seer and the seen – the sheen of a window, the silver glaze of the mirror, the convexity or concavity of the lens […]. (Armstrong 2008: 4-5)

Glass and glass-mediated visuality, as Armstrong argues, were ubiquitous in the Victorian city and blended with consumer desire in the urban landscape as well as facilitating revolutionary scientific discoveries. Glass is both fantastic and mundane but always foregrounds constellations of "scopic culture". The architecture of Dahlquist's unnamed city too teems with glass structures and objects apart from glass windowpanes, suggesting a continuum between the glass books, also described as "tiny window[s]" (Dahlquist 2007a: 149), and the city itself. Celeste Temple's window shopping gives a glimpse of this space where the material of the books also permeates the environment (see Dahlquist 2007a: 4, 394).

The medium of glass both evokes the retro-futuristic vision of steampunk and adds to an understanding of the fictional glass books as not merely fantastic but also retro-futuristic, that is, drawing on past images of

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the future. Glass is a particularly potent mediator of such fantasies. Dahlquist's fantastic material continues Victorian views of glass as embodying progress, realised in the Crystal Palace, train stations, photographic plates, and microscopic discoveries. Amy Bix comments on the depiction of the built environment of steampunk novels as capturing

> [a]t its best, […] Victorians' love of what historian David Nye calls the "technological sublime." Iron and glass combined as fundamental materials to form England's then-radical Iron Bridge (first completely made of cast iron, 1779) and the Crystal Palace of London's Great Exhibition of 1851, both entrancing crowds. (Bix 2013: 236)

Glass as the material of progress evokes a historical and retro-futuristic context of Victorian fantasies. For instance, in 1845 and 1855, the House of Commons Committee on Metropolitan Communications debated proposals to span London, and specifically its congested quarters, with glass aqueducts to channel people and traffic across the city (Armstrong 2008: 157-158). Although this ambitious project was never realised, these projections of glass as the natural material of modernity and the future did materialise in the architecture of railway stations, the Crystal Palace, and the introduction of large shop windows that changed the urban environment and the way people moved through it.

In Dahlquist's novels, mirrors, especially one-way mirrors, feature prominently in the plot, as do lavish interiors with crystal chandeliers, gold mirrors, greenhouses, glass domes, and even a faux-Victorian disco ball, "a multifaceted ball of glittering glass […] quite as large as Miss Temple's head" hanging from the chandelier (Dahlquist 2007a: 396), creating an urban landscape with ubiquitous vitreous surfaces. As a consequence, observing others and being on display emerge as the characters' default condition when moving through this environment, so that watching passers-by through a one-way window "is like looking into a fish tank", while the narrator comments that entering a greenhouse equals stepping into an "aquarium", echoing Miss Temple's perception of herself as a "fish" floating among the hooks of consumer desire while browsing shop windows (Dahlquist 2007a: 414, 256).

The voyeurism and suspicion that pervade scopic interactions thematically culminate in Cardinal Chang's discovery of a panoptical prison

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building. As a knowledgeable inhabitant of this apparently glass-obsessed city,

> Chang knew that in such circumstances the incarcerated began to act, despite themselves, as if they *were* being watched at all times […]. Chang snorted at the perfect ideological *aptness* of the current structure to its current masters. (Dahlquist 2007a: 481, original emphases).

The glass books as media for memories thus exist in a cityscape defined by glass and panoptical conditions. The frequent discovery that mirrors are actually one-way windows maintains the constant threat of being unknowingly subjected to another's gaze and judgement. Miss Temple's "[g]azing still more intently into each exotic display" presented in shop windows (Dahlquist 2007a: 4) in the opening chapter is repeated in the later reading of glass books, as both instances rely on glass as Armstrong's earlier cited "middle term" that privileges looking over touching, with the glass books focusing and holding the reader's attention through spectacular display and making their audience amenable to manipulation. The new inventions based on blue glass and its voyeuristic pleasures and dangers are thus not completely alien to the fictional world but may suggest a continuum of different uses and qualities of glass. This also opens inroads into reading blue glass books as screens.

The similarity, and even continuity, between Victorian uses of glass and the screen forms the basis of Judith Roof's chapter on glass cases, which explores Victorian strategies of translating power into display and then traces the resulting visual regimes to the computer screen (see Roof 2000: 113). In Roof's account, glass organises environments and media as diverse as the museum, the shop window, print advertising, and the graphical operations of the Windows system family running on PCs, by providing a position of mastery carrying the surveying gaze (see Roof 2000: 116).[6] In Dahlquist's novels, this articulation of control and visuality through glass is spelled out from the macroscopic level of the city and its buildings to the private consumption of glass cards. Looking at and looking through vitreous surfaces, discovering others and being caught watching behind one-way windows, panopticism and voyeurism structure a great part of the plot. The fantastical glass books are couched in the idiom of actual Victorian fantasies of the

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future. As a material embodying progress in the nineteenth century, glass provides a springboard for the retro-futuristic sensibilities of steampunk.

