

Introduction to ‘Swing Your Razor Wide...’: Sweeney Todd and Other (Neo-)Victorian Criminalities

Benjamin Poore and Kelly Jones

(University of York and University of Lincoln, England, UK)

This special issue grew out of a one-day symposium held at the University of Lincoln, UK, on 31st May 2008. It explores the discourses on crime and criminality in recent adaptations of *Sweeney Todd* and other contemporary re-visions of nineteenth-century criminal transgression and the cultural fascination, then and now, with the agents, victims, and avengers of such acts.

1. Genesis of the University of Lincoln Performance

The symposium, ‘Attend the Tale: New Contexts for Sweeney Todd and Other (Neo-)Victorian Criminalities’ was inspired by performance work undertaken by undergraduates at the University of Lincoln, UK, during their course in histories of theatre, ‘Restoration to Melodrama’, which formed part of their studies towards a BA in Drama. Having been set the task of performing work influenced by melodrama, students came across Montagu Slater’s 1928 edition of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. Students performed extracts from the play, alongside extracts from the more well-known 1968 adaptation of the London legend by Christopher Bond, and then asked to perform a full-length version of the Slater edition to test the continuing theatrical viability of the earlier dramatic rendition of the tale in the context of present-day theatre. This performance as research project, therefore, set out to investigate how the structures of melodrama might function for a modern audience.

Slater’s text itself was already a hybrid, described by him as “hopelessly corrupt” (Slater 1951: 18), as a patchwork of various sources ranging from the fragmented text of George Dibdin Pitt’s 1847 melodrama to Edward Lloyd’s original periodical serialisation. Strikingly, it even includes a substantial verbatim appropriation of Dickens’ ‘Death of Nancy’ scene from *Oliver Twist* (1837-8). Discussion after the performance, amongst scholars who attended the Lincoln symposium, raised the question of whether Slater’s edition could even be regarded as an early neo-Victorian pastiche, originating in the 1920s as a result of the fashion for Grand

Guignol, that is, dramatic entertainment, growing out of the naturalist movement, with a penchant for detailed depictions of grisly violence.¹ Slater's text, some scholars suggested, might not actually have been intended as an attempt at a *reconstruction* of the Victorian *Sweeney Todd*, as it was played at the Britannia Theatre, Hoxton. Rather, it could be a compendium of the various additions and performative accretions that *Sweeney Todd* had acquired during its long performance history in the later nineteenth century. Certainly, Slater's edition is much more dramatically diffuse than the Dibdin Pitt manuscript on deposit in the Lord Chamberlain's plays collection (1847 volume) at the British Library, or indeed than the Dick's Plays edition of Dibden Pitt's play (1883) which is reprinted in the 1974 collection *The Golden Age of Melodrama*.

2. Restoring Contingency to the Sweeney Legend

Whatever the validity of Slater's text, for its audience of students and scholars, one of the ways in which the University of Lincoln research performance functioned was to make manifest the contingent nature of the legend up to the mid-twentieth century. Since then, we argue, the contours of the legend have become ostensibly more fixed and streamlined in the popular imagination.² As a result of Christopher Bond's version at the Victorian Theatre, Stoke on Trent, in 1968 (and later at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, in 1973), which was used as the basis of the Sondheim and Wheeler musical that premiered on Broadway in 1979, one telling of the Sweeney legend has become privileged above earlier versions. The outlines of this popular version of the story may be briefly summarised as follows: Sweeney returns to England seeking revenge on Judge Turpin, who had raped Sweeney's young wife and had Sweeney himself transported. He sets up his barber's shop with the intention of being avenged on the Judge, only beginning his career as a serial murderer by necessity when the barber Pirelli tries to blackmail him. Mrs Lovett is in love with Sweeney, and misleads him about the fate of his wife Lucy so that he may, she hopes, marry her. Also in this version, Johanna, the Judge's ward, is Sweeney's daughter, and is loved by Sweeney's sailor companion Anthony. At the end of the story, Sweeney unwittingly kills his wife, now a beggar-woman, and is in turn killed by Tobias (who, in this rendition, features as Mrs Lovett's young ward who is driven mad by his knowledge of what goes into her pies). This telling of the tale is much more streamlined than Victorian stage

