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Introduction: Screening the Victorians in the Twenty-First Century

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In 2009, a *Guardian* headline warned melodramatically of the “death of the bonnet”, with the “BBC to overhaul costume drama” (Holmwood 2009). Following the lack of success enjoyed that year by Andrew Davies’s adaptation of Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857), the British national broadcaster announced it was focusing instead on “an evolution in the presentation of period dramas, moving away from the classic nineteenth-century ‘bonnet’ dramas to look at other periods of history” (Holmwood 2009: par. 6). This predicted demise of screen Victoriana, whether the BBC was involved or not, turned out to be premature. Indeed, almost the opposite has proved true: over the past few years film and television representations of the Victorian era have proliferated rather than experiencing a decline, spreading themselves not only across terrestrial channels and the big screen but also finding their way onto new digital networks and streaming platforms. Viewers interested in immersing themselves in the period have been treated to a veritable banquet of neo-Victorian screen pleasures, from Guy Ritchie’s Hollywood interpretations of the famous detective, *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), to the grand guignol Gothic of John Logan’s *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) and Guillermo del Toro’s *Crimson Peak* (2015), and on to a number of neo-Victorian *Doctor Who* episodes (2005-present) and Daisy Goodwin’s royal melodrama *Victoria* (2016-present). This far from exhaustive list should give a flavour of the range and variety of neo-Victorianism on screen in the early twenty-first century.

Such a surfeit of examples certainly suggests it is an opportune moment for this special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*. At exactly the same

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time, research on screen neo-Victorianism seems to be coming of age, with the steady appearance of a number of books, special issues, and articles starting to shape the contours of this particular branch of neo-Victorianism.¹ If, as Margaret D. Stetz has argued, we can trace the definition of mainstream or ‘literary’ neo-Victorian studies to a variety of post-2000 publications and conferences that culminated in the founding of this journal in 2008 (Stetz 2012: 340-341), the growth of scholarly interest in manifestations of screen Victoriana confirms a similar, if belated, process of consolidation at work over the past five to ten years. The study of screen neo-Victorianism may have endured a “marginal status” in relation to the dominant literary approach (Primorac 2018: 2).² However, the appearance of this special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* confirms it is now, finally, coming into its own. It is our contention, in fact, that screen neo-Victorian studies is of pivotal importance not only to the still-ongoing debates around the definition of the field’s central term, but also to the fraught question of how far the neo-Victorian can and should be extended into the realms of popular culture and forms beyond the literary.

Any account of the development of this sub-field must begin with the first study of screen adaptations of Victorian texts, Dianne F. Sadoff’s *Victorian Vogue: British Novels on Screen* (2010). Sadoff’s wide-ranging and suggestive book focuses on popular twentieth-century cinematic adaptations of nineteenth-century novels. Its interdisciplinary approach situates these adaptations “within a particular yet polyvalent history of historical consciousness, in different decades of heritage cultural production” (Sadoff 2010: xi). More specifically, *Victorian Vogue* demonstrates that films such as James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931), Robert Stevenson’s *Jane Eyre* (1944), Francis Ford Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992), Douglas McGrath’s *Emma* (1996), and Iain Softley’s *The Wings of the Dove* (1997) are in “dialogue” as much with the various social, political, and cultural fears and panics of the decades in which they were made as with the original texts themselves (Sadoff 2010: xi). In addition, we must be aware, according to Sadoff, not only “of the cultural forces operative during a source novel’s writing and a film’s remediation”, but also of the latter’s “commentary on its cinematic precursors” (Sadoff 2010: xi-xii). A particular decade’s fascination with the Victorian period and its texts, in other words, should always be placed within the larger context of the screen industry’s long-running relationship with the Victorians. Sadoff also

calls for due attention to industrial and production contexts, and is keen to stress that heritage Victoriana is not only aimed at the British but rather targets “an international or transnational niche market” (Sadoff 2010: xv).