Attention to things and materials, and their futuristic possibilities, is an important and often constitutive part of steampunk novels. Stefania Forlini underlines the point that

> [i]n both its literary and material manifestations, steampunk is about learning to read all that is folded into any particular created thing – that is, learning to connect the source materials to particular cultural, technical, and environmental practices, histories, and economies of meaning and value. (Forlini 2010: 73)

Moreover, "[f]irst and foremost, steampunk is about things – especially technological things – and our relationships to them", Forlini asserts, proceeding to argue that–"[a]s a sub-genre of science fiction, [steampunk] explores the difference an object can make" (Forlini 2010: 72), not least to individuals, their lives, and identities. Steffen Hantke emphasises the same point, tying this preoccupation back to steampunk's relationship to one of its precursor genres:

> Partly due to its close ties to science fiction, steampunk focuses on technology as the crucial factor in its understanding and portrayal of Victorianism. In adopting the name "steampunk," that is to say, in choosing the steam engine as the most appropriate icon of the past to describe itself, it makes technology its main focus. (Hantke 1999: 247)

This preoccupation with technology also implies an interest in human interactions with machines and their impact on society. As part of a wider subculture, steampunk art and fan-objects are an especially prominent aspect in the development of steampunk aesthetics, material culture, and DIY ethos, through which steampunks try to "re-access what they see as the affective value of the material world of the nineteenth century" (Onion 2008: 138-139). Steampunk is interested in the materiality of this technology, emphasising the affective potential and haptic pleasure that contemporary technological devices in their mass-produced "digital silhouette[s]" seem to lack, having

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been designed as "machines without machinery" (Bix 2013: 242, 243). Steampunk's ethics of DIY tinkering lays bare the workings of a device and restores the machinery to view. This aesthetics confronts the sleek and seamless design of much black-boxed contemporary technology and invites amateur interventions.

In this sense, today's laptops and mobile phones are as mysterious as blue glass books. Rather than steam and brass, Dahlquist substitutes alchemy and "indigo clay" (Dahlquist 2007a: 163 and *passim*), that is, fictive rare earths, with endless fantastic properties if mixed and processed. Mike Perschon argues that the incorporation of magical rather than scientific innovations is a recent development in the genre as "[n]ewer steampunk works utilise alchemy or occult ritual to develop steampunk technologies" and "steampunk technologies require some facet of 'magic' in order to be rendered plausible" (Perschon 2010: 140). On the entwining of magic and technology, Perschon quotes Lavie Tidhar, who suggests that

> [t]he underlying theme of all fiction within the Steampunk sphere resorts to that moment *whereby technology transcends understanding and becomes, for all intents and purposes, magical*. (Tidhar qtd. in Perschon 2010: 140, original emphases)[7]

The actual functioning of blue glass technology remains obscure while its sleek lines and surfaces lure the viewer in, recreating the appeal of streamlined minimalist design that hides individual components in a uniform shell. While glass is a tangible and seemingly mundane part of the fictional city, it dissolves and disappears in the reading of the alchemically-treated blue glass of the books in immersive experiences facilitated by the magical properties of indigo clay. This confrontation then reproduces the twenty-first-century lay users' experience of technology as increasingly invisible and deliberately black-boxed, a situation that directly inspired steampunk maker-culture to "restore machinery to a place of visible consciousness" (Bix 2013: 243). Dahlquist exacerbates this experience of impenetrable technological functioning by substituting alchemy for circuit boards, processors, and hard drives. This overrides the utopian impulse of steampunk maker culture and instead emphasises how impenetrable design creates quasi fantastical technology. The glass books as fictional objects combine these futuristic

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imaginaries, drawing on the rich reservoir of meanings inscribed in the material. Rather than following the optimism of the steampunk tinkerer, the Glass Books trilogy spells out the dangers inherent in the material's medial qualities. The scopic culture facilitated through both ordinary and blue glass is one of paranoia and surveillance, in which secret plots and desires are arranged, recorded, and destroyed by the glass.

In 1968, Jean Baudrillard described the atmospheric value of glass as "purity, reliability, and objectivity, along with all those connotations of hygiene and prophylaxis which make it truly the material of the future – a future, after all, that is to be one of disavowal of the body" (Baudrillard 2005: 43). This uncomplicated view of glass as a design element communicating enlightened values in the visual/material grammar of consumer products is complicated in cyberpunk. When reading the material of glass as a *pars pro toto* for the screen, a trope that the trilogy suggests, the "disavowal of the body" in the future lies at the centre of cyberpunk's engagement with the (often) dystopian implications of the medium.

