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Fond Memories of Alienation:

Images of the City in Contemporary Victoriana

When it comes to setting, postmodern rewritings of the Victorian, a genre that has

experienced a veritable "explosion" during the 1990s, come in two varieties.[1] On the

one hand, there is the period or costume drama occasionally dismissed as "Laura

Ashley" fiction, which uses the British countryside, village, or country manor as its

preferred setting. In a curious telescoping of historical perspective, many of the

cinematic adaptations of Jane Austen, as well as the films of Merchant-Ivory or A. S.

Byatt's "Morpho Eugenia" reincarnated for the screen as Philip and Belinda Haas's

Angels and Insects, belong to this type. On the other hand, there are the bestsellers and

blockbusters with a primarily urban setting, many of which infuse their imagery of

Victorian cities with a noir sensibility, making them out to be "urban jungles," a

rhetorical spin analogous to that used by the hardboiled writers and noir filmmakers who popularised this trope long after the last eminent Victorian had passed on. In much contemporary Victoriana of the latter type, it is exactly this setting that is the main attraction. Films explore the densely layered and textured fabrics of the urban environment, aided by CGI technologies far superior to older matte and rear projection techniques. Digitally unleashed cameras swoop down from impossible heights and track through crowded streets at dizzying speeds. Novels pile up odd yet carefully researched period detail in order to celebrate the city as a microcosm of social and global relations.[2]

Given this intense preoccupation with setting, much contemporary Victoriana display a haphazard, lackadaisical interest in plot, which is highly reminiscent of nineteenth-century utopian narratives like Bellamy's *Looking Backward* or Gilman's *Herland*. They limit themselves to a plot so simple that its narrative complications and complexity remain rudimentary—the outsider to the community travelling or being taken around from one place to another. This justifies thick description and extensive exposition. Geographic movement occurs but is not particularly prominent in the most commercially successful contemporary Victoriana. The device of choice for drawing attention from plot to setting, for lovingly evoking the urban ambience for purposes disconnected from storytelling, is not the travel narrative but the use of popular genres.

Seen in the context of popular genres, the displacement of narrative and thematic

elements to the Victorian period characterises a subgenre or cycle in the development of

popular genres. The genre of the mystery novel, for example, enters a new cycle when

contemporary settings, from the British country manor to the lonely streets of American

cities, have been exhausted and writers turn to Victorian London as a setting. For the

genre of popular romance this is not quite such a leap since the subgenre of "historical

romance" already establishes a conventional link to imaginary pasts.

In the context of the historical novel, the use of popular genres is efficient for

shifting emphasis from background to foreground. The more mechanic and formulaic

the machinery of plot and character, the more the authors' hands are free to delve into

the evocation of social space and period.[3] Authors can rely on their readers' familiarity

of generic plot structures, as much as they can rely on the pleasures that such structures

provide. A rich pool of texts from all varieties of popular genres testifies to this

preoccupation with setting—from murder mysteries by Anne Perry or Boris Akunin,

serial killer fiction like the Hughes Brothers' *From Hell* and Caleb Carr's *The Alienist*,

from neo-Sherlockiana like Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, to

"steampunk" science fiction like Paul diFilippo's *Steampunk Trilogy* or Gibson's and

Sterling's *The Difference Engine*, superhero comics like Alan Moore's and Kevin

O'Neill's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, and "steam and sorcery" novels like

Michael Swanwick's *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* or Philip Pullman's *His Dark*

Materials trilogy.

The imaginary cities that appear in these contemporary Victoriana allow us to

think about our own urban experience, as visitors or as inhabitants of cities. By contrast

or analogy, they shed light on what we see, read, or hear about city life at the beginning

of the twenty-first century. But they can also be read as metaphors of the larger

structures we inherit, and thus can function as tools of what Fredric Jameson has called

cognitive mapping. "We know," Jameson argues, "that we are caught within these more

complex global networks, because we palpably suffer the prolongations of corporate

space everywhere in our daily lives. Yet we have no way of thinking about them, of

modeling them, however abstractly in our mind's eye"—something "which makes an

older kind of existential positioning of ourselves in Being—the human body in the

natural landscape, the individual in the older village or organic community, even the

citizen in the nation-state—exceedingly problematical."[4]

The single recurring theme of such urban evocations in postmodern Victoriana

is that of the city as a space of violent shock. On the one hand, violence appears as a

literal component of city life, a corollary of crime and corruption. This goes back to the

question of genre, since most contemporary Victoriana, because of their generic roots in thriller, mystery, and horror genres, are preoccupied by urban crime, political conspiracy, secrecy and anonymity. In noir fashion, urban violence is not geographically limited to particular areas or sections of the city, and thus to particular social or demographic segments of the urban population—the Whitechapel of Jack the Ripper, the Limehouse of Doctor Fu Manchu, or the East End of Dickens' London novels. Instead, violence is endemic, pervasive, irrespective of social and spatial boundaries. It is an integral part of urban life. Michael Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*, chronicling the social ascent of the prostitute Sugar, makes the point that upper-class mansions are as much a place of violence as East End back alleys. Kim Newman's *Anno Dracula* or Moore's and O'Neill's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, both elaborate postmodern pastiche featuring a cast of largely literary characters, cast an occasional satiric glance at the traditional topography of London crime. But they go on to argue that sinister political machinations cut across the lines that used to separate the light from the dark areas on the urban map; crime is as much part of the Limehouse of Doctor Fu Manchu, as it makes a home in the government agencies, the police, secret service, and military of the Empire in their palatial Whitehall quarters.

