

## **Introduction: Spectacles and Things – Visual and Material Culture and/in Neo-Victorianism**

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Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. [...] When I first caught your eye and you decided to come with me, you were probably thinking you would simply arrive and make yourself at home. Now that you're actually here, the air is bitterly cold, and you find yourself being led along in complete darkness, stumbling on uneven ground, recognising nothing. [...] And yet you did not choose me blindly. (Faber 2002: 3)

The re-appearance of the nineteenth century in twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture tends to be both highly visual and material, making its entry, as it does, on a contemporary late capitalist and globalised market, packaged to appeal to a wide consumer base. With *Spectacles and Things – Visual and Material Culture and/in Neo-Victorianism* we would like to focus on the various overlaps between the visual and the material, drawing on and re-defining some of the theoretical tenets established to explore neo-Victorianism so far. This special issue partly derives from the international conference 'Fashioning the Neo-Victorian: Iterations of the Nineteenth Century in Contemporary Literature and Culture' (April 2010, Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany), which in part focused on the debt of present-day visual culture to the development of Victorian technologies of reproducing images, voices and writing, such as photography, cinema, the phonograph, and the typewriter, as well as the politics of representation, and neo-Victorian texts and products as instances – or 'transmitters' – of visual and material culture. Many of the prominent theoretical elements of neo-Victorianism, including nostalgia, fetishism, the trace and spectrality, adaptation and historiographic metafiction, are based on either visual aspects (the spectre is visible but not tangible, adaptation re-adjusts our perspective on texts of the past, historiographic metafiction entails a reflection on the past) or material aspects (the longing for lost

things or past social relations, the fetishised object, the trace in the sense of a material presence of an absence). However, neo-Victorian studies rarely explore the interdependence of the two approaches. We believe that the interrelations between the visual and the material could help explain our persistent fascination with the Victorian; additionally, analysing the visual and the material together will further sharpen theoretical tools, such as fetishism or adaptation, regularly employed in neo-Victorian critical practice. This introduction, then, aims to provide an overview of the fruitful interrelations of material and visual culture in the context of epistemology, literary analysis, and a number of the most central conceptual approaches to the field.

As critics such as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2010), Cora Kaplan (2007) or Marie-Luise Kohlke (2008) have by now established, neo-Victorianism is largely an endeavour to explore the nineteenth-century past through historiographic (meta-)fictions, processes of remembering and forgetting, spectrality, (em-)plotting, self-reflexivity and/or nostalgia. Questions concerning how artworks perspectivise and emplot the past, how they recreate the period's materiality, or how they position the reader in order to re-visualise the Victorian era are part and parcel of the neo-Victorian project. Tying in with central tenets of cultural materialism, neo-Victorianism has also become an academic endeavour that looks into the processes and politics of adaptation, which shape our contemporary perspectives on the past.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, many English-speaking societies still partake of the Victorian legacy in material and ideological terms, which directly impact social structures and, as Cora Kaplan's introduction to *Victoriana* makes clear, also constitutes a personal aspect of academic biographies. As Kaplan points out, her own relationship to the remnants of Victorian material and visual culture, "from the built environment, to fashion, to books and domestic furniture [...] redefined my sense of national identity, influenced my politics and changed my academic signature" (Kaplan 2007: 5). Starting from her own contradictory and sometimes uncomfortable position vis-à-vis Victoriana, which is poised between aesthetic pleasure and critical outrage at the period's social injustices, Kaplan suggests we understand Victoriana as "history out of place, something atemporal and almost spooky in its effects, yet busily at work constituting this time – yours and mine – of late Capitalist modernity" (Kaplan 2007: 6) – in other words, actively creating today's culture and its

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material conditions. This clearly sets a twofold task for neo-Victorianism: one is aimed at the exploration of the respective historical uses of the Victorian in a specific context; the other concerns the analysis of aesthetic constructions and reflections of these uses. The interdependence of lived intertwinements with things Victorian and the critical perspectives necessary to evaluate them provide us with another link between the material and the visual. Kaplan, for instance, focuses on the embodied materiality of “class, gender, empire, and race” in artistic and literary visualisations of the period, noting “the high degree of affect involved in reading and writing about the Victorian past” (Kaplan 2007: 5). *Spectacles and Things* not only continues to explore neo-Victorian (re-) constructions of perspectives on class, gender and race, but also highlights the significant kinds of affect produced by specific imbrications of the visual and the material, structures of emotional or even erotic and fetishistic connection and investment that are highly relevant both for our still developing relationship with the Victorian age and for our evident enjoyment of neo-Victorian artefacts.

**1. Virtual Spaces: *The Crimson Petal and the White***

Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) provides a paradigmatic literary example for this special edition’s focus on visual and material culture. This exemplary neo-Victorian novel highlights its own implication in a capitalist market in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, as rendered explicit in the continuation of the epigraph to this introduction: “Certain expectations were aroused. Let’s not be coy: You were hoping I would satisfy all the desires you’re too shy to name, or at least show you a good time” (Faber 2002: 3). The narrator thus plays at possible reasons why contemporary readers might have purchased the novel, and foregrounds a desire for unspecified but possibly wide-ranging kinds of entertainment. What is underscored here is, of course, the status of the book itself as a commodity in a contemporary market. As Julian Wolfreys proposes in his seminal *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature*, books are also, first and foremost, material objects: “Books appear to have a material presence, without which anchoring that such materiality provides, our lives would assume a ghostly condition of impermanence” (Wolfreys 2002: xi).