4. Post-Cyberpunk Bodies: Posthuman Readers

Dahlquist's fiction renders the material of glass as an ambiguous substance, figuring the future as offering immersive and dangerous experiences reminiscent of tropes and motifs from cyberpunk. The genre projects fears of the dystopian potential inherent in present-day technologies into the near-future and parses the interplay of transnational corporate power and the politics of virtual space in regimes of resistance and surveillance. Brian McHale describes the ubiquitous experience at the root of cyberpunk projections as

> the potent illusion, experienced (I suppose) by all computer users, sophisticated and unsophisticated alike, of gazing into (or even moving around inside) some space lying somehow 'within' or 'behind' the flat screen of the computer monitor. (McHale 1992: 155)

In this sense, cyberpunk serves as a fictional mode to work through the apprehensions and turmoil of new media. It ramps up the intensity of this experience, making visible the ontological implications of entering and moving in the virtual microworlds of cyberspace. The boundaries between

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reality and cyberspace become blurry, giving rise to a sense of paranoia that is amplified by society imagined as replete with and directed by conspiracies (see Aupers 2012: 29).

Several of these concerns may be mapped onto the glass books as images for digital media and new immersive environments. In the novels, the conspiratorial Cabal comprises members of "the Ministry, the military, the Institute, [and] other individuals of power", including industrial magnates (Dahlquist 2007a: 230), forming a secret society with internally shifting allegiances that uses blue glass technology for blackmail and control to stage a putsch (see Dahlquist 2007a: 574; Dahlquist 2009: 116). Reading blue glass books suggests immersive games. Miss Temple 'entering' a glass book is described as "plung[ing] into the experience of several lifetimes piled up in delirious succession" (Dahlquist 2007a: 430). Similarly, Dr Svenson's reading appears as a 'diving' into the glass card's vivid contents:

> It was like entering someone else's dream. After a moment the blue cast of the glass vanished as if he pierced a veil … he was staring into a room – a dark comfortable room with a great red sofa and hanging chandeliers and luxurious carpets – and then […] the image moved, as if he was walking, or standing and turning his gaze about the salon – and he saw people, people who were looking right at him. He could hear nothing save the sound of his own breath, but his mind had otherwise fully entered the space of these images – moving images – like photographs, but not like them also, at once more vivid and less sharp, more fully dimensional and incomprehensibly infused with sensation […]. (Dahlquist 2007a: 147-148, un-bracketed ellipses in the original)

This experience is complicated by the fact that Dr Svenson is here inhabiting the body of a woman, Mrs Marchmont, who has a sexual encounter with the Prince, Svenson's employer. The perspective is hence 'queered' and allows the glass card reader, Dr Svenson, to feel the woman's sexual desire and orgasm, which arouses him as well. The scene then starts again from the beginning, running in a loop as individual glass cards can only hold short sequences of memories. This kind of blue glass recording, which repeats only one scene for the pleasure of the rapt viewer, particularly highlights the

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obsessive nature of the medium. Repetition and seriality are crucial to the effects and economy of pornography (see Schaschek 2014: 6) and are mobilised in critiques of new media and their contents, because their temporalities are imagined as disrupting 'healthy', linear and end-stopped reading and viewing experiences.

In this scene of immersion in blue glass memories, Dr Svenson grapples with the new medium's extraordinary quality, trying to make sense of the experience by placing it in the context of another technology, photography, so that the glass books are used and understood in the familiar framework of nineteenth-century medial ecology. This foregrounds the situatedness of the character in the fictional neo-Victorian world by highlighting his necessarily limited knowledge. Notably, this central description of glass books as "moving images" leaves out film as a point of reference, which is especially striking since film is the medium that not only seems to match the glass books more closely in terms of experiential quality, but whose critical vocabulary also proliferates in the text and paratext of the novels. In psychoanalytically informed film theory, discussion of the oneiric qualities of film and cinema are used to describe the medium-specific experience of reception (see, e.g., Rascaroli 2002: n.p.).[8] The dream-like effect of the glass books is already evoked in the title of the first volume, *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters*. This reading draws not only on readers' knowledge of the medium itself but also the critical discourse on the media-specific qualities of film and the cinema experience. Staying within the media experiences available to the (neo-)Victorian consumer, the glass books may thus be triangulated with the sensation craze and the early moving images of nineteenth-century film as well as contemporary screen media that involve users in immersive environments, such as video games and virtual reality.

For the twenty-first-century reader, blue glass books evoke the experience of inhabiting an avatar in an impossibly vivid gaming experience. The phrasing of the passage is similar to how Janet H. Murray, in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, discusses immersion in games as

> the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. We enjoy the movement of our familiar world, the feeling of alertness that

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> comes from being in this new place, and the delight that comes from learning to move within it. Immersion can entail the flooding of the mind with sensation, the overflow of sensory stimulation […]. (Murray 1997: 99)

The literal sense of 'immersion', as the body enters a different element, and the changed or distorted sensorial experience resulting from plunging into the same is also evident in Dr Svenson's account. His act of 'reading' resonates with Murray's phrasing of immersion experienced in entering the virtual environment of games and highlights the fantastic strangeness of the glass books while evoking the extraordinary spaces "'within' or 'behind'" the screen (McHale 1992: 155). Blue glass does not create a networked virtual space superseding reality but rather extends and reconfigures individual experience and the notion of memory.