versions. In the Bond version, there is a tight circle of desire which motivates much of the action (Turpin-Lucy, Anthony-Johanna, Lovett-Sweeney), but in the nineteenth century versions, unrequited love was represented in the form of the more marginalised form of Colonel Jeffreys, who falls in love with Johanna even whilst delivering the news of the supposed death of her sweetheart, Mark Ingestrie, an impoverished sailor who had run away to sea to seek his fortune. The Reverend Lupin, another of Johanna's suitors, is included as the comic lecher, who hounds Johanna and wheedles his way into the affections of her mother, Mrs Oakley, much to the dismay of Mr Oakley. The functions of the clown characters, Jarvis (who featured, in the early versions of the tale, as Lovett's pastry cook) and Tobias (Sweeney's apprentice in the Dibdin Pitt text), are also conflated in the Bond script.

This fixity has become still more apparent in the wake of the release of Tim Burton's film adaptation of Stephen Sondheim's operatic thriller in early 2008. However, as befits a film built on a musical, which was in turn built on a play that was itself patched together from various sources, the story's architecture is not entirely stable and can be viewed in different ways, depending on one's approach. For instance, Bond's script is subtitled '*A Melodrama*', but he makes explicit in the play's introduction that one of the sources that he drew on was revenge tragedy (Bond 1974: v). This influence is particularly strong in the Burton film, where Sweeney, played by Johnny Depp, is a man who is as sinned against as sinning, sharpening his razors to exact revenge on a corrupt judiciary. This cool, detached avenger is eventually calmly murdered, his role in the tale complete, by the boy Tobias, whom he has instructed in the art of murder (see Weltman 2009: 308). Moreover, in the context of the early twenty-first century, the reconstruction of the criminal as dark avenger, comparable in some sense to equivocal comic book heroes such as Batman, further contributes to Sweeney/Depp's appeal, perhaps also indicating a disillusionment with the efficacy of modern law enforcement.

Viewed from a different angle, however, Depp's Sweeney can be regarded as having a socio-political dimension, since this line of thought is part of Bond's original architecture, which was extended by Sondheim and Wheeler. In Slater's version, Sweeney has an explicitly self-interested, capitalist motivation for his crimes, evidenced by Sweeney's solitary serenade to the string of pearls he clutches to him: "When a boy, the thirst

of avarice was first awakened by the fair gift of a farthing: that farthing soon became a pound; the pound a hundred – so to a thousand, till I said to myself, I will possess a hundred thousand.” (Slater 1951: 29) Sondheim’s musical replaces this avaricious motive with a more widespread “city on fire” metaphor for industrialisation (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 186) as a competitive system serving the survival of the fittest. According to Sweeney, as played by Depp, “It’s man devouring man, my dear” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 105). As Sweeney’s attentions turn to Mrs Lovett’s complicity in cooking up a culinary revenge, there is a cold logic behind his insistence, “And who are we to deny it in here?” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 105)³

It is this sense of capitalist society itself as mad – rather than the criminal as diseased, congenitally depraved, or an inhuman ‘other’ – that is emphasised by the musical, particularly in the original Broadway production directed by Harold Prince, with its front drop of George Cruikshank’s illustration *The British Beehive* (1867) and its use of a factory-whistle as a sound effect whenever a murder took place. The Sondheim and Wheeler version thus rejects atavistic explanations for Sweeney’s behaviour, or those theories of degeneracy associated with Max Simon Nordau (see Mack 2007: 65-67). The expansionist tendencies of Victorian criminology, under the influence of Cesare Lombroso, had been to pathologise in turn the homosexual, the artist, the political revolutionary and the prostitute and classify them as criminal types (see Greenslade 92: 23-24). Whilst, for the audiences of the later nineteenth century, these latter ideas may have provided some explanation for Sweeney’s criminal behaviour, Sondheim and Wheeler, reconstructing the story for the late twentieth-century, could not rely on the “reassuring confidence” of such “empirical routes to certainty”, as John Kerrigan has called the science of the period (Kerrigan 1996: 60). Instead, the musical can be read as proposing a form of Marx-derived *economic* determinism (the pursuit of profit alienates and corrupts the human) instead of the explanatory schemes of criminal anthropology. Thus, the Sondheim and Wheeler version suggests that any one of us, pushed by the contradictory imperatives of capitalism, could become a Sweeney: “Isn’t that Sweeney there beside you?” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 203)

Whilst much of this socio-political critique remains present in the film – albeit at a textual level – Burton takes the bold step of doing away

with Sondheim and Wheeler's chorus, replacing it with an animated sequence and a wordless prologue. Hence, the framework, the scaffolding, of the stage musical is removed, and the events are presented as filmic 'reality' rather than a self-consciously constructed story: "What happened then – well that's the play/ And he wouldn't want us to give it away." (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 25) This move could be seen as aestheticising the gore rather than critically commenting upon it, a tendency that will be further discussed in section 5 below.