Since Sadoff’s initial foray into screen neo-Victorianism, two other full-length studies have appeared. Both pursue new directions and bring the discussion closer to the present. The first, Iris Kleinecke-Bates’s *Victorians on Screen: The Nineteenth Century on British Television, 1994-2005* (2014) shifts its attention to the small screen and deploys a much narrower cultural and temporal focus. Kleinecke-Bates describes television “as the medium which has, historically, shown the most pronounced preference for the Victorian age” (Kleinecke-Bates 2014: 3). Her study moves energetically through an impressive range of televisual formats, from original drama to factual programming and the more familiar terrain of the classic adaptation. Kleinecke-Bates is keen to stress the strongly visual nature of aspects of recent television Victoriana. In comparison with the media representations of other, more seemingly settled, periods of history, TV neo-Victorianism employs a particular “look”, in terms of its “use of colour, camerawork and even setting” that moves away from a straightforwardly nostalgic view of the past (Kleinecke-Bates 2014: 4). Kleinecke-Bates argues that this creates a feeling of “anxious dislocatedness” related to our cultural and historical relationship with the period, which “is located too closely to the problems of modernity” and hence “does not offer the same kind of certainty and stability” as other eras; as a result, visual representations of the Victorians are “not quite part of the romantic and idealised portrayal of the distant past, yet not quite modern either” (Kleinecke-Bates 2014: 5).

A similarly nuanced image of the Victorians on screen is explored in the sub-field’s third major study: Antonija Primorac’s *Neo-Victorianism on Screen: Postfeminism and Contemporary Adaptations of Victorian Women* (2018). Primorac’s sub-title gestures to the fact that her study has a specific thematic focus, with “the figure of the Victorian heroine, and how she is represented to contemporary audiences” providing the central strand of what follows (Primorac 2018: 4). Nonetheless, particularly in its introduction, *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* provides a knowledgeable and sophisticated general account of this cultural phenomenon. Primorac argues convincingly that the dismissal of visual Victoriana by noted neo-Victorianists like Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn does not point to its inherent inferiority to the literary; rather, the “complex web of textual, visual and filmic references

which does not link an adaptation clearly to one or more identifiable adapted texts” complicates the neo-Victorianist tendency to value the interpretative relationship between the contemporary and the Victorian over other contextual connections (Primorac 2018: 9-10). For Primorac, however, this multi-dimensional process of intertextual exchange “is precisely what is fascinating about neo-Victorianism on screen as an adaptive phenomenon” (Primorac 2018: 11). Echoing Kleinecke-Bates, *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* stresses the visuality of screen Victoriana’s engagement with the period. Primorac describes this suggestively, noting how the phenomenon “adapts and absorbs aspects of what is understood as Victoriana, creating along the way a neo-Victorian *imaginarium* that enables a sensory immersion in a fantasy of the past” (Primorac 2018: 12, original emphasis). According to Primorac, this visual “fantasy” has, a significant effect on “audiences’ expectations”, which “are moulded less by a knowledge of the period based on the archival data [...], but more by the images generated by other, preceding, films and TV series set in the same period” (Primorac 2018: 12).³

These significant contributions to this area of neo-Victorianism confirm the distinctiveness of screen Victoriana as an object of study. This phenomenon interacts, of course, with literary Victorianism and other media and forms of neo-Victorianism, but at the same time has its own genealogy and connects to a different set of cultural and disciplinary contexts. These contextual frames help us better understand not only individual examples of screen neo-Victorianism, but also the broader changes at work in the visual representation of the Victorian past. These film and television contexts are certainly useful in approaching the subject of this special issue, which analyses post-millennial visual Victoriana with an emphasis on productions of the last decade or so. If, as Iris Kleinecke-Bates argues, “the period from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s” was marked by “a more self-conscious negotiation of historical representation” (Kleinecke-Bates 2014: 9), then the more recent era under consideration here has only become more sophisticated and knowing in its interrogation of the Victorian. Jonathan Cranfield also notes this shift away from a “traditional heritage vision of crinolines and starched-collars”, arguing instead that the “creative industries now rely on a more nuanced and diverse popular perception of the Victorian period” (Cranfield 2016: 3). Cranfield suggests that this change in “perception” has come about as “revisionist historical work” in Victorian studies “has percolated into the mainstream” (Cranfield 2016: 3).