In cyberpunk, living through, or even in, the machine complicates and rearranges the relationship between body and mind, and between memory and identity. Cyborgian and posthuman entities accommodate the resulting new "centrifugal self" (McHale 1992: 161) and propose different versions of connections between cyberspace, bodies, and machines. Information becomes unfettered, independent of material substrates, and endlessly transferable so that bodies are understood in terms of immaterial information rather than substance.

The Glass Books trilogy heavily draws on a cyberpunk conceptualisation of memory and recall. The modification of memories, on the one hand, and their disembodied storage in external repositories "for anyone to consume" (Dahlquist 2007a: 382), on the other, is a central theme in cyberpunk. Dahlquist's glass books function as "prosthetic extensions" (Bukatman 1993: 42) for their reader and the reader's altered identity, producing a sort of "terminal" subjectivity or "*terminal identity*" (Bukatman 1993: 9 and *passim*, original emphasis) with modified memories. The posthuman need not be a literal cyborg but may also denote those new subjectivities that result from combinations of "terminal identity". Cyberpunk texts are often concerned with grafted experiences that invade the individual's mind and erase the boundaries between 'real' and implanted memories. Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and his short story "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale" (1966) have influentially established this trope, not least through Ridley Scott's and Paul Verhoeven's

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popular film adaptations (1982 and 1989, respectively). More recently, the computer game *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) features a quest involving implanted memories that seem real to the victim, and variations on this theme permeate many cyberpunk texts concerned with the porosity of identity fragmenting the contained body and mind.

The function of memories in cyberpunk intersects with the notion of dreams in the Glass Books trilogy, which are shorthand for the same notion of (formerly) inalienable aspects of identity that become uncontrollably mobile and externalised: glass books and glass cards holding memories are passed between characters, stolen, destroyed, and retrieved. The glass books have a similar effect to cyberpunk technologies, interfacing with humans and letting externally stored, disembodied memories circulate and invade readers' minds while being erased for their original 'owners'. One of the victims of the procedure describes this as "[c]onfusing", since "*intimate* details of my life are missing – not about my employers but about *me*" (Dahlquist 2009: 117, original emphasis) after she has given over her memories to the Cabal for blackmailing her superiors. The resulting composite memories are the product of readers staring into glass surfaces, in which the unified self is 'terminated' while the 'terminal' creates new, hybrid identities. However, set not in the near-future but the neo-Victorian fictional past, invaded by a fantastical, even magical element, the Glass Books trilogy displays a post-cyberpunk sensibility, which substitutes extrapolation with magic or "dark science" (Dahlquist 2007a: 250), picking up and refracting some classical cyberpunk tropes.

The Glass Books trilogy does not conform to the generic tenet of cyberpunk as an extrapolated near-future dystopia as it rather gestures towards a faux-Victorian past. Nevertheless, the effects of the blue glass technology build on familiar cyberpunk tropes of unreliable and fungible memories, and sinister conspirators orchestrating the exploitation and pacification of the populace through media that penetrates users' intimate lives, making experiences public commodities and changing the users' own memories of them. These images of a weaponised technology allowing access to formerly private and now mediatised spaces and the resulting interpenetration of user and machine, or reader and medium, on the level of body and identity, resonate with central conflicts in cyberpunk.

The Glass Books trilogy offers an alchemical version of the cyborg in the creation of what might be termed 'blue glass women'. The Cabal's

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mastermind “transfigure[s]” three women into living glass books that are able to probe his enemies’ minds and project their thoughts in a kind of hypnotic crowd control or “alchemical mind-bludgeoning, dream-sniffing, thought-eating” (Dahlquist 2009: 109, 477). Miss Temple contends with the last remaining glass woman, Mrs Marchmoor: Miss Temple “turned to face the woman – the glass *creature* – the slick blue surface of her flesh, the impassive fixity of her expression belied by the wicked amusement in her laugh, and the subtle curl of her full, gleaming lips” (Dahlquist 2009: 202, original emphasis). The glass woman can directly fuse with the books that are made of the same material of indigo clay as her transformed body:

