The Beatles as Performers of Cultural Memory

Terrance Riley
(Bloomsburg University, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.)

Abstract:
Critical commentary on neo-Victorian art focuses predominantly on prose fiction produced by a single author. This focus generates definitions that can prove limiting when applied to other media. Neglected are works that are clearly neo-Victorian in character, but which are collaborative in origin, or are fanciful or ludic, which are expressed in mixed media, or which predate the development of neo-Victorian critical theory – all of which are true of the Beatles' album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and their film *Yellow Submarine* (1968). Concepts drawn from theorists of cultural memory can expand the canon of neo-Victoriana to include these and other works of art and craft which would otherwise remain marginalised, unrecognised, or insignificant.

Keywords: Beatles, cultural memory, neo-Victorian, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, steampunk, *Yellow Submarine* (film and soundtrack).

*****

The predominant attention to prose fiction in the critical discourse surrounding neo-Victorianism, as well as a preoccupation with the essential characteristics of that fiction, have resulted in a number of questions unresolved, or altogether unexplored. Self-consciousness and metafictionality are among the main definitional criteria currently in use (see Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4). But if the work of art under scrutiny is music or an image, or music and images working together, is it still necessary that the engagement with things Victorian be self-conscious, and what would count as evidence of that self-consciousness? If the neo-Victorian artefact is the product of collaboration, of two or a dozen or a hundred people, can the result be called 'self conscious' at all? Perhaps most importantly, how does one categorise artefacts that appeared before the concept of 'neo-Victorian' had taken shape, but which bring the contemporary world and the Victorian period together in a clearly neo-Victorian style? To these specific questions, we can add another more

_____

general one: informal but discernible rules have evolved for inclusion in the canon of neo-Victoriana, but ought those rules be reconsidered?

We can begin to think through these issues by considering two artefacts that conform to very few artistic rules at all: the Beatles' 1967 album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and their 1968 film *Yellow Submarine* (dir. George Dunning 1968). As I aim to demonstrate, these are fully-formed neo-Victorian works of art. Yet they were not the result of any single artistic intention or plan; they were not so much collaborative as anarchic in execution; they signify in an unpredictable concert of images, lyrics, musical genres, and narrative, working in unison or at cross purposes; and though they appeared in the same decade as the early canonical neo-Victorian fiction, they have no resemblance to that literature and have never been associated with it. In the case of *Sgt. Pepper*, cover images, music, and lyrics worked together to create an impression of mysteries to be solved and artistic statements to be interpreted; in point of fact, the mysteries actually reveal how hurried and occasionally careless the participants were in the early stages of production. Decisions were made, but then impulsively abandoned or displaced by other decisions, one quickly giving way to another and to the exigencies of getting the album out. One critic has called *Sgt. Pepper* "an album put together almost out of control" (Moore 1998: 25). And yet even after fifty years the album preserves the appearance of conceptual and artistic unity.

1.   Creation and Collaboration
To understand how *Sgt. Pepper* works one must first understand how it doesn't work, i.e., that it is not the kind of coherent artistic object its enthusiasts usually imagine. Pre- and post-release publicity about the album and the 'clues' on the cover led to an early awareness that Sgt. Pepper's band was intended as an alter-ego to the Beatles, and much subsequent interpretation, both casual and serious, has proceeded from that starting point. But pinning down what should be easiest, what the Lonely Hearts Club Band is supposed to represent, proves impossible; the clues all lead in different directions. In the centre of the cover photo are the only four obviously living figures, and they are in band costumes.[1] The Sgt. Pepper of the title would be the one with the stripes on his arm. But this cannot be an active duty group; a military band would be named after its regiment, not after its director. Salvation Army bands also have sergeants and a military

_____

style, but they are normally named after their citadel and not after their sergeant. In either case, one then has to imagine a Sgt. Pepper who's retired from his first vocation but kept his stripes, and neither suggestion is picked up anywhere else.

The uniforms appear to be Victorian or Edwardian in inspiration – costumes based on "old military tunics", as Paul McCartney recalled in a 1995 interview (McCartney 2000: 248) – though military and marching band uniforms have always been anachronistic. But while the uniforms are generally of the same cut, they are differently coloured and decorated. Ringo Starr wears an unidentifiable but definitely non-regulation pink hat, George Harrison wears an orange tricorn with a green feather; McCartney and John Lennon are uncovered. McCartney's buttons are London Fire Brigade and one of his arm patches is from the Ontario Provincial Police. Lennon is the most highly decorated with six World War II medals he had borrowed for the occasion. Harrison and McCartney wore their own, real MBEs (the Queen having awarded all the Beatles the Order of the British Empire in 1965). An expert description of the uniforms, as per The Costumer's Guide to Movie Costumes (see http://www.costumersguide.com/cr_pepper.shtml), reads a bit like a lengthy list of Imperial symbols spanning several generations, all of them meaningful in themselves, but forming no discernible pattern here. McCartney said that the costume shop they visited "had books there that showed you what was available. Did we want Edwardian or Crimean? We just chose oddball things from everywhere and put them together" (McCartney 2000: 248).