3. The Symposium

Inspired by this creative tension between variations in the tale and the means by which it is told, we organised a symposium on the day of the University of Lincoln undergraduates' performance to explore the reasons behind our culture's ongoing fascination with the Sweeney legend, and with other fact-based and fictional manifestations of the Victorian underworld. The event was generously supported by the Society for Theatre Research and brought together a range of speakers from disparate fields, including English Literature, History, Drama and Theatre Studies, to create a truly interdisciplinary forum.⁴

The papers given on the day were by no means all neo-Victorian in scope. John Simons, for instance, spoke on the travelling menagerie and the beast show in Victorian England, investigating the links between wild animals and criminality in the popular imagination, whilst Gary Peatling's paper considered the Victorian legal understanding of criminality, and associated frameworks of punishment, which were exported to India through the writings of James Fitzjames Stephen, a legal member of the Viceroy's Council in India from 1869 to 1872. Two papers took criminality in Victorian literature as their starting-points: Tony Garland considered the emergence of the *femme fatale* towards the end of the nineteenth century, as manifested in such figures as Thomas Hardy's Arabella Donn, Oscar Wilde's Salomé, and Max Beerbohm's Zuleika Dobson, while Melissa L. Brawn used modern theories of criminology and victimology to interpret the behaviour of characters from *Great Expectations* (1860-1), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *The Woman in White* (1859-60) and *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-2).

Our keynote speakers, Peter Thomson and Richard Hand, provided valuable insights on the Sweeney legend and its place in the literary and

theatrical discourses of the nineteenth century and beyond. Both Paddy Cooper and Roy Pierce-Jones offered spirited and persuasive interpretations of Sondheim and Wheeler's *Sweeney Todd* as "a subverted morality tale" and "an angry, sociopolitical commentary" respectively, while Scott Freer examined Bakhtinian "grotesque realism" and the creation of the "exotic topography of a Victorian criminal underworld" in the Lionel Bart musicals *Oliver!* and *Scrooge*. Two further presentations confirmed the breadth of current interest in adapting Victorian tales of criminality. Both Darren Tunstall and Andy Jordan's presentation on a new adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Nigel Morris's stimulating discussion of Christopher Nolan's film *The Prestige* (2006) referenced Victorian illusionism and the discourses surrounding the emergence of modernity at the *fin de siècle*.

4. The Contemporary Fascination with Victorian Criminalities

Discussion of the papers at the symposium and the plenary session debate helped to crystallise some of the reasons that the Sweeney legend continues to fascinate in the twenty-first century, and how it fits into topographies of crime in Victorian London. Drawing on points raised in Freer, Cooper, and Tunstall's presentations, it was agreed that the legend plays on our continued wariness of the city as a place where identities become disturbingly changeable, where loved ones can be 'lost' – or lose themselves – and where the concentration of people leads to arbitrary choices (to visit one barber's shop rather than another) with potentially deadly consequences. Our own current concerns with teenage knife crime and 'problem' children who 'slip through the net' of social services are surely related to these urban nightmares. As Simons' paper made vividly clear, the turning of a corner in Victorian London could lead to an encounter with a wild beast, and the idea of the beast at the heart of modern civilization continues to be used as a metaphor when newspapers discuss the problem of 'feral' urban youths.⁵ In this light, it could be argued that we are still dealing with the consequences of Darwin's discoveries and the breakdown of our cherished binaries and categorisations of human and beast, civilised and savage (see Mack 2007: 63, 67).⁶

It may be that the figure of Sweeney himself serves as a prototype for modern fictional criminals, either as an example of the criminal without shame, the believer in vigilante justice in a society where the law remains

susceptible to corruption (an association suggested by this issue's discussion of *V for Vendetta*), or else of the criminal as connoisseur, the serial killer as would-be artist (as in the case of Hannibal Lecter). Meanwhile, the Sweeney-related trope of 'couples who kill', the brutal ogre of a man and his partner, the cunning witch who wins the confidence of innocent children, is echoed in modern accounts of the Moors Murderers, or Frederick and Rosemary West (or, in the US, Alton Coleman and Debra Brown, to cite one example).⁷ The idea of some kind of love or loyalty helping to motivate such repellent behaviour seems to continue to exert a peculiar fascination.