> Mrs Marchmoor extended one slender arm towards the book, the cloak falling away to either side, the fingers of her hand uncurling like the stalks of some unclassified tropical plant. […] At the point where the woman’s finger tip ought to have clicked against the cover like a tumbler striking a tabletop, it instead passed directly through, as if into water.
>
> ‘Glass … is a liquid…’ whispered Mrs Marchmoor.
>
> At the intrusion of her finger the book began to glow. She slowly inserted the whole of her hand, and then, like the curling smoke from a cigarette, twisting, glowing azure lines began to swirl inside the book. Mrs Marchmoor […] extended her fingers, as if she were tightening the fit of a leather glove. (Dahlquist 2009: 203, un-bracketed ellipses in the original)

The question whether the glass women are still “alive” or even “human” (Dahlquist 2007a: 512) remains unanswered, while “any questions of *identity* can be laid to rest” (Dahlquist 2009: 497, original emphasis). The ambiguity of the glass women’s bodies and their fusion with the alchemical technology running rampant in the novels lets them appear like cyborgian creatures that fuse human and organic form with alchemical vitreosity, giving them superhuman power over others and direct access to the information stored in blue glass. For them, human minds and glass books are almost indistinguishable resources. Rather than exploring the feminist potential of the cyborg, like Donna Haraway’s influential manifesto, the glass women, or “*living* book[s]” (Dahlquist 2007a: 596, original emphasis) follow popular representations of female cyborgs as sexualised and dehumanised. This is

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made clear from the beginning, when the Comte leads one of the women, "like an animated sculpture of blue glass […] by a leather leash linked to a leather collar" (Dahlquist 2007a: 594).

Approaching the novels as post-cyberpunk elucidates a sometimes irritating aspect of the plot: the proliferation of antagonists (see Kilgore 2020: 54). One reviewer complained that "[a]s Celeste remarks at one point, 'there are too many names'" (Foden 2007: n.p.).[9] One technique of this type of mystery story is to "multiply identities until identity itself becomes a maze" (Foden 2007: n.p.). While the labyrinthine plot and multitude of characters can be viewed as a nod to the Victorian serial and the material exigencies of its production, they also dovetail with a specifically cyberpunk understanding of humans as temporary repositories of data. Hence, I read Dahlquist's arguable narrative shortfall as situating the Glass Books trilogy within the cyberpunk discourse of posthumanism. Cyberpunk ontologies deprivilege the human and reduce bodies to nodes in the exchange of information. This inserts bodies, alongside paper and glass, as another material through which the glass books' dreams may be imagined to flow.

The glass books figuratively occupy the place of those external electronic devices that upset humanist distinctions and valuations of the human. The notion that all objects are basically constituted by information blurs the boundaries between humans and non-human materials, with "the flesh of life becom[ing] the flesh of dreams" (Dahlquist 2013: 409). This phrase describes an alchemical procedure by which the human body is consumed and transcended. The attendant mobility and fungibility of identities and bodies is exploited for the purposes of plotting, so that Miss Temple, for example, can vow to destroy her enemy in "whatever body holds him" (Dahlquist 2013: 89). In fact, the major antagonist of the first novel, the inventor Comte d'Orkancz, dies after his mind has been absorbed into a book and is later resurrected in a different body. The finale of the third book, the "Chemickal Marriage", describes an alchemical ritual in which Chang, implanted with blue glass, and Miss Temple are harnessed to machines that are supposed to resurrect the Comte in Chang's body, and also cleanse the Comte's mind of "the taint of death" (Dahlquist 2007a: 167). This plan is ultimately foiled because, by sleight of hand, Dr Svenson exchanges the glass books holding Chang's and the Comte's memories, respectively, and reattaches the tubes of the apparatus so that Miss Temple's mind is cleared from the Comte's memories she had absorbed before. Both ludicrous and

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suspenseful, juggling the characters' minds caught in the books foregrounds the interchangeability of bodies and minds as vessels and information. Both bodies and books emerge as cases temporarily housing memories,[10] akin to mechanical or virtual storage units. Reduced to (often sick and decaying) shells for other people's memories that may be re-extracted and re-circulated, the human bodies and glass books enter a relationship that is symmetrical rather than hierarchical. Concatenated by the flow of memories, or information, the human protagonists' individuality ceases to matter, so that Dr Svenson muses on how allegiances and motivations are increasingly hard to disentangle due to "different figures overlap[ing] maliciously", figures that are "intertwined and deadly" (Dahlquist 2007a: 167, 238).

5. Neo-Victorian Objects: Biographical Things

In the collisions of blue glass media, its smooth surfaces and mind-altering depths, with mundane objects, the novels also strikingly display juxtaposed cyberpunk and neo-Victorian notions about materiality: virtual bodies have to become material. All three main characters are depicted as harbouring some affection for certain personal possessions, which could be described as "biographical objects" that Violet Morin argues exist in a relationship with their users so that human and thing modify and animate each other (Morin 1969: 133). Morin regrets the disappearance of the natural "biographisme" of pre-industrial objects (Morin 1969: 134), a notion that evokes the recovery of things' "affective value" (Onion 2008: 138) that steampunk maker culture subscribes to as well as neo-Victorian iterations of "identification and identity constructions based on wholeness" (Boehm-Schnittker and Gruss 2011: 15). Janet Hoskins quotes Morin's argument that biographical objects are indeed an important aspect of a person's sense of self because of their long-standing association with their owners and their role as "witness[es]": "The biographical object 'imposes itself as the witness of the fundamental unity of its user, his or her everyday experience made into a thing'" (Morin qtd. in Hoskins 2009: 78).[11] The idea of objects gaining personal value through their inextricable and long-term link with their owners, whose identities are thereby solidified, helps to outline the role of objects as counterparts to the translucent glass books that undermine stable identities.