The foreground of the cover photo appears to place the implied action in a small town square, where Sgt. Pepper's band has just concluded a concert; that was McCartney's memory of their original intention (McCartney 2000: 248), and further that they were to be given the key to the city by the mayor, one of many details forgotten or discarded along the way. The 70-plus other personages in the photo (sixty-three life-size cardboard cut-outs and eight waxwork effigies, if one includes blown-up cartoons and hairdressers' dummies) could represent the town's citizens, perhaps assembled for a commemorative photo. We might then settle on the possibility that Sgt. Pepper and the boys are a local military band, of which there are still many examples in Great Britain and America. But equally plausibly, we might take *all* of the people on the cover as band members –

_____

some of them, at least, qualifying because of their lonely-heart status (Marilyn Monroe, Edgar Allan Poe, T.E. Lawrence). In this case, we would have a dream image of both living and dead individuals, all ready to offer whatever real or figurative music they might be imagined to play or have played in life. Unfortunately, several of the most interesting possibilities are undone by the surprisingly specific opening line of the first song, "It was twenty years ago today" (Lennon and McCartney 1967a: l. 1),[2] which takes us back to 1946 or 1947. Thus it would be a year or two after the war that "Sgt. Pepper taught the band to play" (Lennon and McCartney 1967a: l. 2), the band being a group of war-weary vets taken in hand by their kindly yet visionary non-commissioned officer. Such a backstory could account for the 'lonely hearts club' appellation: these were men who had no wives to return to. But then the cycle of objections restarts: it cannot be a military band, they are all differently uniformed, they are Edwardians, etc., etc.

In that same 1995 interview, McCartney recalled the original principle for choosing the individuals represented on the cover: "To help us get into the character of Sgt. Pepper's band" – whom they still had not identified – "we started to think about who our heroes might be. […] Who would my character admire?" (McCartney 2000: 248). Soon this exercise in character development devolved into "anyone we liked" and things they liked (e.g., garden gnome, hookah) (McCartney 2000: 248). On a different occasion, Harrison's memory was that "we were trying to say we like these people, they are part of our life" (Harrison qtd in Inglis 2008: 93). But the casual principle of "liking" created an unintended effect. As the number of cut-outs proliferated, they looked increasingly isolated, even alienated from each other. Only the four central band members are looking directly at the camera; a few of the others are looking generally forward; most are looking slightly askew or in some other direction entirely. The overall effect is of a living band pretending to be from the past, surrounded by ghostly reminders of the past *and* the present, with none of those reminders in any relation to any other. Sgt. Pepper's band offers the only hope of communication or community.

Notions of community and communication are more fully represented in the songs and in the interactions among them, but not through the Sgt. Pepper alter-ego. Actually none of the songs supports the military band concept; with its organ and four French horns, 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' does recreate the appropriate brassy sound, but the

_____

melody and lyrics are classic English musical hall (with rock inflections), a setting immediately recognisable from the band leader's mawkish banter – "You're such a lovely audience / We'd like to take you home with us" (Lennon and McCartney 1967a: ll. 17-18) – and the audience's laughter at some unrevealed stage business. The whole of the first number is an introduction to 'With a Little Help from My Friends' (1967), and as soon as Starr takes over vocals from McCartney, the quasi-military instrumentation drops out altogether and does not reappear.

In 1960s England the music hall was still alive, albeit as a form of nostalgia. *The Good Old Days*, a recreation of the nineteenth-century music hall experience, had been on the BBC since 1953. John Osborne's play *The Entertainer*, with Laurence Olivier as a washed-up song and dance man, premiered in 1957 and ran for a year in various productions; it was made into a motion picture with Olivier in 1960. McCartney's father Jim had himself led a ragtime band that played the last few existing Liverpool halls in the 1920s, and he brought other musical interests into Paul's life, as a member of an army reserve brass band and a double-bassist, familiar with classical music (Miles 1997: 22-24). So for composers Lennon and especially McCartney, 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' and 'When I'm Sixty-Four' (1967) were drawn from a living, if etiolated, tradition; 'She's Leaving Home' (1967), 'Lovely Rita' (1967) and 'Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!' (1967) are variations on the same style. These and a few other songs from the same period ache for a simpler and more communal time. The sing-alongs 'Yellow Submarine' (1966) and 'All Together Now' (1969) recreate childlike feel-good shared experiences, exactly the sort encouraged by the music hall sing-along, a much-loved feature of a traditional programme. "We all live in a Yellow Submarine" and

> [...] our friends are all aboard,
> Many more of them live next door,
> And the band begins to play.
> (Lennon and McCartney 1966: ll. 13-15)

This musical environment has much in common with the hinted-at *Sgt. Pepper* setting: the small town, all our friends, and many more of them,

_____

assembled as the band begins to play. It lacks only the Sergeant himself to cry out "he wants you all to sing along".

Likewise conventionally old-fashioned both in musical style and in moral outlook is 'When I'm Sixty-Four' with its Darby and Joan-ish lyrics and clarinet accompaniment; McCartney recalled some studio engineering to make the sound "more rooty-tooty" (McCartney qtd in Miles 1997: 319). So too 'Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!' with lyrics drawn from a nineteenth-century circus poster in Lennon's possession and instrumentation capturing the nineteenth-century circus sound, with organs, calliope, harmonium, glockenspiel:

> Over men and horses, hoops and garters
> Lastly through a hogshead of real fire!
> In this way Mr. Kite will challenge the world.
> (Lennon and McCartney 1967b: ll. 5-7)

But these cheerful recreations of a comprehensible and supportive society are set against reflections on how traditional moral values fail in the contemporary world. In 'Eleanor Rigby' (1966) and 'She's Leaving Home' (1967), conventional moral lives prove incomplete and unsatisfying. While the lyrics are more inventive than George Meredith's and rather less so than Thomas Hardy's, nevertheless both poets would have recognised the lesson offered in these lines from 'She's Leaving Home':