On another level, the tale may serve as an argument for the necessity of a police force, since the setting of Lloyd's version "when George the Third was young" (Anon 2007: 3) predates the 1829 formation of the metropolitan police; so too of detective methods (Mack 2007: 62). (The detective story, of course, comes into its own slightly later in the century, in the novels of Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, among others). In Foucauldian terms, we might note in passing that, as Mack points out, the Sweeney legend emerges "at about just the same moment that public executions as theatrical spectacles were themselves finally being eliminated altogether from public life" (Mack 2007: 61). Thus, read as a commentary on the beginnings of the surveillance society or "carceral city" (Foucault 1977: 307), the story, in its various versions, is packed with instances of surveillance and confinement: Jonas Fogg's asylum; Anthony's surveillance of Johanna's window; the beggarwoman's insistent pointing out of the tell-tale smoke; Pirelli's calculating observation of Sweeney/Barker; the suspicions of Beadle Bamford; the jeweller Jean Parmine's determination to report Sweeney's suspiciously-acquired pearls; Sweeney's surveillance of Lovett, Lovett's surveillance of Toby, Toby's surveillance of the pies. Consequently, the story calls for a series of more or less self-interested detective figures, from Toby, Jarvis, Parmine and Ingestrie in the Dibdin Pitt version to Anthony, Lucy and ultimately Sweeney, who discovers Lovett's deception and punishes her, in Bond/Sondheim and Wheeler's versions.

Yet perhaps it is the tale's metaphors of consumption that retain the most resonance for the early twenty-first century. As Richard Hand argued, the placing of the barber's shop and pie shop in Fleet Street, which in the 1840s was only beginning to be associated with newsprint, and the image of a pie wrapped in newspaper, being sent out via delivery boy, create very

modern reverberations with our own news media's practice of chewing up and spitting out individuals via the kiss-and-tell and celebrity gossip industry. Furthermore, as Roy Pierce-Jones hinted, Sondheim's vision of a society hurtling towards its own destruction – a city on fire, with rats in the streets, a city literally consuming itself – is one with which, via our modern addiction to burning finite fossil fuels and producing excess waste, we can sharply identify on a much grander scale. Obviously, this latter thought is unlikely to have occurred to Bond or Sondheim during their work on the story, nor would it have had a similar currency in the Victorian age. Nevertheless, it does serve to demonstrate the extent to which our present-day perspectives on the Victorians are always likely to be decisively shaped by our own cultural context.

This need to place ourselves in the frame as we examine our imaginings and adaptations of the Victorians and the world they inhabited is discussed at greater length in Marie-Luise Kohlke's introduction to the inaugural edition of *Neo-Victorian Studies*:

To properly 'address' the manifold spectres of the nineteenth century, with which we cohabit in the present, also means addressing our own complex investments in resurrecting the past, acknowledging how desire makes the spectres dance to our tune, delimiting what we choose to hear when we make the ghosts speak – or speak for them. (Kohlke 2008: 14)

We would like to offer an alternative, yet complementary, perspective to the neo-Victorian's concern with tropes of spectrality and haunting invoked here, by suggesting that, alongside this communion with the transient spectral traces of the past, the fascination with the subject of neo-Victorian criminalities represents a more profound concern with the *material* body and its somewhat grotesque actuality.

5. The Place of 'Vile Bodies' in Burton's *Sweeney Todd*

The positioning of ourselves with regard to the Victorians and their attitudes to sexuality and physicality may have become more sophisticated since landmark studies such as Steven Marcus' *The Other Victorians* (1966) and Ronald Pearsall's *The Worm in the Bud* (1969). Pearsall, for instance, seems fascinated by the details of the Whitechapel murders, even while