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This becomes quite clear in the marketing of neo-Victorian novels as pleasurable commodity objects inviting consumption as indicated by the sometimes strongly generic cover images, which tend to promise titillating entertainment with their almost fetishistic depictions of corseted female bodies. The frontispiece of Faye L. Booth's *Cover the Mirrors* (2007), for example, consists of a photograph of a corseted young woman turning (or offering?) her back to the reader, a semi-seductive image that is heightened by an advertising blurb praising the novel (which does, in fact, draw heavily on the language of formulaic romance erotica) as "[l]ush and evocative" (Booth 2007: blurb). A similar, if more strongly stylised, cover image invites readers to buy Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2006);<sup>2</sup> and at least one edition of *The Crimson Petal and the White* (Canongate, 2010) is advertised as an erotic adventure via a cover that shows the all-but-naked back of a young woman. Furthermore, Faber's novel mimics the Victorian three-decker novel in size and, in the case of the novel's internet presentation or its BBC adaptation as a mini-series (2011), imitates Victorian serial publication.<sup>3</sup> A last case in point is Sarah Waters's Victorian trio, with the cover art of the Virago-editions drawing specific attention to the material presence of objects which will come to play a vital role in the novels, thus inviting readers into Waters's seemingly 'real' recreations of the nineteenth century: the cover of *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) is decorated with a pair of pink shoes (as symbols of the world of the music hall), that of *Affinity* (1999) with the medallion which will facilitate Selina's control over Margaret, and the cover of *Fingersmith* (2000) shows a pair of gloves, symbolic not only of Maud's imprisonment by her uncle, but – as a love token – also evoking the lesbians' love and appealing to the readers' urge to 'touch' and 'feel' the nineteenth century. In the context of our twofold approach to the neo-Victorian, these eroticised representations do not come as a surprise: fetishised objects feed on a complex interplay between the visual and the material; drawing on the Freudian understanding of fetishism, the surrogate objects glossing over feminine lack would be devoid of meaning if they were not part of a (negative) visual event in the first place. Marketing strategies frequently fetishise products to make them appear desirable irrespective of their actual use or exchange value. The covers of the neo-Victorian novels mentioned above render this conglomerate of material, visual and commodity culture conspicuous. Neo-Victorianism thus provokes, appeals to and plays with contemporary

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desires, for example the desire on the part of readers/consumers to know and appropriate the past.

The narrative structure of *The Crimson Petal and the White* further enhances the book's market appearance as a consumable object. The reader cannot passively consume the text; s/he needs to actively navigate the fictional environment presented, once introduced to an imaginary urban environment, in which the story's narrator functions as a notoriously bossy and at times condescending guide. The narrative space thus created equates with a virtual space, in which the reader is required to make choices pre-formatted by the narrator's manipulations in order to arrive at the appropriate insight into the fictional world. "What you lack is the right connections", the reader is told, "and that is what I've brought you here to make: connections" (Faber 2002: 4). The novel plays at the hermeneutical process of contemporary ways of understanding the Victorian past, and it does so by intermedially appropriating adventure-game strategies, whose visual setup is structured by the focalisations of the characters in the game. The respective 'player' cannot help but follow them with his readerly avatar in order to explore the fictional world, a phenomenon that can be described as a variation of "vicarious kinaesthesia" (Darley 2000: 152). The reader moves through the story by following the guides offered by the script, the narrator and the characters. Faber's novel thus reflects on processes of reading, reception, and the marketable pleasures of reading in which, of course, the novel itself also participates.

Apart from creating a navigable narrative space, *The Crimson Petal and the White* offers its readers the experience of a 'vicarious synaesthesia' in that it renders the created spaces perceptible by describing meticulously what this virtual world looks, feels, smells, tastes and sounds like.<sup>4</sup> It invites or even lures its readers into a story structured by contemporary visual regimes, such as the adventure game or the virtual (tourist) tour, and plays with readers'/consumers' voyeurism and desire for vicarious entertainment. As the quotation above illustrates, the reader is invited to a guided tour to make connections, just like a tourist attempting a fully immersive experience in 'foreign' culture. What is part and parcel of such a tourist experience is, of course, the "tourist gaze" (Urry 1998), and the virtual tour through the world of *The Crimson Petal and the White* is no exception. Similar to the indulgent cover image, the narrative voice allows the

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traveller's gaze to 'feast' on a prostitute's body, before it ushers him or her on in the journey:

Now prepare yourself. You have not much longer with Caroline before she introduces you to a person with slightly better prospects. Watch her bodice swell as she inhales deeply the air of a new day. [...] Then watch your step as you follow her towards Arthur Street. (Faber 2002: 19)