> Friday morning at nine o'clock she is far away
> Waiting to keep the appointment she made
> Meeting a man from the motor trade
>
> She (What did we do that was wrong?)
> Is leaving (We didn't know it was wrong)
> Home (Fun is the one thing that money can't buy)
> Something inside that was always denied
> For so many years.
> (Lennon and McCartney 1967c: 23-30)

Part of the magic of *Sgt. Pepper* is that listeners have always felt comfortable with juxtapositions of this sort: endorsements of traditional

_____

beliefs followed by misgivings, with songs like 'When I'm Sixty-Four' in the neighbourhood of psychedelia like 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' (1967; the songs were back to back on the single), the hard-rock reprise of the title song, and the apocalyptic epic of modern England, 'A Day in the Life' (1967). But the recollections of the artists involved are in agreement that the creation of the cover and the arrangements of the songs were spontaneous, frequently changed, often whimsical or fortuitous, half thought-out, or thought-up but not pursued. In a 1980 interview Lennon said, "it was called the first concept album, but it doesn't go anywhere […] it works 'cause we said it works" (Lennon qtd in Sheff 2010: 197). One understands Lennon's remark: the album didn't go in the expected direction, and the ambiguities and inconsistencies must have seemed glaring to one so closely involved. But *Sgt. Pepper* does go somewhere, and it is crucial to its effect that it *is* ambiguous and inconsistent; both the songs and the cover art are heterogeneous collections of new and old that contrast the alienation and loneliness of contemporary British life, represented most strongly in 'A Day in the Life', against the imagined lost communities of the Victorian past, the small town and the music hall.

2.   Neo-Victorian Self-Consciousness Reconsidered

We are in a position now to elaborate on some of the limitations of neo-Victorian critical discourse suggested at the outset, limitations that are implicit in Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's influential definition: "To be part of the neo-Victorianism we discuss […] texts (literary, filmic, audio-visual) must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4). That a work of art must be "self-conscious" suggests a single author, or a small team in seamless cooperation. "Engaged with the act of" indicates a deliberate self-staging; and if we take "(re)interpretation" to mean interpretation and/or reinterpretation and construe the other terms in the same way, we generate a familiar figure: the artist of power, launching a purposeful intervention into intellectual history. Simple play or entertainment, or any admission of the accidental, would seem quite out of place.

        Some privileging of the literary is customary in current critical theory, and references to "texts (literary, filmic, audio-visual)" are less controversial than they ought to be. Heilmann and Llewellyn are aware of

_____

the potential problems caused by "appropriating […] terminologies across different media" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 212), and they generally avoid the practice. But sometimes their close readings of non-print art gloss over real difficulties. For instance, they write, "in the realm of the [Dicken's World] theme park […] we see […] engagements taking place between the technological advances of the contemporary sphere and the Victorian imaginary" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 215). Without further information, we are left with a half-formed notion of a "*self-consciously engaged*", behind-the-scenes genius; in fact, the park's thematics might well have been as topsy-turvy as *Sgt. Pepper*'s were. Parallel problems arise from trying to read visual expressions and music and other forms of sonic art as if they were articulated in discrete signifiers. The arrangement of figures on the *Sgt. Pepper* cover – Johnny Weissmuller standing next to David Livingston, Edgar Allan Poe next to Fred Astaire – is silently meaningful, but not meaningful in the way that a text means: it evokes and teases rather than asserting. The contrast between 'When I'm Sixty-Four' and 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' is both musical and lyrical, but the contrast would have been created effectively by the music alone, with no assistance from the literary or the verbal. Also left stranded by the concept of an easily 'readable' audio-visual is the enormously diverse range of live performance and reenactment and non-representational visual art.

'Self-consciousness' as a criterion for canonical neo-Victorian status, while certainly more inclusive than the historiographic metafictionality proposed by Linda Hutcheon (see Hutcheon 1988: 105-123), postulates the same creative origin: virtually always a single, serious writer of fiction, fully in control of the shape and the details of her or his work; "neo-Victorianism in its more defined, theorized, conceptualized, and aesthetically developed form", Heilmann and Llewellyn observe, is always accompanied by "the self-analytic drive" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 5). The emphasis on the unitary consciousness in much neo-Victorian discourse is captured repeatedly in discussions of film, the one non-print medium to have been welcomed into the neo-Victorian canon. In Cora Kaplan's *Victoriana*, the 1993 motion picture *The Piano* is always referred to as director Jane "Campion's film" (Kaplan 2007: 119-127); likewise, in their introductory essay to the steampunk-themed special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall describe "Katsuhiro Otomo's film *Steamboy*" (Bowser and Croxall 2010: 18), and the same

_____

usage is common in Hutcheon's many references to film in *A Poetics of Post-Modernism*. This is the way we speak about motion pictures, of course, putting the director into the position of *auteur*, analogous to the author of a text; but the way we speak and write about films, and about the work of collaborative or alternative-media artists, is usually misleading, often simply wrong.

Very little in neo-Victorian theorising reaches out to *Sgt. Pepper*, even though in virtually every aspect of its art – images, musical traditions, and song lyrics and sequences – the album clearly falls into the genre of the neo-Victorian. But though the ostensible artistic 'unity' of the album suggests a single presiding consciousness, there is no *auteur* here among the composers, producers, artists, and performers. Like most artefacts in the world of entertainment, *Sgt. Pepper* is thoroughly collaborative, and therefore full of compromise, revised or forgotten premises, and simple and complex mistakes. It might by some stretch be called 'metafictional', if ironical self-references are a kind of low-grade metafictionality; but it is certainly not historiographic. How then to describe it theoretically; how to welcome it?