Glass books as objects are handled by different protagonists, stolen, and destroyed. Their threat to individual identity compounds with their precarious status as property as it is also often unclear whose perspective and

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memories they convey. Personal objects in *The Glass Books* are put to work for a sense of biographical continuity vis-a-vis the corrosive effect of blue glass reading: like the protagonists of superhero comics or folktales, each of the three main protagonists is identified with a signature accessory. While the blue glass books mediate memories that threaten, destabilise, and eventually erase individual memories and identities, the novels insist on the stability of material objects and especially personal items. The main protagonists are insistently identified with trademark accessories, which turn them into readily identifiable types. A conversation between the protagonists highlights the significance of things for identification:

> "I don't mean to be impertinent," observed Svenson, "but when I overheard men speaking of you – they called you 'Cardinal'."
> "It is what some call me," said Chang. "It derives from the coat."
> "And do you know," said Miss Temple, "that Doctor Svenson recognized me by the color of my boots? Already we have so many interests in common." (Dahlquist 2007a: 214)

Dress as a significant part of characterisation recurs in the novel, and Miss Temple's comic attempt at making conversation turns out to be a valid observation. In the first volume of the trilogy, the reader participates in this game of identification: each chapter is topped by the illustration of an object that is to play a major role in the section, often also identifying the point of view the narrator will inhabit. These illustrations include Cardinal Chang's tinted glasses (Chapter 2, titled 'Cardinal'), the doctor's medical bag (Chapter 3, 'Surgeon') and cigarette case (Chapter 6, 'Quarry'), and Miss Temple's boots (Chapter 7, 'Royale'), among others.

Not only can the protagonists be recognised by the things they wear, but these also have an impact on their identity. Cardinal Chang incorporates his trademark red coat into his identity to the point that he takes his alias from its conspicuous colour, and the reader never learns his real name.

> He was called Cardinal from his habit of wearing a red leather topcoat that he'd stolen from the costume rack of a travelling theatre. It had been winter, and he'd taken it because the

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> ensemble included boots and gloves as well as the coat […]. The boots and gloves had since been replaced, but he had preserved the coat, despite wearing it through all weathers. Though few men in his line of work sought to identify themselves in any way, he found that, in truth, those who sought him […] would find him even if he wore the drabbest wool. (Dahlquist 2007a: 65)

In Miss Temple's mind, too, the coat and the man who wears it are closely entwined when she ruminates that "one had to admit the red coat was ostentatious … and Chang's character *was* wicked" (Dahlquist 2009: 186; original ellipses and emphasis). Cardinal Chang regards his possessions with affection and as providing a sense of stability through time. Thus, shedding the coat also means shedding the past associated with the object:

> Few objects caught Cardinal Chang's sentiment, and most of those – his red leather coat, his stick, his boots – he had already sacrificed. Within his genuine regret for their loss, he nevertheless detected a vein of relief … the more of his past that disappeared, the less he felt its cold constraint. (Dahlquist 2013: 96, original ellipses).

Consequently, in the last chapter of *The Chemickal Marriage* that concludes the trilogy, Chang owns "a newly made long coat of red leather" and "the whole of his former life had been reclaimed with a scatter of gold coin" (Dahlquist 2013: 512).

The interactions between Miss Temple and Cardinal Chang flow through objects. When Chang searches for Miss Temple and only finds her footwear in a ransacked hotel room, for instance, he is touched by the sentimental "poignance of the empty boots" and takes them with him (Dahlquist 2007a: 307), hoping to find her still alive to eventually return them to her. They are later replaced by "a new pair of ankle boots, the leather dyed dark green. Her old pair had been placed in the wardrobe, split and scuffed by too many perils to name" (Dahlquist 2009: 9-10). The damaged boots are a material record of her adventures, much like Cardinal Chang's coat, and hence a proof of 'history' that mind-altering cyberpunk-inspired media threaten to contaminate.