The novel intersperses participatory pleasures with metafictional strategies of distancing by continually modulating the reader's perspective on the story. Thus it comments on various implications in and reflections of material and visual aspects of our relationship to the nineteenth century. The mimicry of Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861) cleverly highlights the fact that insights into life styles are dependent on class-related visual regimes and material differences between observers and observed (see Faber 2002: 404). The narrative play on distances in Faber's novel entails calibrations of how readers can 'see' or picture the scenes and characters described. This touches upon questions such as who can become the object of whose gaze, who is the subject of the gaze, what power structures are implied in gazing, and how the process of gazing is itself made conspicuous and reflected? In contrast to the metafictional breaching of the frame, time and again the narrative set-up also enables readers to 'see through' the representation according to generic conventions of realism, which assume language's transparency and ability to function as a quasi 'window' on the real, thereby disavowing the constructedness of the fictional world. Thus, 'viewers' as contemporary readers are at times allowed to disclaim their own complicity in a late capitalist market. The novel enables an identificatory reading position which suspends a critical viewpoint – but only until the intrusive narrator highlights this same process and calls the reader to order again: "Are you still paying attention?" (Faber 2002: 46). *The Crimson Petal and the White* thus creates an at times self-reflexive or self-conscious, at other times obviously pleasure-infused reading position. Faber's novel therefore illustrates some of the crucial ways in which material and visual culture intertwine in neo-Victorianism, highlighting some of the genre's core concerns with the pleasures and disquietude occasioned by our attraction to all things Victorian.

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## 2. Touching the Past, Seeing the Past

How we perceive the past depends on the construction of perspective (including narrative focalisations), and the provision of information, which are ideologically tinged as well as generically calibrated. But it is not only the sheer abundance of neo-Victorian texts that bears witness to this cultural preoccupation with Victorianism; visual and performative recreations of the Victorian era are equally characterised by intersections of visual and material culture. The aspect of life-style and an actual living of Victoriana, as aided by journals such as *Victoriana: Magazine for Victorian Style Living* or the web magazine *Living Victorian*, draws on the construction of a visual image of oneself quite literally *inhabiting* the Victorian, on the possession and artful recombination of the material culture of the time (or its twenty-first-century replicas), as well as on the performative re-enactment of social practices (such as decorating the Christmas tree as Queen Victoria did or cooking Victorian recipes).<sup>5</sup> These practices are based on an imaginative participation in the past; that is, they depend on specific constructions of subject positions and the material purchase as well as the cultural appropriation of such practices.

Such appropriation may be discerned in the advertising strategies of *The British Shop*, targeted mainly at German and Austrian consumers. *The British Shop* offers a wide range of 'British life style' products such as 'Floris', a Christmassy cinnamon and tangerine room fragrance. The accompanying slogan informs potential consumers that the Queen sprinkles Sandringham House with Floris at Christmas, thus creating the myth that by spending 26,90 € for the fragrance, everyone can be a little royal. More directly aimed at consumers of (neo-)Victoriana, and reminiscent of the products available in *Past Times* shops and on the *Past Times* website, customers can order 'Robin', a Christmas bauble advertised as 'Victorian', which is again linked to the royal family – manufacturer Bronnley, the advertising text stresses twice, is purveyor to the court.<sup>6</sup> Both products are invested with authenticity because of their origin in Great Britain; both can be used to live a life less contemporary, suffused with nostalgia and the idea of a supposedly secure past. In a similar vein, *Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book: Revived and Illustrated* (2008) offers not only gustatory

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participatory pleasures. Standing in the kitchen to prepare dishes Mrs. Darwin may have served her husband Charles renders history tangible and perceptible for and in many senses. The book's blurb specifically describes it as "[m]ore than a cookbook", stressing that

the *Mrs. Charles Darwin's Recipe Book* delineates a *lifestyle* at the top of English society and intelligentsia at the time. This *treasure trove* that includes unlikely dishes such as Turnips Cresselly and Penally Pudding contains, even, another cook evident in the work: The recipe for boiling rice is *in Charles Darwin's own hand*. The image of Darwin standing over a pot of boiling water with his pocket watch in hand, is one to savor, along with every other *vestige of a lost kitchen and lifestyle* come back to life here. (Bateson and Janeway 2008: blurb; emphasis added)

This description clearly plays at a nostalgia for the past, alluding, as it does, to the "lost kitchen and lifestyle", and makes up for this loss by offering some Victorian authenticity, not only based on the past's culinary accomplishments but also on the man's "own hand". Tying in nicely with A.S. Byatt's notion of the library as a "treasure-trove" and the reader's corresponding "treasure-hunt" in her Booker Prize winning *Possession* (Byatt 1990: 4, 83), the recipe book is advertised as a "treasure trove" which, in its turn, offers Victoriana in plenty. The performative reiteration of neo-Victorian lifestyles is based on material objects, visual display and contemporary desires. Far from just being a temporary whim, it has materialising effects with regard to contemporary identities.