3.   The Praxis of Cultural Memory

There is a disciplined way of expanding the neo-Victorian canon close at hand, but one requiring some restatement or perhaps simply reassertion. For neo-Victorian theory has, one might say, flirted with concepts of cultural memory without ever quite fully embracing them. The orientation is implied in some essays from the 1990s and early 2000s, but its first explicit use in this context probably occurs in Marie-Luise Kohlke's introduction to the inaugural issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* in an admonition to critics to see the "ethical and political implications of neo-Victorian creative and critical praxes, together with how these inform and structure public memory and its transmission" (Kohlke 2008: 13). Here Kohlke cites critical historian Patrick Joyce: "writers and critics and their works become alternative 'sites' of memory […] that is, they enlarge 'the scope of collective memory' by producing alternative 'sources' and 'traces'" (Kohlke 2008: 13). In the essay quoted earlier, Bowser and Croxall allude to Kohlke's introduction in attributing neo-Victorian theory's "expansiveness" to its cultural-memorial function: neo-Victorian discourse is "necessarily historically conscious and very often includes what Marie-Luise Kohlke describes as 'cultural memory

_____

work'. […] Steampunk seems precisely to illustrate, and perhaps even perform, a kind of cultural memory work" (Bowser and Croxall 2010: 1). Ultimately, in 2013, Heilmann and Llewellyn themselves, revisiting their own prescriptions of some years before, seem to welcome the introduction of cultural memory, though again without pursuing its implications very far: "neo-Victorian studies can draw particular strength for the future exploration of the field from thinking much more diversely and much less homogenistically about the spaces it inhabits as part of a wider cultural memory" (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013: 29). In fact, all of these authors appear to be turning away from homogenistic thinking and toward alternate models of analysis.

As a theory of cultural continuity, cultural memory owes much of its contemporary shape to the works of Egyptologist Jan Assmann during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1995, Assmann wrote that

> [t]he concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness and particularity. (Assmann 1995: 132)

Assmann might be inclined to use his parallel category of "communicative memory" to describe neo-Victorian phenomena, because there the externalised "memories" in question are under less institutional control and are developed "through interchange with others, with circular or feedback interplay between interior and exterior", i.e. between an individual's memories and externalised symbols (Assmann 2011: 6). The utility of either concept for neo-Victorian theory is immediately apparent: among other things, it explains why the Victorians appear so directly in the rear-view mirror – "closer than they appear" in Simon Joyce's metaphor (Joyce 2007: 16). The period roughly from 1840-1910 provides, for at least some contemporary Britons, the closest available set of "reuseable[s]" on which to base their "awareness and particularity". Available but unappealing for this purpose are the disquieting Modernists, the horror of the world wars, and the long, dismal post-war period of reconstruction and decolonisation.

_____

Access to the materials of Victoriana via art, architecture and literature is easy for a Briton, easier yet in the early 1960s when the music hall was still alive, the Edwardian Teddy Boy style was in fashion for young rebels – Lennon went through a Teddy Boy period in the 1950s (Laing 2009: 17) – and the Royal Liver Building (1911) was still the tallest in Liverpool.

Expanding on Assmann some years later in the introduction to her anthology *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, the polymathic Dutch theorist Mieke Bal writes that the

> interaction between present and past that is the stuff of cultural memory is […] the product of collective agency rather than the result of psychic or historical accident. […] [C]ultural recall is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer but something you actually *perform*, even if, in many instances, such acts are not consciously and wilfully contrived. (Bal 1999: vii, original emphasis)

The crucial dynamic here is that interactions among individuals – a kind of performance – reveal common memories (internal or external, in the form of objects or locales). From this perspective and retrospectively, it is perfectly clear how McCartney's nonsensical rhyming of "salt and pepper" to "sergeant pepper" (Miles 1997: 304) might develop into the sergeant's stripes and the band uniforms and the earlier cited "oddball things from everywhere" (McCartney 2000: 248).

Kate Mitchell's *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* is the most sustained deployment of the concepts of cultural memory in service to neo-Victorian theory. Mitchell also offers the concept of cultural memory as an alternative to the exclusivity of Hutcheon's criterion, as a means of "draw[ing] a wider context for historiographic metafiction itself and […] extend[ing] and transform[ing] this category" (Mitchell 2010: 3). Drawing on Bal, Mitchell suggests

> that the emergence of memory discourse in the late twentieth century, and the increasing interest in non-academic forms of history, enables us to think through the contribution neo-Victorian fiction makes to the way we remember the

_____

> nineteenth-century past in ways that resist privileging
> history's non-fictional discourse, on the one hand, and
> postmodernism's problematisation of representation on the
> other. Approaching neo-Victorian fiction as memory texts
> provides a larger framework for examining the sheer
> diversity of modes, motivations and effects of their
> engagement with the past, particularly one which moves
> beyond dismissing affect. As Mieke Bal suggests, "the
> memorial presence of the past takes many forms and serves
> many purposes, ranging from conscious recall to unreflected
> re-emergence, from nostalgic longing for what was lost to
> polemical use of the past to shape the present." (Mitchell
> 2010: 4)

Mitchell uses the term "memory text" – borrowed from Gail Jones, one of the novelists under consideration in *History and Cultural Memory* – to refer to a text or image, which, like "the circulation of photographs establishes and maintains links between groups and individuals, overcoming distance […] and enabling distant family members to participate in special moments and rituals" (Mitchell 2010: 173). One should add that the family photographs form an archive, which, over the years or decades, is necessarily subject to interpretation and negotiation. The concept is useful for *Sgt. Pepper*, which comprises several archives of this sort: old music, old (or old-fashioned) poetry, old photographs, interpretation of which began immediately after the album's release and has not ceased since (see Inglis 2008).