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The importance of dress already informs the opening of the first novel. Miss Temple attempts to regain her composure by browsing the items on display in

> a store whose windows were thick with all shapes of luggage, hampers, oilskins, gaiters, pith helmets, lanterns, telescopes, and a ferocious array of walking sticks. She emerged […] wearing a ladies' black traveling cloak, with a deep hood and several especially cunning pockets. A visit to another shop filled one pocket with opera glasses, and a visit to a third weighed down a second pocket with a leatherbound notebook and an all-weather pencil. Miss Temple then took her tea. (Dahlquist 2007a: 6)

The objects provide her with much needed support and substitute solidity as her planned-out life is suddenly thrown into flux following the cancellation of her engagement. Although she later uses these objects one by one (for example, turning the pen into a weapon), the green boots she brought with her to the city remain a recurring and constant item in the depictions of her adventures. When they are damaged and replaced, like Cardinal Chang's red coat, they entail the notion of material memories accruing in a particular object, registered in wear and tear. When Miss Temple unintentionally absorbs the memories held in two glass books, written from the minds of her most dangerous enemies, and these memories invade the concrete experience and materiality of her world, she thinks about the threat in terms of her boots:

> she must face the truth that her confusion was nothing less than the ability to distinguish her thoughts from the world around her – and that by virtue of this perilous glass her access to ecstasy might be as palpable a thing as her shoes. (Dahlquist 2007a: 419)

Miss Temple frames the "perilous glass" as dangerous because it is set to erase the boundaries between "the world around her", which is tactile like her boots, and "her thoughts", which are the gateway for blue glass memories. The glass books not only hold experiences that are as haptic and immediate as "her shoes", but that are also as readily available.

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In the case of Dr Svenson, the object continually associated with his character is a silver cigarette case, bearing the inscription "*Zum Kapitänchirurgen Abelard Svenson, vom C. S.*" (Dahlquist 2007a: 618, original italics), a gift from his deceased cousin and unrequited love who, it turns out, died because of the Cabal's plot to gain control of indigo clay deposits in his estate. The cigarette case functions as a classic memento, and it makes an appearance in the text almost every time the chain-smoking doctor lights up. In keeping with the pattern that governs the replacement of Miss Temple's green boots and Cardinal Chang's red coat, Dr Svenson receives a new case from Miss Temple bearing the same inscription (see Dahlquist 2013: 513). On the one hand, the emphasis on material objects as identificatory and 'biographical' things, entangled with and even constitutive of identity, provides a concise formula to stereotype protagonists in novels boasting a sprawling set of characters. On the other hand, the staging of material accoutrements, so closely entwined with their owners' lives and memories, suggests that Dahlquist's novels also tap into nostalgic neo-Victorian imaginations of a past thing culture that is particularly attractive to twenty-first-century readers and scholars inhabiting an increasingly virtual world. Furthermore, despite the assertion that these accessories anchor floating identities in a 'world of things', the objects are also blatantly interchangeable: the 'original' lost items are replaced by identical reproductions, a substitution that the characters are nevertheless aware of. However, their character as simulacra is not problematised in any way, as if the mere tactility of objects assures their stability in contrast to the blue glass books and their effects.

In the novels, the identification of characters through stock accessories may be motivated by the underlying popular intertexts of adventure and superhero tales. Yet, considering the neo-Victorian fascination with nineteenth-century material culture, they may also be read as drawing on the recovery of nineteenth-century thing culture in Victorian studies and neo-Victorian texts, thus deploying 'things' against the effects and affects of 'screens'. In the introduction to *Ideas in Things*, for instance, Elaine Freedgood describes the experience of reading Victorian realist novels as being

> shower[ed] […] with things: post chaises, handkerchiefs, moonstones, wills, riding crops, ships' instruments of all

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> kinds, dresses of muslin, merino, silk, coffee, claret, cutlets – cavalcades of objects threaten to crowd the narrative right off the page. (Freedgood 2006: ix)

Such critical readings demonstrate a new-found interest in the central role played by material objects in nineteenth-century literature, with critics like Freedgood taking their cue from Bill Brown's thing theory. Brown pertinently highlights how a focus on material objects can generate "new thoughts about how inanimate objects constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects" (Brown 2001: 7). Brown's description also resonates with Dahlquist's neo-Victorian trilogy and its blue glass books as well as the protagonists' prized personal possessions. Both the glass books and the personal objects circulate and (de-)stabilise identities and relationships.

The view of the nineteenth century as "attracted by the notion of plenitude" (Briggs 1988: 15) also informs popular later re-imaginations of the Victorian period in literature and film, many of which pay particular attention to materiality in their depictions of stuffed domestic interiors and the dirt and grit of city streets to achieve 'immersive' effects. This fascination with things extends to the self-reflexive depiction of the materiality of texts and paper in neo-Victorian novels. Elizabeth Ho calls this "a certain neo-Victorian thingy-ness [that] lends a particular thickness or authenticity to the reconstruction" (Ho 2012: 178). Reading Dahlquist's novels as conversant with (nostalgic) notions of Victorian materiality may explain their strategy of recuperating identities through "Victorian thingy-ness" beyond and in opposition to blue glass technology.