Material Culture Studies provide ways of exploring contemporary modes of access to Victoriana, and we would like to draw on the *Journal of Material Culture* to introduce some central tenets of this approach. In the journal's inaugural edition (1996), its scope is defined as exploring "the ways in which artefacts are implicated in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social identities", or, to put it more broadly, "the relationship between people and things" (Anon. 1996: 5). To illustrate this idea, the journal draws on the conviction that "[a]ll human groups dwell in space" and that "the physical presence of houses and landscapes is there as a material environment that creates people (has an impact, or effects,

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facilitates or constrains activities) as much as it comprises structures that people create” (Anon. 1996: 6). The editorial performs a turning away from a predominantly semiotic notion of culture, which reads culture as text, to a concept that takes materiality as well as material environments seriously, to the extent that they are deemed to shape identities or even “schemes of perception” (Anon. 1996: 9). Faber’s novel seems to pay tribute to this idea in that it creates a fictional space that repeatedly interrupts the narrative flow and makes readers “watch their step” – a process that necessitates a new calibration of the reader position towards the fictional world depicted, and with it of the respective perspective on what is presented; thus, it fosters, at least, self-consciousness and, at most, self-reflexivity. Such a fictional rendering of material space therefore implies epistemological questions of how readers can approach the past in a neo-Victorian text.

Whereas the inaugural edition of the *Journal of Material Culture* still uses ‘things’, ‘objects’ and ‘commodities’ rather interchangeably, these terms provide demarcations for different concepts later on. Three different, but, arguably, intersecting theoretical approaches provide helpful tools to explore the role of materiality in neo-Victorianism: Material Culture Studies, Thing Culture, and Commodity Culture. Material Culture Studies entail the focus on artefacts and the social and symbolic practices involving them, as well as the forms of communication directed at them; materiality, here, clearly figures as an effect of processes of production and human culture that yields insights into that same culture (see Tischleder and Ribbat 2008: 464). This is a concern in studies by Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu and Christopher Tilley, among others. In contrast, proponents of Thing Culture such as Mieke Bal, Bill Brown and Bruno Latour shift the central focus to the thingness of objects, and with it those aspects of objects that cannot readily be semioticised. In *A Sense of Things*, Brown explores the role of things within literature and is particularly interested in questions such as “why and how we use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies” (Brown 2003: 4). Instead of exclusively exploring things within webs of significance, thing culture highlights performative and affective relations to things, including investigations of space, gender, race, and class (see Tischleder and Ribbat 2008: 464). Commodity culture, finally, analyses objects in terms of how they are implicated in capitalist modes of production and consumption, thus

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shifting the emphasis from the relations between things and people to that between things and socio-economic structures.

The interest of *Spectacles and Things* lies less in a contribution to a further calibration of analytic approaches to material and visual culture and more in an investigation of those intersecting approaches that most readily lend themselves to the exploration of neo-Victorianism. Neo-Victorian texts frequently tap into all schemas of materiality, at once metafictionally highlighting their own status as artefacts, playing at the affective relations to things for characters and readers alike, and reflecting on texts as products and their implications within a late-capitalist marketplace. This special issue consequently focuses on aspects such as the following: How can material culture – and the material presence of the Victorian in the neo-Victorian – be analysed so as to provide insights into processes of historiography? In what ways does a “Biography of Things” illustrate culturally specific meanings that might, in their turn, illuminate the respective Victorian and contemporary perspectives on things (Kopytoff 1986)? What are the concrete material circumstances that influence forms and processes of meaning construction in the first place? And, finally, how can we account for the regime of the visual, which inevitably plays a role in the consumption of the neo-Victorian?

This last question links material questions to the other dominant facet of this special issue, the question of visual culture – and as our brief detour into the cover art of neo-Victorian novels has already shown, visibility and the aesthetics of books play an important part in the marketing and consumption of neo-Victorian goods. As Chris Jenks asserts, “the way we think about the way we think in Western culture is guided by a visual paradigm. Looking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined” (Jenks 2002: 1). Apart from Western epistemology, which relies greatly on the nineteenth-century ‘invention’ of second-order observation, the very construction of subjectivity (at least according to Jacques Lacan’s notion of the mirror stage) depends on vision: it is only when we recognise the ‘I’/‘not-I’ in the mirror that we are able to enter the Symbolic, and with it, society. The specular identification at the root of subjectivity in this psychoanalytical view dovetails nicely with societies of the spectacle, which equally rely on visibility and visual consumption. Historically, the Great Exhibition of 1851 as well as the late-Victorian introduction of department stores attest to the fact that material culture and

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visuality are closely connected. The exhibits in both spaces were to a large extent consumed visually. Shopping in particular depends on the construction of the consumers' gaze on products and on how the presentation of goods and advertising strategies can increase goods' desirability. Scopic regimes thus play a vital part in the way we see ourselves and our relationship to consumer goods – which are central concerns of many neo-Victorian texts. Furthermore, many neo-Victorian negotiations of visuality draw on media technology, that is, the technology we inherited from nineteenth-century inventions. Since many of the technological devices of visualisation, such as photography or the cinema, emerged in the nineteenth century, contemporary visual regimes fall heir to these “historical techniques” and “discursive determinations” (Foster 1988: ix).<sup>7</sup> As visuality also pertains to “the body and the psyche” (Foster 1998: ix), it constitutes a vital component of cultural formations of the social and the subject alike. The essays in this special issue seek to explore the various kinds and intersections of materiality and visuality in neo-Victorianism, ranging from Marxist approaches to materiality or the representation of materiality as a neo-Victorian narrative strategy, to the construction of scopic regimes, and a reflection of the technological development of visual media or visual strategies in focalisation.