Though most of Mitchell's book is devoted to the interaction between history and prose fiction, the recurrent themes of her argument continually indicate wider possibilities. As Beth Palmer noted in her review of *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, "[p]erhaps what is most engaging about Mitchell's ideas on neo-Victorian fiction is her willingness to understand the genre as open to shared cultural memory, rather than closed off in a metahistorical cul-de-sac" (Palmer 2012: 170). It is worth noting what might be obvious, that "shared cultural memory", like "collective agency", is by no means a new idea; both concepts were adumbrated long ago by T. S. Eliot: "no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" (Eliot 1975: 38). More recently Roland Barthes has claimed

_____

that "[a]ny text is a new tissue of past citations" (Barthes 1981: 39). What might be unfamiliar is the way that the cultural memory paradigm, for Mitchell, brings reading into the same intertextual dynamic; "[r]eading becomes an act of communal recollection not only between ourselves and our contemporaries, but also between ourselves and our Victorian ancestors, mediated by the Victorian novel itself" (Mitchell 2010: 173-174). We would appear to be firmly in the territory of Assmann's "communicative memory" here, "communal recollection […] between ourselves and our contemporaries" being another way of describing collaboration. And to the mediation provided by the Victorian novel, we can now add mediation by any of the "many forms and […] many purposes" of Bal's earlier cited "memorial presence of the past".

The distinct advantage of the points of view advocated by Assmann, Bal, and Mitchell, and at least admissible for Heilmann and Llewellyn and Bowser and Croxall, is that we can begin to expand the purview of the neo-Victorian beyond serious single-author novels and into other forms of art and entertainment, collaborative, or otherwise, 'pure' or hybrid, in the form of "images and rituals", in Assmann's words. Among rituals we can count "communal recollection" and performance. It will often be true that works of art that appear purposefully designed can be the result of extemporisation, rather than being "consciously and wilfully contrived" (Bal 1999: vii).

4.   Test Case: *Yellow Submarine*

We can test these hypotheses against a hard case, the 1968 film *Yellow Submarine*. Like most of the Beatles' studio projects, both the song and the film *Yellow Submarine* started going through changes from the moment of conception. McCartney recalled the origins of the title song that had first appeared on *Revolver* (1966); trying to write a song for Ringo, he "started making a story, sort of an ancient mariner, telling the young kids where he'd lived. […] The lyrics got more and more obscure as it goes on" (McCartney qtd in Beatles Interview Database 2008: n.p.). In fact, the obscurity doesn't take long to develop.

> In the town where I was born
> Lived a man who sailed to sea
> And he told us of his life
> In the land of submarines,

_____

> So we sailed on to the sun,
> Till we found a sea of green
> And we lived beneath the waves
> In our yellow submarine. […]
>
> And our friends are all aboard,
> Many more of them live next door,
> And the band begins to play.
> (Lennon and McCartney 1966: ll. 1-8; 13-15)

There might be some kind of plot or premise here: a man who lived in that town told other residents ("the young kids"?) that there was a land of submarines, and for that reason some of those residents went off to live in an undersea realm which was the land of submarines; and the friends who are not on board this submarine are next door, on another submarine. The first writer assigned the task of transforming the song into a narrative seems to have kept the idea of a "land of submarines" (Hieronimus 2002: 192-193), but as was true of the cover of *Sgt. Pepper*, the original concept was replaced by a second and a third and fourth in an ongoing flurry of disagreements and restarts over a period of two years. The film's credits list four writers, but they were not a team; they never sat down together to plan, but they worked at different times, sometimes collaborating, but sometimes simply changing what other writers had put in place.

The science fiction/fantasy orientation of McCartney's lyrics did persist, but McCartney himself was not consulted on how it was to be developed. In 2002 the eclectic artist and author Robert Hieronimous published *Inside the Yellow Submarine,* the fullest version of the film's creation, based largely on interviews with the participants. The Beatles themselves, Hieronimus found, were hardly involved in any aspect of the production till near the end. The film was not the Beatles' idea, and almost certainly would not have been made at all had the Beatles not been under a four-film contract to United Artists, eventually resulting in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), *Help* (1965), *Yellow Submarine* (1968), and *Let It Be* (1970). An executive at King Features, which had been producing the animated television show *The Beatles* and owned the rights to the Beatles' cartoon images, proposed an animated film based on the song. United Artists agreed

_____

if the Beatles would make at least one live appearance in the film
(Hieronimus 2002: 28-30). At odds with each other artistically and
personally, alternately bored and challenged by their fame, the four
musicians who ought to have been central were content to maintain a
sideline presence for most production decisions (though they did have script
and concept approval, and both Lennon and McCartney occasionally issued
a veto).