On the level of objects and technology, the novels thus juxtapose an idealised and nostalgic relationship between the owners' sense of identity, stored in their things, and the disruptive technology of blue glass that dissolves any sense of individual memory and experience. The texts thus connect with discourses of 'terminal identities' and process contemporary technological developments, while setting the latter in and against a neo-Victorian object world. The novels' investment in their characters' appropriation of objects as signifiers of personal identity anchors each protagonist's individuality in things embedded in a recreated, neo-Victorian sphere of goods that becomes animated by the overlap of paper, glass, and blue-light screens in a truly hybrid fiction.

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6. Conclusion: Retro/Futuristic Reading(s)

Dahlquist's trilogy provides page-turning entertainment and the opportunity to critically interrogate the dense generic layering of its central multivalent object, the glass books. Paratextual choices and statements by the publisher and author signal the neo-Victorian self-reflexivity of the trilogy: not only the setting and characters are reminiscent of Victorian popular fiction, but the actual experience of the twenty-first-century reader is framed as quintessentially Victorian. However, the neo-Victorian is not a genre but an approach sensitised to historical fiction's knowing shuttling between the past and the present, which lays bare the echoes and continuities between periods and between their (re-)mediations. Fiction and reading are crucial to the neo-Victorian framing of its analytical tenets, as after all, the author of the neo-Victorian text is first a reader of the 'Victorian' representation, and the relationship between fact and fiction is perceived as particularly unstable in the epistemological perspective of the neo-Victorian.

The Glass Books trilogy dramatises the scene of captivated and obsessive reading in a faux-Victorian setting, thus incorporating the neo-Victorian interrogation of the past as fiction while anticipating the actual readers' pleasure in seeing their own situation reiterated in the novels. This is emphasised by making the glass books into an amorphous and fantastic image, which may stand in for any new media that disrupts habitualised modes of reception. The neo-Victorian probing of the glass books is hence only one facet of the ultimately speculative project of the novels: the glass books appear fantastically anachronistic when their affordances are measured against actual Victorian media, and proleptic when their workings and effects are compared to the media that we today conceptualise as 'new'. Generically, I have contextualised these simultaneously forward- and backward-looking perspectives that the objects proffer as drawing on the related speculative genres of steampunk and cyberpunk, whose affects and tropes eclectically fuse in the glass books and the story of their (mis)use, showing the generic overlaps by starting from the media's materiality and its shifting meanings. The escalating uses of the blue glass, from recording experiences to the promise of immortality in the hands of a secret group of high-ranking conspirators, contribute to a sense of paranoia. I have framed this as a fantastic iteration of 'media panics' in the idiom and register of different genres' responses to the perceived problems and dangers of new media technologies

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whose resolution, I suggest, leads back to the allure of (neo-)Victorian material culture.

Considering fiction like Dahlquist's trilogy under the purview of neo-Victorianism raises the question of the fuzzy borders of this cultural phenomenon. The presence of the speculative and fantastic complicates the issue of including popular texts into analyses of neo-Victorian fiction. This may necessitate conversation on a neo-Victorian fantastic that retains elements from the neo-Victorian novel conceived as a special case of historiographic metafiction and adds fantastic elements to create unabashedly popular entertainment to garner wide public appeal.

Notes

1. The blue glass books bear a passing resemblance to the *Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* in Neal Stephenson's 1995 novel *The Diamond Age*. The *Primer* is a responsive 'book' that bonds with its owner and tailors its contents to the reader's situation. Like the glass books, this is an instance of book-shaped media that upset Victorian societies and which is inflected by contemporary concerns about virtual environments and interactive media. In a different genre and tone, Bridget Collins's *The Binding* (2018) also takes up the magical archival properties of books.
2. Parts of the following section are elaborated from Fazli 2015: 129-132.
3. This is made clear when Miss Temple kills the Contessa with a piece of boning from her corset (Dahlquist 2013: 507).
4. More particularly, they are interested in glass as facilitating 'spectrality' alongside 'specularity', noting that within Victorian spiritualism and occultism, glass was also ghostly and hence an appropriate image of the past as haunting (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 146).
5. Verne's novel was subsequently published in book form in 1870, with the first English translation appearing in 1872.
6. In the Windows operating system, a blue screen appears when an error causes the system to crash, informing the user that a restart is necessary (colloquially known as the Blue Screen of Death [BSoD]).
7. Perschon here cites Tidhar's article 'Steampunk' (see Tidhar 2005: n.p.).
8. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this connection.
9. The actual quote reads: "There were really too many names" (Dahlquist 2013: 395).

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10. In *Neuromancer* (1984), the main protagonist is fittingly called Case.
11. Hoskins here cites Violette Morin's article ''L'Objet biographique' (see Morin 1969: 137-138).

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