### 3. Consuming the Neo-Victorian

In his classic *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams created an enumeration of Victorian entries into the body of cultural vocabularies, a list of words which were either coinages of or acquired new meanings in the Victorian Age, and which hint at the manifold material implications of the nineteenth century even today:

*ideology, intellectual, rationalism, scientist, humanitarian, utilitarian, romanticism, atomistic; bureaucracy, capitalism, collectivism, commercialism, communism, doctrinaire, equalitarian, liberalism, masses, mediaeval and mediaevalism, operative (noun), primitivism, proletariat (a new word for mob), socialism, unemployment; cranks, highbrow, isms, and pretentious.* (Williams 1960: xv, original italics)

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The entry on ‘masses’, along with ‘capitalism’ and ‘commercialism’, evokes the notion of mass culture, which, at least from the 1880s onwards, includes the mass production of goods for socially stratified groups of people (an evocation that is strengthened by the inclusion of ‘highbrow’). Drawing on Mary Poovey, Erika Rappaport observes that

by the 1860s new technologies of representation along with material innovations ‘brought groups that rarely mixed into physical proximity with each other and presented them as belonging to the same, increasingly undifferentiated whole’. (Rappaport 2007: 100)

This goes to show that the social construction of groups is closely intertwined with the creation of new urban spaces and markets in the context of an expanding capitalism. These spaces, in their turn, create not only new forms of interaction between different social groups, but also redefine the interrelations between people and goods as new forms of shopping, advertising, and competition between consumer groups emerge, a process which was as valid in the nineteenth century as it is today.<sup>8</sup> With mass production (and this includes, of course, the mass production of books), a relation between people and things develops that is characterised by consumption, and, tying in with *Fingersmith*’s symbolically charged presentation of gloves on the book cover, the fetish characterises the emergent consumer culture in several ways. Karl Marx famously analysed the relationship between people and objects within consumer culture as being defined by abstraction, namely the abstraction from use value for the benefit of exchange value, which culminates in commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism entails the notion that the value of the commodity inheres in the commodity itself, whereas it actually inheres in the human labour invested in its production.

This idea is mirrored in the anthropological notion of fetishism, in which a divine power inhabits an object, e.g. a totem: envisaged from the point of view of its exchange value, the commodity seems to be invested with value independently of the historical circumstances that make it valuable. Jean Baudrillard famously ascribed another form of value, namely sign value, to commodities, a value they acquire specifically in late capitalist societies. “Marketing, purchasing, sales, the acquisition of

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differentiated commodities and object/signs,” he argued, “all of these presently constitute our language, a code with which our entire society communicates and speaks of and to itself” (Baudrillard 1970: 51). Furthermore, since the sign value of what people consume constitutes their socially stratified and culturally differentiated readability, consumption assigns “identity value” (du Gay 1996: 96). The marketing of things Victorian is a case in point. Victoriana in the age of mass production has almost only sign value to sell, and today’s markets know how to use it. Victoriana in the original sense of the word – as actual material remnants from the past, be they architectural or objects of everyday use – are not (and cannot) be produced now albeit in the form of reproductions that providers such as *The British Shop* or *Past Times* offer – one example might be the ‘Forget-Me-Not Trinket Box’, which is, of course, produced in a contemporary market but, as a product, is meant to evoke a Victorian lifestyle in which “flowers symbolised true love” ([www.pasttimes.com](http://www.pasttimes.com)). Accordingly, Williams’s entry on ‘masses’ alone would make a formidable starting point for questions of material culture, the sign systems and codes of visibility they produce, and the identities they help construct.

Fetishism is a multifaceted concept that is not only relevant in a Marxist context. Many of its definitions have a bearing on the interrelation between material and visual culture and why objects specifically are charged with meaning. Hence, it can help explain the particular relationship of contemporary consumers to neo-Victorian recreations of the past, as it elucidates ‘the power of things’ on the one hand, and contemporary desires, on the other. In the Freudian understanding, the fetish (such as a shoe, stocking, or a glove, for that matter, as in Sarah Water’s *Fingersmith*) is first and foremost a substitute for a lack. Drawing on fetishism in this psychoanalytic sense clearly shows how the visual event of a perceived lack must rely on a material object as substitute. For the fetishist’s later sexual development, it will be further visual events that replay the scenario of anxiety-ridden lack and object-related cure in erotic fantasies. Mieke Bal transfers this psychoanalytic scenario to cultures of collecting and therefore clearly embeds it in material culture studies. She illustrates the ways in which fetishism is a “story of origin”, “an act of interpretation, of construction out of nothingness”, in that the perceived ‘lack’ of the mother is already an interpretation and supplementation of the seen *as* lack, a kind of “negative vision” that constitutes male identity and that is supplemented