Soon-to-be-famous novelist Erich Segal believed in 1968 that he had
been "the last re-writer", but discovered later that he had been followed by
"a handful of successors" (Segal qtd in Hieronimus 2002: 18). These
successors remain unidentified, but they might not have been writers at all;
many of the two hundred individuals who worked on the film contributed in
some fashion to the script. The film's art director Heinz Edelmann imposed
several script changes simply by exceeding his authority: given a part of the
working outline that called for a Davy Jones character and a mermaid,
Edelmann recalled "well obviously I couldn't do Davey Jones" – he meant
that he preferred not to – "and I didn't want to any [*sic*] mermaid. So I
thought, 'what would I like to draw?' And I built a sort of outline around
that, and developed the characters" (Edelmann qtd in Hieronimus 1993:
n.p.). Edelmann also remembered the "first, second and the several versions
of the script", including one in which "the SUBMARINE only appeared as a
ship in a bottle" (Edelmann qtd in Hieronimus 1993: n.p.). Edelmann's
other recollections include the film's production being "one of the most
chaotic in the entire history of film", with "a preliminary test" followed by
improvisation and some "twenty minutes of film" completed "in rough
form" before the plot had been even been decided on: "It was a communal
effort, done under pressure, so nobody had the time to really control [their]
input" (Edelmann qtd in Hieronimus 1993: n.p.).

Communally and under pressure, the idea evolved to build on the
success of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* by reinserting the central
characters into an appropriate environment (Brodax 2004: 170). That
decision, along with McCartney's lyrics, probably set the production on a
neo-Victorian course, and the participants began generating images,
allusions, and dialogue that drew upon the stock of cultural memories. Thus
was born Pepperland, a park with groves and lanes and bandstands, and
incidental characters dressed in vaguely but identifiably
Victorian/Edwardian fashion. In what might be a combination of the 'land

_____

of submarines' with a Jules Verne allusion, Pepperland is "80,000 leagues beneath the sea" (Dunning 1968: 00:09), and therefore in the vicinity of strange, colourful, and not very menacing sea beasts, unlike Verne's but quite like those in Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies, A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* (1863). Ashore we are more likely to come upon eccentric and ineffectual authority figures, like Old Fred and the Lord Mayor, who might have been created by Lewis Carroll; another character reminiscent of Victorian satire is Jeremy Hillary Boob, Ph.D., who, despite the name and degree, is another denizen of the oceans between Pepperland and Liverpool. That a voyage would take place between those two locations was another fortuity: the clause in the Beatles' contract stipulating that they would appear in the film in person almost guaranteed a meeting of the two bands.

Once "the production was closed down" and most of the contributors had departed the set, "it was discovered that the film did not have a proper ending", causing the four remaining personnel to "put together" the famous "psychedelic end sequence" over the course of a weekend by "using existing artwork"; Edelmann complained that "[o]ne would have liked to be, consciously liked to be part of a great masterpiece, but in a way as the old pilots used to say, this was one I walked away from" (Edelmann qtd in Hieronimus 1993: n.p.). Hieronimus's response to these revelations is tactfully understated: "There's no way that any of us who have watched that movie a dozen or so times could have figured out that it was done in such a piece meal [sic] way" (Hieronimus 1993: n.p.). And yet despite the chaos, a masterpiece did materialise, even greater than most commentators have recognised. *Yellow Submarine* has often been called a childlike fantasy of good and evil, and a graceful melding of classic pop music and innovative animation. All of this is still true, but much has been missed, in part because the film predates the concepts that can illuminate it more fully.

The first of a series of unplanned effects is the atmosphere of nostalgia that pervades the film because of the way the songs and incidental music fell together. Only four of the songs were previously unreleased, and producer George Martin's orchestral score was new, composed especially for the film; eleven songs were familiar from as early as *Rubber Soul* (1965). But some of the originals, e.g. 'All You Need Is Love' (1967), had been remixed; others, such as 'With a Little Help from My Friends', were simply excerpted. Martin's interlude includes variations on the title song and quotations from Harrison's 'Within You, Without You' and 'A Day in

_____

the Life' from *Sgt. Pepper*, songs which do not appear elsewhere in the film (MacDonald 2007: 244). The result is a pleasantly confusing musical experience: some songs are exactly the ones fans fell in love with two or three years earlier; some are there in fragments or only hinted at. And because the songs' titles are not announced in the film, excerpts or allusions could leave the listener wondering 'where have I heard that before?' – in a way parallel to the feeling evoked by the liminally remembered images on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper*. Also reminiscent of the *Sgt. Pepper* cover is the profusion of photographs set against the animation throughout the film. These were cut-outs from old postcards and photographs and also new photos of people who worked on the film (Hieronimus 2002: 260-264). British and American audiences alike might have wished they could recognise any of these obviously important characters.

The opening voiceover announces nostalgia as a theme: "Once upon a time or maybe twice, there was an unearthly paradise called Pepperland" (Dunning 1968: 00:08). It is a musical never-never land, sustained and protected somehow by Sgt. Pepper's band's ongoing performances. The reuse of Sgt. Pepper is doubly nostalgic: once for its reminders of the 1967 album, and again for its reminder of better times in English history. The harmony-hating Meanies attack from some adjacent territory, capture the band, and begin to paralyse the Pepperlanders in place. Old Fred flees before the invaders, finally reaching the Lord Mayor, who is playing the cello in a string quartet. At first the Mayor cannot believe that the Meanies would dare attack. But when the third member of his string quartet is frozen, he cries out, "Young Fred" – Fred is younger than the Mayor – "the Blue Meanies are coming!" (Dunning 1968: 6:35-6:40), and the pair sets off toward the Yellow Submarine, which rests high atop a pyramid. As they climb the stairs toward it, the Mayor offers the origin story (annoyingly interrupted by Fred): "scores and bars ago" – time in this domain is apparently measured musically – "our forefathers […] and foremothers […] made it in this yellow submarine […] to Pepperland" (Dunning 1968: 6:58-7:17). So the Pepperlanders came from elsewhere long ago, long enough that the submarine has become an object of veneration, and when the Mayor exhorts Fred to "Go! Get help!" and Fred replies "where should I go?" the Mayor replies, "No time for trivialities" (Dunning 1968: 7:38-7:48). He doesn't know where they came from.