asserting the superior openness of his own age. In general terms, Pearsall blames repression for the Victorians' failures and their lack of industry (Pearsall 1969: 518), and yet we are left wondering how, if the Victorians *were* so un-industrious and unwilling to discuss sexual violence, they came to leave so much detailed discussion and documentation of the Ripper's crimes for us to peruse. However, even after Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978) exploded the 'repressive hypothesis', our present-day society remains prone to taking a primarily prurient interest in the nineteenth century in order to assert its own superiority, persistently (re-)inventing the Victorians as bogeymen (Sweet 2001: xi). Furthermore, we might usefully expand on a point made by Andrew Smith in *Victorian Demons*, regarding how the medical profession itself fell under suspicion during the Whitechapel murders, since doctors investigating the murdered and mutilated women could be accused of "essentially producing autopsies about autopsies" (Smith 2004: 86). Is our culture's continued hunger for the details of such crimes – the victims' nakedness and dishevelment, the removal of their organs and genitalia, the evidence of their diets from the contents of their stomachs – any more disinterested or free of suspicion?⁸

The original Broadway production of Sondheim and Wheeler's *Sweeney Todd* managed to sidestep such ghoulishness in a number of ways. Most importantly, of course, it was a legend rather than a documented piece of criminological history, and indeed it recounted a legend at that time unfamiliar to North American audiences (Sondheim, cited in Mack 2007: 269). Whilst the front-drop depicting Cruikshank's *British Beehive* etching asserted the story's synecdochic relationship to the Victorian metropolis and thus, by implication, to capitalism at large, the production design seemed far less concerned with reproducing a precise historical period than presenting, in Brechtian fashion, the socially significant elements of that world. Central to the set was a large truck with the barber's shop on the top and, when it was revolved, the frontage of the pie shop was revealed on the ground floor. The chorus would sing, narrating the tale, as they arranged the set. The form of the musical also contributed to the drawing of attention to the characters' physicality, and in itself distanced the performances from naturalism. The fact that Sweeney (as originally played by Len Cariou, then by George Hearn) had a huge physical presence, heavy white face make-up and a distinctive, sweeping hairstyle, helped to locate the story as fable rather than precise social history. Most importantly for this argument, the first *Sweeney*

production celebrated the grotesque comedy of the tale. Mouths had to be opened wide for voices to fill the theatre. The piercingly operatic singing of Johanna, so out of keeping with that of the other characters, seems to highlight the almost embarrassing extent of her unworldly romanticism. Mrs Lovett is the very opposite of a siren, her motley dress sense, eccentric hairstyle, and inept dancing during 'A Little Priest' inviting the audience to laugh at the character, even whilst acknowledging her callousness as an accessory to murder. If, as Mack proposes, Sondheim and Wheeler's stage *Sweeney Todd* was able to position itself generically between musical and opera (Mack 2007: 274-275; 282-283; 286-287), then the Tim Burton film of the musical might be said to combine the conventions of filmic naturalism with the hyperreality of music video. The resultant style arguably offers a much smaller and more controlled space for the grotesque.

The film 'naturalises' the action since, instead of the full-throated, open-mouthed delivery of the stage show, on the film soundtrack characters sing in a more self-consciously 'pop' style, where notes can fade to a whisper or be croaked and mumbled.⁹ And, as in music video, these notes are delivered on-screen by mouths only partially open, maintaining the characters' serious, self-involved façade; they do not consciously sing 'at' us. As Sharon Aronofsky Weltman notes, "Burton's *Sweeney Todd* foregrounds mood and acting over singing" (Weltman 2009: 306). As mentioned earlier, the explicitly audience-directed element of the musical, the chorus that frames the tale, is made into an instrumental overture and accompanied by an animated sequence set in London's sewers.

However, as suggested above, the film combines this representation of a self-contained, cohesive world with the hyperreal visual language of music video. Live action is mixed with animation; Victorian London is given a stylised, bleak palette of monochrome shades only relieved by the deep red of blood, creating a knowingly artificial world, but one which does not comedically comment on itself as the Broadway production did. As in music video, the 'Poor Thing' and 'By the Sea' sequences flash between the diegetic here-and-now, the past, and the putative future with radically different designs and sets of costumes. Every character in the film is styled for maximum visual impact, with Sacha Baron-Cohen providing an instantly recognisable cameo as Pirelli, and Johnny Depp's Sweeney not only referencing *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) with the streak of white in his hair, but also looking startlingly similar to Mrs Lovett (Helena Bonham-Carter).¹⁰