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by several fictionalisations (Bal 1994: 106). She goes on to show that the motivation for telling stories and collecting alike is to fend off death: “subjects constantly work their way through the difficulty of constituting themselves by re-enacting a primal scenario of separation, of loss and recovery, in order to defer death” (Bal 1994: 112). Jean Baudrillard’s approach to collecting ties in with Bal’s evaluation when he states that “[i]t is this irreversibility, this relentless passage from birth to death, that objects help us to resolve” (Baudrillard 1994: 16). Objects hence have the capacity to centre attention as well as to bundle psychic energies. In the neo-Victorian context, this approach sheds light on the relevance of collecting with reference to our relation to the past, as it helps elucidate the psychic investments in the collected objects; regarding the ever growing canon of neo-Victorian products, collecting even appears as a central cultural technique. Objects are not only things in the sense of a material presence or as parts of semantic networks; they are also and significantly psychologically charged, thus indicating specific culturally relevant cathexes. Concurring with Cora Kaplan, who draws on Freud’s notion of the “mnemic symbol”, which can be defined as an object or also a narrative “that embodies and elicits a buried psychic conflict which cannot be resolved in the present” (Kaplan 2007: 7), the representation of material culture in neo-Victorianism should be analysed with an eye to contemporary anxieties centring around objects which may be invested with contemporary problems that are projected onto the past, or, alternatively, with an eye to objects that still carry the cultural memory of problems of the past which can be tackled in the present; the latter might help explain why suppressed discourses of the nineteenth century resurface in neo-Victorian products. Material culture proves a vital part of cultural memory connecting past and present.

In the context of neo-Victorianism, it is specifically the iterative telling of stories of origin that indicates mnemic symbols or culturally relevant items from cultural memory. Even on the plane of theory, the nineteenth century seems to be fashioned as the cradle of many contemporary phenomena. As Dianne Sadoff and John Kucich point out, “Baudrillard found the origins of contemporary consumerism in the nineteenth century, Foucault found sexual science, Sedgwick gay culture, Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter, Armstrong found gender identity” (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xiv). This implies that we need the Victorian age to

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construct ourselves as we know ourselves today; it provides us with a plethora of stories of origin. Hence it is not surprising that, in the literary engagement with the past, the romance genre and the quest narrative are employed frequently – from Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984) or *Arthur and George* (2005) to Graham Swift’s *Ever After* (1992), from Byatt’s *Possession* to Waters’s Victorian trio. This libidinal take on the connection between objects, visual events and narrativisations in the case of neo-Victorian fetishism provides yet another framework to analyse “the late twentieth-century desire to know and to ‘own’ the Victorian past through its remains: the physical and written forms that are its material history” (Kaplan 2007: 1).

The intertwining of the visual and the material seems definitive of neo-Victorianism. The notion of “cultural fetishism”, as outlined by Hartmut Böhme, aptly describes how we knowingly play with processes of immersion and self-reflexivity as we consume the Victorian in the present:

The modernity of cultures is dependent on the further differentiation of the competence of a second-order observation, which binds cultural evolutions to the condition of increasing self-reflexivity. The latter does not contradict processes of fetishism and idolatry, of magic and of pleasurable (self-)enchantment, but is the condition of the possibility of cultural fetishism. Where this condition is fulfilled, the ineradicable magical and fetishistic need can turn into a playful variation of culture and into a culture of play. (Böhme 2006: 482, editors’ translation)<sup>9</sup>

If Böhme is right in saying that cultural fetishism is a defining feature of modern cultures, neo-Victorianism clearly partakes in shaping these, as it constitutes an on-going “playful variation of culture” which allows for (or even demands, as in Faber’s case) an interplay between immersion and self-reflexivity. Neo-Victorian fiction and culture caters to our pleasures in immersion, identification and identity constructions based on wholeness, but equally reflects on these processes as potentially problematic in their sometimes conservative and reactionary stance. A self-aware “culture of play” aims at having one’s cake and eating it. Neo-Victorianism provides the pleasures of immersion and enhance these by keeping us in the know of

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the how and why these pleasures are produced. The rules of this game are, of course, culturally and historically specific, and the question how the past is shaped regarding material recreations and visual perspectivalisations in the game called neo-Victorianism will remain indicative of our relation to the past.

#### 4. Contributions

In “‘Those Ill Things’: On Hidden Spectacles and the Ethics of Display’, Monika Pietrzak-Franger investigates literary and visual (in this case photographic) representations of syphilis and explores the disease’s ideological enmeshments with social hierarchies of gender, race and class with a close eye on their ethical implications. Reading John Wood’s poetry collection *Endurance and Suffering* (2007), which includes nineteenth-century clinical photographs of syphilitic patients, alongside Angela Carter’s short story ‘Black Venus’ (1985) allows Pietrzak-Franger to critically evaluate the neo-Victorian propensity for voyeurism. She Wood’s collection, an icono-textual project that explicitly aspires to re-integrate patients into society by making them visible, in fact misreads Victorian visual materials. Consequently his poetry re-inscribes nineteenth-century prejudices about both syphilis and the gendered syphilitic body, and eventually leads to a strengthening of social and gender hierarchies rather than their contestation. For a contrasting project, Pietrzak-Franger turns to Carter’s feminist rewriting of the life of Jeanne Duval, Charles Baudelaire’s mistress, and Carter’s highlighting of the complexity of individual lives marked by the disease by drawing attention to the multiplicity of traditional discourses to which Duval was subjected. By focusing on the conservative contextualisation of the nineteenth-century patients’ visual representations, Pietrzak-Franger puts the neo-conservative trajectory of some neo-Victorian writing under critical scrutiny.