_____

The Lord Mayor appoints a doubtful Fred Lord Admiral, but command turns out to be easy: the submarine knows where to go. It sails itself to 1960s Liverpool – in grim contrast to Pepperland, a dark, polluted, scantly-populated city, its smoking chimneys reminiscent of Victorian mill towns. The submarine leaves the ocean and becomes an airship – by the 1990s a regular feature of neo-Victorian science fiction – and soon locates the miserably bored Ringo; "Compared with my life", Ringo soliloquises, "Eleanor Rigby's was a gay, mad whirl" (Dunning 1968: 13:44-13:47). First Ringo and then the rest of his at-loose-ends comrades are recruited and board the vessel, whose interior is dominated by the steam engine that powers it and the accessory pipes, pistons, valves, and levers, along with a reel-to-reel tape recorder and a stroboscope, once again positioning the contemporary alongside the nineteenth century (Dunning 1968: 23:00-23:45). Among the adventures on the return to Pepperland is a spell of time travel as the submarine moves through a region of underwater clockwork. John is the first to notice: "In my humble opinion, we've become involved in Einstein's time-space continuum theory" (Dunning 1968: 26:15-26:22). They go backward, then learn how to move forward again, and pass themselves going backward (Dunning 1968: 27:59-28:00).

It is a plot worthy of the then-running *Star Trek*: a lost world whose inhabitants long ago fled the violence of their homeland to found a society without conflict. There they live a simple, slightly backward, and unchanging life, the antiquated technology which transported them no longer fully understood and therefore treated as a symbol of deliverance. Under attack, they get the icon working again to travel forward in time to seek help from the homeland, which has remained in the flow of time. The homeland is Liverpool, now in the 1960s; Pepperland is Victorian England; and *Yellow Submarine* is a fully-realised, time-travel steampunk science fiction, three years before Michael Moorcock's English prototype *The Warlord of the Air* (1971), and twenty years before the word 'steampunk' was coined to describe the novels of a small group of American writers. The film's vision is simple but powerful: late nineteenth-century and late twentieth-century England join forces to repel an invasion of meanness into both times. To that end, the Lord Mayor urges the Beatles to "impersonate [Sgt. Pepper's band] and rally the land to rebellion" (Dunning 1968: 56:58-57:01). Dystopian Liverpool and (optimally) utopian Pepperland need each other. Liverpool needs music and a bit of nonsense; Victoria's England,

_____

frozen in time, wants to be released from its paralysis: it wants to live again. On *Sgt. Pepper*, the periods were simply contrasted; here they interact, confer, cooperate.

Despite its production being "one of the most chaotic in the entire history of film", in Edelmann's earlier cited words, *Yellow Submarine* is a clearly-structured neo-Victorian fantasy, not only one of considerable craft, but of cool metafictional appraisal, framing past and present, asking what has been lost and what remains. *Yellow Submarine* is dramatic evidence that systematic, internally-coherent, multi-modal works of art can be assembled without a single mind or a close-knit team in control. But we need not think of the film as an accidental masterpiece. In Jan Assmann's model, cultural memory "works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation"; he goes on to describe it as "self-reflective in that [it] draws on itself to explain, distinguish, reinterpret, criticize, censure, control, surpass, and receive hypoleptically" (Assmann 1995: 130, 132). We reconstruct the past by reference to present categories, and therefore our recollection is always reflexive; the *Yellow Submarine* writers and artists naturally decorated a Victorian Pepperland with everything then modern-day Liverpool lacked.

"Hypolepsis" is Assmann's term for the processes by which the past is apprehended by the present, but it differs from traditional intellectual history in rejecting particular starting points and conclusions:

> Hypolepsis […] proceeds from the belief that truth can never be more than an approximation, and the hypolectic process is one of engaging in approximations. It draws its momentum from the awareness that knowledge is never complete, and there is always more to be had. You can only come closer to the truth […] by freeing yourself from the delusion that you can keep starting afresh, by recognizing that you have been born into an ongoing process, by seeing which way things go, and by consciously, understandingly, but also critically learning what your predecessors have already said. (Assman 2012: 261)

We are not born, nor is any idea or movement or genre of art born, in a single moment or intellectual gesture; instead human minds, imaginations,

_____

customs, and artistic styles evolve in an ongoing recapitulation and recovery of cultural memories. Neo-Victorian fiction was not born in 1966 or 1969 or 1990; it *may* have begun to evolve around the time that Victoria came out of mourning, but the Victoria Memorial in Westminster was already neo-Victorian. As soon as the nostalgic attitude of 'Yellow Submarine' and the Victorian/Edwardian motifs of *Sgt. Pepper* were fixed into the outline of the film, the participants, serially and collectively, began to build a neo-Victorian artefact from materials as old as a hundred years. Everyone in Great Britain and most Americans have a mental lumber room well stocked with images, themes, characters, songs, and fragments of plots from the long British nineteenth century, and often it is not the most serious or erudite artists, but the most intuitive and whimsical, who can see which pieces go best together.