This visual 'twinning' of the two leads 'androgynises' both, so to speak, obscuring sexual difference, and removing elements of the grotesque, of masculinity or femininity gone wrong, excessive, disproportionate. Instead, with their alabaster complexions and uncanny youth, the two leads conform more to a neo-classical ideal than a Gothic one. The film co-opts the visual vocabulary of the style tribe 'goth' (and its much younger cousin 'emo'), more than 'the Gothic' as such, even though the depictions of vengeance and violence in the film in some ways conform to Smith's discussion of the Male Gothic, with its representation of "male violence, female persecution, and semi-pornographic scenes" (Smith 2004: 71).¹¹

The result of such a repositioning in the representation of Sweeney and Lovett is that the supporting colourful and/or grotesque cast of Pirelli, Beadle Bamford, Lucy, and the unnamed victims during 'God, That's Good!', can all be read as being punished for their bodily imperfections by a pair of ethereal, dark-eyed beauties with high cheekbones. In contrast the victims are too old, wrinkled, misshapen, diseased, or flamboyantly dressed - and, almost always, too hairy - hence the need for a shave. The reluctance to make Depp and Bonham Carter physically grotesque thus inadvertently ends up pointing out the narrow limitations of physicality in contemporary mainstream media, when compared to the Victorians' celebration of physical variety and oddity (for instance, in Dickens' and Collins' fictional characters and in music hall performance), or indeed, to the unashamed use of the grotesque in Harold Prince's stage production.

The visual logic is clear. In adapting *Sweeney Todd* for film - the medium that invented the extreme close-up - the melodramatic idea of villainy being written on the face and body, which had always accompanied the Sweeney legend, is replaced by the idea of villainy masked by surface beauty. The latter idea, of course, not only serves as the foundation of many fin-de-siècle narratives, chief amongst them *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), but also constitutes one of the underlying assumptions of theatrical naturalism, the style that overshadowed melodrama in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Melodramatic Sweeney has given way to a figure like that of Captain Alving in Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), who could walk among his peers without revealing his secret dissolute lifestyle.¹²

Furthermore, the naturalistic conventions of film have prevailed even in a highly un-naturalistic story genre; as mentioned earlier, Burton's adaptation highlights the elements of revenge tragedy (in its broadest sense)

in Bond's original framework, and massively increases the bloody violence and spectacle. It is a fascinating paradox that where one element of the grotesque – Sweeney's throat-slitting career – has never been more explicitly portrayed, the presentation of an unappealing pair of grotesques, perpetrating the pie-making process, appears to have been too much to bear, or rather risk, for the Hollywood star system. Where Weltman asserts that Burton has "return[ed] Sweeney Todd's story to mass audiences" (Weltman 2009: 306), we argue that it already had mass appeal in its musical form, given the widespread popularity of professional revivals and amateur productions, and that it would be unfortunate if the success of Burton's film led to stage versions attempting to tone down the Brechtian, grotesque savagery of the musical in line with a new 'definitive' version.

Finally, Burton's *Sweeney Todd* can be placed in a broader context of televisual and filmic notions of Victorian criminality. Whilst Burton's film sets the action in a world of graphic cartoon violence that mixed Grand Guignol with computer generated images of mincing machines and sewers, Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006) places multiple acts of homicide at the centre of a complex, deceptive film about stage illusionism. The television series *Doctor Who* continues to tease us with the idea of Victorian criminality, whilst usually revealing the perpetrators to be alien creatures (as in the 2008 Christmas Special *The Next Doctor*). Even more recently, the British television drama series *Whitechapel* (ITV 2009) employed a visual language of flickering film and distorted images of paper, photographs, and shadows to play with the idea that a serial killer in present-day London might be Jack the Ripper himself, and to underline the detectives' fear that this killer, too, might disappear forever from their grasp. Seen in this light, the dark fantasy of Burton's *Sweeney* is of a piece with a range of neo-Victorian dramas which deliberately conflate fact, fiction, and apocrypha, and add spectacular visual effects, seemingly to suggest, on different levels, that straightforward notions of the emergence of the modern mass murderer in Victorian London are at least as much to do with our own construction of the Victorians – our wish to locate evil in one particular place and time – as with historical truth.

In the lyrics to the prologue edited from the film, the chorus incites Sweeney: "Swing your razor wide, Sweeney! / Hold it to the skies!" (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 24) This introduction has pointed out two telling ways in which the new cinematic Sweeney has cut his legend into a

decisively different shape. The rest of this special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* will present a wider view of the ways that the figure of the (neo-) Victorian criminal still haunts contemporary formulations of transgression and evil.