Julia Kinzler’s analysis of the representation of the young Queen Victoria in Jean-Marc Vallée’s recent feature film (2009) echoes Pietrzak-Franger’s interest in the neo-Victorian’s propensity for neo-conservative values. In ‘Visualising Victoria: Gender, Genre and History in *The Young Victoria* (2009)’, Kinzler points out the film’s ambivalent stance towards neo-Victorianism. *The Young Victoria* is a neo-Victorian royal biopic – a genre Kinzler differentiates from the more established heritage film – which visualises much of its characterisation of the young royal by using

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nineteenth-century paintings and portraiture as the basis of its iconography in a self-conscious, intermedial mode of representation that Kinzler ascribes to the film's neo-Victorian 'agenda'. Kinzler's detailed analysis shows that *The Young Victoria*'s depiction of the monarch fails to live up to a critical version of neo-Victorianism as it re-inscribes our myths of Victorian gender hierarchies and represses Victoria's disruptive potential by normalising her as a married wife and mother. Hence, Kinzler evaluates the film as – at least in part – belonging to a Victoriana that nostalgically yearns for the 'good old' values of the nineteenth century and is therefore uncomfortably evocative of the Thatcherite take on the Victorian Age. It seems that now, in a time of (financial) crisis, representations of the hierarchically ordered and allegedly secure structures of the past have become comforting once again, despite their ideological pitfalls.

The question of the (neo-)conservatism of neo-Victorian texts and lifestyles shifts to the terrain of steampunk in Christine Ferguson's contribution, 'Surface Tensions: Steampunk, Subculture, and the Ideology of Style'. Her essay explores steampunk as a material practice and examines its ideologically charged discourses on the aims and tenets both inside and outside of the movement. In the context of debates on post-subculture, Ferguson re-evaluates by now stereotypical stances towards steampunk and contends that it is neither the Jamesonian aesthetic superficiality (or a Hebdigean blunting of ideological impetus through medial appropriation, for that matter), nor a clear anti-establishment punk attitude that defines steampunk today. Rather, steampunk has developed into a conglomeration of versatile, ideologically stratified and often politically circumspect set of attitudes, which cannot be homogenised under the umbrella term 'steampunk' any longer. In her analysis of steampunk attire as a semiotic system, Ferguson is furthermore able to show the intricate interdependencies between material and visual culture in contemporary (post-)subculture.

'Wagnerpunk: A Steampunk Reading of Patrice Chéreau's Staging of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1976)' returns to the visuality of steampunk culture, but with a different focus. Instead of critiquing the subculture's politics of representation, Carmel Raz explores intermedial relationships between steampunk and adaptations of Richard Wagner's opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung*. In her analysis of Chéreau's staging of the opera, Raz elucidates the possible lines of intersection between nineteenth-century

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opera and steampunk aesthetics before the latter's rise to cultural prominence from the 1980s onwards. With her focus on the domain of music and the visuality of the opera stage as one possible example of neo-Victorian returns to the past, Raz's article is innovative in its focus on an aspect of neo-Victorianism which has not (yet) been widely explored.

Gianmarco Perticaroli's analysis of Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* tackles specific aspects of material and consumer culture. In 'Neo-Victorian Things: Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*', Perticaroli puts processes of consumption under scrutiny and ponders the question of how the novel portrays processes of production and the class differences instigated by the uneven distribution of participation in the ownership of the means of production. The essay culminates in the insight that Faber's novel embraces post-Marxist convictions as financial capital fails to be translated into symbolic capital for the main characters, which undermines any notion of gain at the end of the book. This, Perticaroli maintains, can also be read as a critique of twenty-first-century consumer society: lured into the text through the lush descriptions of a material world that, eventually, fails to satisfy the protagonists of the novel, readers have to question their own desire for both the consumption of the (neo-)Victorian and their position in a society built upon the consuming passions of the Victorians. While Perticaroli focuses on the "rhetoric of presence" (Perticaroli 2011: 123) for much of his article, he also points to the impact of the absence of the material object in Faber's neo-Victorian novel.

This absence of the material in neo-Victorian fiction is taken up by Joachim Frenk, who points out that Charles Dickens's works have elicited an academic focus on the materiality of things in his novels. In 'Unending Dickens: Droodian Absences', Frenk chooses a different trajectory by examining the way neo-Victorian spin-offs exploit the gaps inscribed into Dickens's last and unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). He investigates the absences in Dickens's text (of an ending, and of the author), and the spectacular endings of two neo-Dickensian novels, Dan Simmons's *Drood* (2009) and Matthew Pearl's *The Last Dickens* (2009). As in Dickens's *Edwin Drood*, a double absence characterises both adaptations of the work, which are haunted by the mystery of Dickens's eponymous hero as well as the 'disappearance' of Dickens himself. As Frenk demonstrates, neo-Dickensian versions of Drood interestingly substitute

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spectacle for that which is not materially present, encouraging the reader to imagine presences where only absences exist.