While this is true, the “more nuanced and diverse” recent screen representation of the period also relates to ongoing discussions in film, television, and adaptation studies. In the televisual context, the influential work of Jason Mittell posits that we are living through an age of complex TV, since “a new paradigm of television storytelling has emerged over the past two decades, redefining the boundary between episodic and serial forms, with a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics” (Mittell 2015: 53). This complexity is apparent, moreover, not only in the aesthetic sophistication of screen texts, neo-Victorian or otherwise, but also in the ever-expanding complex network of which such texts are a part. Within this increasingly challenging context, our understanding of textuality is transformed; as Mittell explains, “[e]specially (though not exclusively) in the digital era, a TV program is suffused within and constituted by an intertextual web that pushes textual boundaries outward” (Mittell 2015: 7). Mittell’s insights, in this case, are applied to the television industry, but whether we are dealing with television or film, in the contemporary digital, multi-platform environment the line between text, context, and intertext seems ever more blurred, and consumers of screen culture are increasingly used to exploring dense interconnected constellations of texts and other cultural productions. In *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013), Linda Hutcheon notes that this significant media change has similarly affected the practice and reception of adaptation. In this shifting context, “our thirst for retelling stories has not been quenched in the least. But what *has* changed is the availability of many new forms and platforms” (Hutcheon 2013: xix, original emphasis). As a result, “[f]an culture has taken imaginative (and economic) possession of the fate of its favorite stories” (Hutcheon 2013: xix). This increasingly plural, democratised adaptation culture provides a particularly pertinent frame for the self-reflexive examples of neo-Victorian adaptations considered here.

Our understanding of the self-consciousness of neo-Victorianism on screen is enriched if read alongside these fast-developing shifts in contemporary media production and consumption. It would be a pity, however, only to consider screen Victoriana within this medium-specific context, and to isolate it from broader trends in neo-Victorian studies. It may appear, as Primorac puts it, “marginal” to the field as a whole (Primorac 2018: 2), but careful consideration of screen neo-Victorianism helps revise limiting definitions of the neo-Victorian canon, and reminds us

of the frequently blurred line between textual and screen Victoriana. As Imelda Whelehan argues in her stimulating exploration of the role of adaptation in neo-Victorian studies, “neo-Victorian literary texts are themselves adaptations, even when they do not refer back to a single Urtext” (Whelehan 2012: 272). Similarly, in her recent polemical discussion of definitions of the neo-Victorian, Jessica Cox takes up the issue of the relationship between neo-Victorian fiction, popular culture, and forms beyond the literary, noting that “there has been a critical resistance to the ‘popular’ in neo-Victorianism” (Cox 2017: 104). Screen texts have frequently been placed in this category by neo-Victorian scholars, and as a result have been side-lined and judged as aesthetically or ideologically inferior to works of securely literary fiction. In discussing the problematic gender politics of *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), for instance, Marie-Luise Kohlke sets up a distinction between “neo-Victorian works produced for the mass market” such as film and television productions and “‘literary’ or otherwise ‘artistic’ works” (Kohlke 2018: 6). The former, Kohlke argues, “aim to maximise entertainment value” at the expense of the progressive and “liberal politics” typical of more serious and critical neo-Victorian writing (Kohlke 2018: 6). And in a consideration of neo-Victorian detective series such as *Ripper Street* (2012-2016), *Copper* (2012-2013), and *Murdoch Mysteries* (2008-present), Claire Meldrum argues that, “despite the retroactive valorization of science, technology, and rationality” evident in these series, “the models of gender and gender roles” they present “are far from progressive, depicting a reductive gendered essentialism, whose underlying ideology betrays an overt, and troubling, misogyny” (Meldrum 2015: 202). According to Meldrum, these three series show a particular lack of respect in the way they deal with women’s bodies, which are “presented as [...] object[s] of sexual display” for the titillation of viewers rather than for serious social purposes (Meldrum 2015: 205).