Models of cultural memory open up "a larger framework for examining […] engagement with the past" (Mitchell 2010: 4), which can be applied to objects that resist traditional textual analysis. Assmann is at his most useful at this point, in suggesting that we attend to the "ongoing process" rather than looking for fixed starting points: definitional approaches to genres belie the process of apprehension and reinstate the "delusion" of "starting afresh" (Assman 2012: 261). An alternative offered by the cultural memory orientation is to begin with obviously relevant artefacts, and then move backward to try to account for them, archeologically, as it were. We do indeed uncover, or liberate, the "sheer diversity of modes, motivations and effects" (Mitchell 2010: 4) that human beings use to reconstruct their past and to construct their present, and some strange creatures can come in at the door: rock stars, flying submarines, steampunk tea parties, even Margaret Thatcher.[3] But even Thatcher, though her company may be unpleasant, can teach us something about how the Victorian period is remembered.

Notes

1.   Photographs of the *Sgt. Pepper* cover art and the original band uniforms along with extensive analysis can be found at The Costumer's Guide to Movie Costumes (see http://www. costumersguide.com/cr_pepper.shtml).

_____

2. All lyrics are quoted from Colin Campbell and Allan Murphy's *Things We Said Today: The Complete Lyrics and a Concordance to the Beatles' Songs, 1962-1970* (1980).
3. Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979-1990, Thatcher was a highly selective advocate of so-called 'Victorian values'. A complete account of this theme of her ministry can be found in Raphael Samuel's 'Mrs. Thatcher's Return to Victorian Values' (see Samuel 1992).

Bibliography

Assmann, Jan. 1995. 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity' (trans. John Czaplicka), *New German Critique* 65: 125-133.

––––. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bal, Mieke. 1999. 'Introduction', in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Hanover: University Press of New England, vii-xvii.

Barthes, Roland. 1981. 'Theory of the Text', in Young, Roberts (ed.), *Untying the Text*. London & Boston: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 31-47.

Bowser, Rachel A. and Brian Croxall. 2010. 'Introduction: Industrial Evolution', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3:1, Special Issue: *Steampunk, Science, and (Neo)Victorian Technologies***:** 1-45.

Brodax, Al. 2004. *Up Periscope Yellow: The Making of the Beatles' Yellow Submarine*. Winona: Limelight Editions.

Campbell, Colin and Allan Murphy. 1980. *Things We Said Today: The Complete Lyrics and a Concordance to the Beatles' Songs, 1962-1970*. Ann Arbor: Pierian Press.

The Costumer's Guide to Movie Costumes. n.d. 'Sgt. Pepper', http://www.costumersguide.com/cr_pepper.shtml (accessed 23 March 2015).

Dunning, George (dir.). 1968. *Yellow Submarine.* Apple Films.

Eliot, T.S. 1975. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (ed. Frank Kermode). New York: Harcourt, 37-44.

Heilmann, Ann and Mark Llewellyn. 2010. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hieronimus, Robert, R. 2002. *Inside the Yellow Submarine*. Iola: Krause Publications.

––––. 1993. 'Heinz Edelmann Interview Transcript', http://www.21stcenturyradio.com/NP-8-28-99.1.html (accessed 14 November 2015).

_____

Hutcheon, Linda. 1988. 'Historiographic Metafiction: The Pastime of Past Time', in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 105-123.

Inglis, Ian. 2008. 'Cover Story: Magic, Myth and Music', in Julien, Oliver, *Sgt. Pepper and the Beatles: It Was Forty Years Ago Today*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 91-102.

Joyce, Simon. 2007. *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Kaplan, Cora. 2007. *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Kohlke, Marie-Luise. 2008. 'Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1:1: 1-18.

Laing, Dave. 2009. 'Six Boys, Six Beatles: The Formative Years, 1950-1962', in Womack, Kenneth (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Beatles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 9-32.

Lennon, John and Paul McCartney. 1966. 'Yellow Submarine', *Revolver*. EMI.

——. 1967a. 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band', *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. EMI, Capital.

——. 1967b. 'Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!', *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. EMI, Capital.

——. 1967c. 'She's Leaving Home', *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. EMI, Capital.

Llewellyn, Mark and Ann Heilmann. 2013. 'The Victorians Now: Global Reflections on Neo-Victorianism', *Critical Quarterly* 55:1, Special Issue: *The State, or Statelessness, of Victorian Studies*: 24-42.

MacDonald, Ian. 2007. *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.

McCartney, Paul. 2000. *The Beatles Anthology*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

——. 2008. 'Yellow Submarine', Beatles Interview Database. http://www.beatlesinterviews.org/dba10sub.html (accessed 5 May 2015).

Miles, Barry. 1997. *Paul McCartney: Many Years from Now*. New York: Henry Holt.

Mitchell, Kate. 2010. *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Moore, Alan F. 1997. *The Beatles: Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Palmer, Beth. 2012. '*Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*, by Louisa Hadley; *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*, by Kate Mitchell (review)',

_____

    Victorian Studies 55:1, Special Issue: *The State, or Statelessness, of Victorian Studies*: 168-170.

Samuel, Raphael. 1992. 'Mrs. Thatcher's Return to Victorian Values', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 78: 9-29.

Sheff, David. 2010. *All We Are Saying: The Last Major Interview with John Lennon and Yoko Ono*. New York: St. Martin's.