Focusing on the afterlife of another canonical Victorian writer's work, Kara Manning explores the adaptational strategies involved in revisions of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), especially in the neo-Victorian translation of Tim Burton's *Alice* (2010). Her major focus in "That's the Effect of Living Backwards": Technological Change, Lewis Carroll's *Alice* Books, and Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* is on how technological inventions of the nineteenth century, such as the thaumatrope, the zooscope, the panorama and diorama and finally the cinematograph, not only find their intermedial reverberations in Carroll's text, but are further updated by the film technology Burton employs. If, for instance, the stereoscope provided a means of adding spatial depth to images in the nineteenth century, Burton presents his *Alice* using contemporary 3D-strategies. Manning thus convincingly shows how it is not only film itself that we have inherited from the Victorians, but wider representational strategies and scopic regimes that we re-adapt and re-appropriate today. At the same time, she focuses on the importance of immersion in the (neo-)Victorian text as a reader-response that Carroll's texts prefigure and that recent 3D-technology facilitates for the audience of Burton's film. This immersion into the texture, smells and sounds of the Victorian – the visual and material worlds – is an interest that all contributions of this volume share.

### Notes

1. See, for example, Heilmann and Llewellyn, who argue that "[w]e have reached a point [...] where a new adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* or *Great Expectations* is as much about the dialogue between this and earlier adaptations as it is about the relationship between the adaptation and Jane Austen's or Charles Dickens's novels" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 212).
2. See Heilmann and Llewellyn, who point out that the cover art of Starling's novel can be associated with both the act of opening the book and the loosening of the corset's laces (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 108).
3. See also Allison Neal's discussion of the BBC adaptation of Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (Andrew Davies, 2002). Neal reads the mini series as a

mass-produced commodity product aimed at a heteronormative market, and points out that this “adaptation makes a neo-Victorian story of cross-dressed lesbians accessible to a (male) heterosexual audience, by appealing to the sexual titillation of seeing a lesbian couple effectively performing for their gratification” (Neal 2011: 72).

4. Several contributions now draw attention to the fact that perception plays a vital role in neo-Victorianism and hence, many critics explore neo-Victorian attempts at making the Victorian perceptible in translating its materiality. See, for example, Colella 2010: 85-110 and Arias 2009: 92-107.
5. For an illuminating example of the contemporary impact of (neo-)Victorian clothes, see Margaret Stetz’s article ‘Would You Like Some Victorian Dressing with That?’ (2009). Stetz depicts the “fervent interest in knowing more about Victorian material culture and in creating new styles of self-presentation that draw upon Victorian fashion” and points to the internet as a platform which caters to the tastes of consumers “who wish to graduate from dressing Victorian paper dolls to dressing themselves in elements of Victorian fashion, thus becoming the living embodiments of mashup” (Stetz 2009: para. 18, 17).
6. The advertising slogan for the Floris room fragrance states: “Diesen edlen Raumduft versprüht die Queen zu Weihnachten! [...] Dem Vernehmen nach lässt sich auch die königliche Familie jedes Jahr einige Flacons davon liefern, um eine stimmungsvolle Weihnachtsatmosphäre zu schaffen.” The text describing ‘Victorian’ Christmas bauble ‘Robin’ stresses the status of Bronnley: “Vom Hoflieferanten Bronnley! [...] Ausgedacht hat sich diese schöne Idee der Hoflieferant BRONNLEY.” ([www.the-british-shop.de](http://www.the-british-shop.de)).
7. For an exemplary analysis of photography in neo-Victorian writing, see Kate Mitchell’s *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (2010), especially Chapter 6: “‘The alluring patina of loss’: Photography, Memory, and Memory Texts in *Sixty Lights* and *Afterimage*” (Mitchell 2010: 143-176).
8. See also Gianmarco Perticaroli’s article in this volume for an analysis of consumer culture in Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White*, which underscores this proposition. Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith* provides a focus on one exemplary Victorian market (if not necessarily one of mass consumption) The marketing and consumption of pornography is depicted through the eyes of Maud Lilly, who not only interacts economically with various ‘men of business’, but also sexually with a woman supposedly belonging to the lower classes. Maud becomes an asset in the pornographic and voyeuristic regime of

her uncle's enterprise, an enterprise that implicates both Maud herself when "phrases, fragments" of the books (Waters 2002: 280) intensify Maud's desire for Sue Trinder, as well as readers who immerse themselves into the plot. In her novel, Waters also emphasises the materiality of the pornographic books – when, on the day of her escape from Briar, Maud destroys her uncle's collection, the books seem to breathe a material presence that makes it hard for Maud to 'kill' them; the first book she cuts to pieces takes part in the sado-masochistic qualities of the pornographic marketplace when it "*sighs*, as if longing for its own laceration; and when I hear that, my cuts become swifter and more true" (Waters 2002: 290).

9. The original in German reads: "die zeitgemäße Form der medialen Exteriorisierung von anthropologischen Potenzialen [...]. Die Modernität von Kulturen ist von der Ausdifferenzierung einer Beobachtungs-Beobachtungskompetenz abhängig, welche kulturelle Evolutionen an die Bedingung zunehmender Selbstreflexivität bindet. Diese steht nicht in Widerspruch zu Prozessen des Fetischismus und der Idolatrie, der Magie und lustvollen (Selbst-) Verzauberung, sondern sie ist die Bedingung der Möglichkeit des kulturellen Fetischismus. Wo diese Bedingung eingelöst ist, kann das unausrottbare magische und fetischistische Bedürfnis zu einer Spielform der Kultur und zur Kultur des Spiels werden."

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