Meldrum and Kohlke’s interpretations draw welcome attention to the “far from progressive” response to Victorian women in dramas such as *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) and *Ripper Street* (2012-2016) (Meldrum 2015: 202). Their emphasis on entertainment and visual pleasure, however, downplays other, more self-conscious, elements of neo-Victorian screen culture which, to adapt Helen Davies’s words, is frequently also interested in “*doing something with* the Victorian era” by “critically engaging with nineteenth-century fiction, culture, and society, as opposed to *just* repeating

or nostalgically harking back to a past era” (Davies 2012: 2, original emphasis). As a number of the articles in this special issue demonstrate, twenty-first century screen neo-Victorianism, much like its literary equivalent, responds to the period in multivalent ways, recovering the experience of marginalised communities and challenging received ideas about gender and sexuality. And while there is undeniably a strong layered connection between screen Victoriana and popular Gothicised conceptions of the period, it would be overhasty to claim that this is the *only* mode or genre available to production teams dealing with the Victorians.⁴ The essays gathered in this edition of the journal highlight, rather, the diverse and aesthetically challenging forms of neo-Victorianism on screen that move us beyond stereotypical or cloyingly nostalgic images of the era.

The special issue’s wide-ranging first article, Robbie McAllister’s ‘Reengineering Modernity: Cinematic Detritus and the Steampunk Blockbuster’, focuses on a range of examples of steampunk cinema, from Barry Sonnenfeld’s *Wild Wild West* (1999) and Frank Coraci’s *Around the World in 80 Days* (2004) to Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and Paul McGuigan’s *Victor Frankenstein* (2015). According to McAllister, the hybridity and anachronism of the steampunk genre as a whole make it particularly suitable for mass-market cinema. McAllister stresses, however, that steampunk is not applied to popular film in a superficial fashion. Instead, it provides a commentary upon the passage of modernity and postmodernity. Intriguingly the examples of steampunk surveyed not only respond to the Victorian past in anachronistic ways; their interaction with layers of myriad textual and media forms is equally self-reflexive. For McAllister, then, steampunk films avoid a straightforwardly nostalgic interaction with the detritus of the nineteenth century, whether that might take technological or textual shape. In key films such as Martin Scorsese’s *Hugo* (2011), moreover, characters are frequently empowered by the genre’s cogs and clockwork devices rather than being threatened by them. McAllister concludes by suggesting that the anachronism of screen steampunk, and its oscillation between modernity and postmodernity, define it not only as neo-Victorian, but also as a typically metamodern product.

In a similarly expansive piece, ‘Representations of Masculinity in Neo-Victorian Film and Television’, Jamil Mustafa investigates varied screen representations of neo-Victorian manhood across an array of examples from Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Ripper Street*

(2012-2016) to Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak* (2015) and *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016). Mustafa structures his discussion of these diverse screen masculinities thematically in relation to representations of public life (in the arenas not only of the workplace but also the boxing ring and rat pit), through recurring interconnections between England and America, and in the context of the masculine role within the feminised private sphere. While the more obviously Gothic *Crimson Peak* (2015) and *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) unsettle traditional hegemonic models of Victorian masculinity more overtly, all four screen texts reveal a vision of manhood that, in various ways, is under pressure. This means ultimately that masculinity in these neo-Victorian narratives not only reflects the uncertainty and challenges of the *fin-de-siècle* era, but also speaks to the experience of twenty-first century viewers dealing with shifting and increasingly fluid contemporary notions about gender identity and sexuality, especially with regard to masculinity.