Notes

1. See the useful definitions given for Grand Guignol by Richard J. Hand, Michael Wilson and Mel Gordon in the featurette 'Grand Guignol: A Theatrical Tradition' (Baker 2007: n. pag.)
2. Richard J. Hand's half-hour adaptation of the legend for radio, *The Terrifying Tale of Sweeney Todd*, broadcast on 22 October 2008, provided a counterpoint to this idea of Sweeney's increasing fixity. In his version, Mrs Lovett escapes justice, and is revealed, in an uncanny twist at the end, to have been our narrator all along.
3. The socio-political dimension of Bond's script could also be seen as updating the formula of revenge tragedy: he wrote of wanting to make the story believable "given a mad world not unlike our own" (Bond 1974: v), and of course the world as a mad-house is a familiar trope from Jacobean drama. We are indebted to John Kerrigan's *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* for these insights into broader cultural patterns of revenge tragedy.
4. For the full programme of the event, see <http://www.lincoln.ac.uk/home/conferences/sweeneyTodd/index.htm>.
5. See, for instance, articles in British newspapers, such as Bruce Anderson, 'Youth must be spared from feral criminality', *The Independent*, 6 November 2006, viewed 10 January 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/bruce-anderson/bruce-anderson-youth-must-be-spared-from-feral-criminality-423132.html>; and James Slack and Liz Hull, 'Top judge attacks "feral" yobs in a courtroom tirade as Cameron calls for national service', *Mail Online*, 18 January 2008, viewed 10 January 2009, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-508877/Top-judge-attacks-feral-yobs-courtroom-tirade-Cameron-calls-national-service.html>.
6. The idea of the criminal as a kind of savage was, of course, a feature of the theories of atavism associated with Cesare Lombroso and, later, Havelock Ellis (see Greenslade 1994: 97). The idea of the primordial urban predator was also fed by narratives like Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903)

(see McLaughlin 2000: 123-124), as well as the legend of Spring-Heeled Jack and speculation concerning Jack the Ripper.

7. This association is also suggested by our reading of Marina Warner's book, *No Go the Bogeyman* (1998), which mentions the Sweeney legend only once (Warner 2000: 12) but points out the insatiable physical appetite of the ogre and its grotesque marks of otherness and excess (Warner 2000: 136; 312). As Sweeney sings in the musical: 'Not one man, no, / Nor ten men, / Nor a hundred/ Can assuage me' (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 102). In these terms, Sweeney may be considered the ogre and Lovett the witch, who plays the role of the good mother to capture Tobias, like the witch in the Hansel and Gretel fairytale.
8. Indeed, this idea of 'autopsies about autopsies' takes on an extra, imitative dimension in the genre collision between Victorian murder-mystery and forensic police-procedural offered by the 2009 UK drama serial *Whitechapel*, mentioned later in this introduction.
9. Mark Kermode, in reviewing the DVD release of the film, confirmed the similarity between Depp's vocal delivery and that of the 1960s British pop star Anthony Newley (Kermode 2008: 18).
10. Burton's film, and the casting of Depp in the lead, also sets up a series of associations with the visual style of previous Burton films, such as *Beetle Juice* (1988), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), and *The Corpse Bride* (2005), as well as other Depp roles where he plays Englishmen (with varying degrees of dark humour), including his characters in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1999), *From Hell* (2001), and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise (2003-2007). Whilst not wishing to diminish the importance of such filmic intertextuality, and even allowing for the likelihood that Burton's distinctive filmic sensibility may in turn have affected production design for music video, we are here focusing on the way that a film set to music may create connections with the discrete genre of the promotional music video.
11. Although Burton's *Sweeney Todd* focuses far more on murder than rape, the rape of Lucy perpetrated by Judge Turpin (briefly represented in flashback) is the event for which Todd demands vengeance; the threatened rape of Johanna provides a pretext for Antony's elopement with her, and Sweeney's violent impulses towards women are manifested by his murder of the mad, diseased Lucy and Mrs Lovett.
12. Of course, the syphilitic figure in Sondheim and Wheeler's narrative, Lucy, does bear the 'marks of sin' upon her face, which is part of the film's double-standard: characters who look grotesque (Pirelli, Bamford, Lucy) are a

second-order threat, while the real villain, the wily Judge Turpin (Alan Rickman), is almost as facially inscrutable as Sweeney himself.

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