Clayton Carlyle Tarr's 'For British Eyes Only: *Arrested Development* and Neo-Victorian Television Comedy' draws us away from these more familiar screen interpretations of the Victorians, focusing instead on neo-Victorian elements in a comedy vérité series set in a heightened version of contemporary America. More specifically, Tarr argues that *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013, 2018) is particularly indebted to the work of the period's representative author, Charles Dickens. According to Tarr, the series draws knowingly on a grotesquely Dickensian vein of humour. As this article ably demonstrates, the connections extend into other areas, from shared thematic preoccupations such as charity, class, and disability to echoes of characters and scenes especially from the darker, late novels *Bleak House* (1852-1853) and *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857). Tarr concludes by gesturing to the shared narrative complexity of Dickens and *Arrested Development*, thus expanding more familiar parallels between Victorian multi-plot fiction and quality contemporary television drama to encompass sophisticated comedy series like this one. In assessing the show's ambiguous response to disability, he also questions the idea that neo-Victorian products are always subversive in their revisioning of Victorian social attitudes. In this case, the presentation of abnormality prompts dark laughter rather than deeply-felt sympathy.

With 'Miss Ives and ISIS: The Cult(ure) of Collaboration in Neo-Victorian Adaptations', Cameron Dodworth turns our attention to the rich

set of associations between neo-Victorianism, the popular Gothic, and adaptation. These different but closely related cultural modes are at once contemporary and archaic, and each of them engages with a dizzying range of multimedia forms. Dodworth's particular focus in exploring these broader themes is a cluster of neo-Victorian Gothic adaptations: Stephen Norrington's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003), Stephen Sommers's *Van Helsing* (2004), and *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016). These works draw on a complex network of literary and cultural reference points, and in doing so destabilise traditional models of adaptation and cultural transfer between texts and periods. More intriguingly, they also embed networks and forms of collaboration into the action of the narratives themselves. As Dodworth points out, the films and television series under consideration here foreground groups of characters, whether fighting on the side of good or evil, as a central structuring device. This focus on collaborative networks, often depicted in violent and hypervisual terms, parallels the contemporaneous rise of terrorist groups such as ISIS, stressing the influence of our own heavily mediated culture on these representations of the Victorian past.

Marina Gerzic and Duc Dau's "I love her and, as to different, well, she's a lizard": Queer and Interspecies Relationships in *Doctor Who*' begins by noting the fascination of this globally-popular BBC series with the nineteenth century. Neo-Victorian *Who* has already been discussed in some detail by critics, including a significant article by Catriona Mills in this journal. Gerzic and Dau take this conversation in stimulating new directions, positing that the show's reinvention of Arthur Conan Doyle's Holmes and Watson pairing in the form of Vastra and Jenny from the Paternoster Gang demonstrates a commitment to non-normative queer notions of the family unit. *Doctor Who*'s presentation of these characters, on one level, demonstrates a subtle subversion of Victorian family values; on another, its subversiveness applies to interspecies relations. In the portrayal of Vastra in particular, Gerzic and Dau argue, the show normalises human-animal relationships and questions established Victorian ideas, as well as our own, about the fixed divide between species.

Helena Esser's article, 'What Use Our Work: Crime and Justice in *Ripper Street*', also focuses on a specific, if rather different, case study: the BBC and Amazon Prime's long-running neo-Victorian procedural *Ripper Street* (2012-2016). Esser contextualises Richard Warlow's drama alongside

the tendency not only to Gothicise the East End of Victorian London, but also to assume that neo-Victorian screen texts are always Gothic ones. *Ripper Street* (2012-2016), Esser claims, may have Gothic elements, but it does not fully Gothicise its subject matter. Instead the series adopts a microcosmic approach to the late-Victorian city, which has more in common with the work of social investigators like Henry Mayhew and Charles Booth than more obviously Gothic narratives. The subtle chronicling of diverse East End communities in the series deals seriously with individuals marginalised in terms of their race, class, and sexual identities, with the effect of self-consciously subverting the othering of social figures typical of the Gothic mode. *Ripper Street* (2012-2016)'s social world is, as a result, neo-Victorian not in its uncanny Gothicism, but rather in the way it makes us identify and sympathise with a rich panoply of late-Victorian city dwellers.

Our closing essay, Lindsay Lawrence's 'Doctor Who and the Neo-Victorian Serial Christmas Tradition', returns to the Whovian universe explored earlier in this special issue. Lawrence reads the *Doctor Who* Christmas specials alongside the Christmas serial literature that was so popular with the Victorians. Her analysis is both formal and ideological, and demonstrates a sensitivity to remediated textual forms and to ideas and values associated with the Christmas period in the Victorian era and the present day. The Christmas episodes Lawrence analyses show particular similarities with the collaborative, annual supernatural stories Dickens published in his journals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. These neo-Victorian seasonal narratives, Lawrence argues, eschew a straightforwardly nostalgic or cheery vision of Victorian Christmas celebrations, stressing instead a shared ambiguous concern in both acknowledging and working through loss and grief.

The focus of this special issue is on very recent developments in screen neo-Victorianism. Subsequent scholars exploring this new field could certainly benefit from delving further into the origins and genealogies of popular screen Victoriana, and questioning the temptation to associate neo-Victorianism only with contemporary literary and cultural productions. Dianne F. Sadoff has made important steps in this direction with *Victorian Vogue*, of course, and Catherine Paula Han's recent *Neo-Victorian Studies* article dealing with 1960s and 1990s adaptations of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) recovers and recontextualises twentieth-

century examples of neo-Victorianism on screen, but the terrain is so vast and so varied that much remains left to explore. The precise parameters of the historical period defined by the term ‘screen neo-Victorianism’ also deserve further exploration. Considering the neo-Victorian as a whole, Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich argue that the Victorian period is so “historically central to late-century postmodern consciousness” that it “projects a ‘Victorian feel’” into distinct historical periods on either side of it (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xi). If anything, this is only amplified in neo-Victorian screen texts; as Antonija Primorac has noted, Jane Austen can convincingly be considered “an honorary Victorian” in the screen context (Primorac 2018: 5), and on the basis of multiple transplantings of Victor Frankenstein into the Victorian era, as in *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) and Paul McGuigan’s *Victor Frankenstein* (2015), we might well add Mary Shelley to that list. Moving beyond these literary examples, recent historical television dramas such as *Taboo* (2017-present) and *The Frankenstein Chronicles* (2015-present) have shifted their focus to the period just before the Victorians. (The former is set in 1812, the latter in the late 1820s.) Generically, aesthetically, and ideologically, however, these series have much in common with other contemporary, Victorian-set productions. It would, therefore, be worth further exploring the extent to which screen neo-Victorianism is defined by look and mood as much as period veracity. Indeed, we might approach the question of periodisation differently and ask how useful the term ‘screen neo-Victorianism’ is, if our examples are so wide-ranging in their historical reference points. In other words, is this new sub-field potentially better situated within discussions of period drama in the context of film, television, and adaptation studies? Finally, future critics of neo-Victorian screen cultures will need to address more centrally another broader issue that remains an undercurrent here: the huge processes of change in the media environment that have had, and will continue to have, an immense impact on the creation and consumption of subsequent visual interpretations of the Victorian era. It seems unlikely, as was predicted in 2009, that the period will disappear from our ever-shrinking devices any time soon. Rather, we should brace ourselves not only for a raft of upcoming adventures in screen Victoriana, such as Christian Rivers’s *Mortal Engines* (2018) and Craig William Macneill’s *Lizzie* (2018) produced for the born-digital, transmedia moment, but also for what might come afterwards.

Notes

1. For helpful surveys of the literature on screen neo-Victorianism, see Primorac 2016 and 2017.
2. As Jessica Cox notes, there have nonetheless been attempts to “explore beyond the traditional literary framework of the genre” (Cox 2017: 113). Monographs by Elizabeth Ho and Saverio Tomaiuolo are good examples of studies that effectively integrate the literary with the cultural (see Ho 2012 and Tomaiuolo 2018).
3. See also Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn’s point 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). Further discussion of the relationship between adaptation and neo-Victorianism is also a part of Hila Shachar’s analysis of ITV’s 2009 adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (see Shachar 2012: 145-180).
4. For a more detailed consideration of this brand of popular, neo-Victorian Gothic in the work of Tim Burton, see Louttit 2018.

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