On the other hand, violence appears as a more pervasive, universal symptom of

modern experience, a trope foregrounded first in the discourse on urban life at the end

of the Victorian period and the beginning of the twentieth century. Sociologists of the

modern urban experience like Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin centre their

discussions of city life around the concept of shock, which means informational density

or "noise," coexistence of radically opposed or discontinuous elements, suddenness,

novelty, experiential fragmentation, compression, intrusion, and boundary

transgression.[5] The subject, plunged into a state of sensual overload, is either submerged,

drawn out, and scattered throughout the urban text by such overwhelming assault, or

driven back into itself in an instinctive gesture of self-protection. In his work on

Baudelaire, Benjamin develops a theory of the shock as a hallmark of modernity in a

broader sense, always with the modern metropolis at its centre. Devoid of older cultural

mechanisms that translate information into experience, the rush of raw data into a

structured and meaningful processed totality, modern subjectivity is marred by an

"increasing atrophy of experience."[6] The urban crowd, Benjamin goes on, inspires "fear,

revulsion, and horror" in "those who first observed it."[7] City traffic, for example,

"involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections,

nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession like the energy from a battery."[8]

While Simmel explains the callousness and indifference, "the blasé attitude" as the

modern urbanite's self-protective reflex in response to "the intensification of nervous stimulation, which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli,"[9] Benjamin expands the shock into a series of analogies—the gambler in the throes of excitement, the worker at the machine, the ordinary person interacting with new technologies like the telephone, the tabloid media, photography, or cinema. All of them are facets of modernity, but at the core of the conceit stands the city as the locus and origin of violent shock.

Postmodern Victoriana make it their first priority to communicate this experience of violent shock to their audiences. In the cinema, it is lovingly re-created through a number of techniques and technologies, all of them geared toward immersion, not exposition or representation. Immersion is exemplified by one of the opening shots in the Hughes Brothers' *From Hell*: the camera first gives us a panoramic shot of Victorian London, a vast brooding maze not unlike Ridley Scott's futuristic L. A. in *Blade Runner*. By placing the camera just slightly above the horizon, the directors create an image that compresses the dense layers of buildings vertically, emphasising the labyrinthine density of the urban text. But then the camera cranes down in a fluid steadicam motion, past rows of windows, each of which shows a scene of exploitation and human degradation. It stops at street level, where its vertical movement is now

redirected into a horizontal tracking shot, reveling in a kind of "bath in the crowd" as it

moves through the streets and back alleys of Whitechapel. In another shot, later in the

film, the camera penetrates the pavement and continues its vertical tracking down below

into the sewers underneath the streets, suggesting an even further extension of the

spatial organisation of the city.

Moore's and O'Neill's graphic novel *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*

(1995) reproduces this two-step cinematic technique of moving down from a panoramic

establishing shot into the microscopic capillaries of the city. One panel shows "Paris,

Late June 1898," another one Captain Nemo's Nautilus anchoring at the London docks,

and yet another one is labelled "Down East, in Limehouse."[10] Each panel crowds the

page with densely packed action, much of it with the same amount of detail in both

background and foreground, eschewing a visual fade that would suggest depth of field.

The fact that each panel takes up an entire page orients the viewer's gaze vertically,

reproducing the cinematic crane shot effect in either one direction.

Though each device is unique to its medium, the effect they produce is the same.

Foregoing the panoptic safety of the elevated point of view, they immerse the viewer in

the dense fabric of the urban experience. The dynamic quality of the devices makes the

moment or process of immersion itself part of the representation; we are not to *find*

ourselves in the middle of a crowded street, but are to witness ourselves *being inserted*

into the scene. Though a brief moment of panoramic contemplation initiates the

experience, the fluidity and speed of the camera movement downward, as well as the

bewildering density of detail, ultimately undercut our sense of mastery, control, and

orientation. The emphasis is on a kind of delirious immediacy, coupled, paradoxically,

with a self-awareness of the creation of this sensation.

The second device in the service of immersion creates a sense of the urban

space out of auditory information. The essential clue might come from R. L.

Stevenson's *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde*, a strikingly modern urban nightmare in which the

city, shrouded in fog, is largely absent except by "the low growl of London from all

around;"[11] another passage talks about "the procession of the town's life … still rolling

through the great arteries *with a sound as of a mighty wind*."[12] David Lynch's film *The

Elephant Man* picks up on this clue and immerses the viewer in an ominous industrial

soundscape, laying a carpet of distant sounds—steam hissing, pistons pumping, and

gears turning—underneath the images. In a few scenes, Lynch shows us greasy,

dripping pipes and muscular workers' bodies interacting with machines. Though the

industrial imagery in these scenes is not essential to the narrative, it is, nonetheless,

diegetic. In the more effective scenes of the film, however, the origin of this industrial

noise remains outside the frame altogether. Rendered non-diegetic, removed from

location or action, these sounds evoke the city as a powerful, eerily omnipresent force,

which penetrates even the most private, secluded spaces. Ian MacLeod's novel *The*

Light Ages describes a similar auditory phenomenon. The British Midlands are

undermined by a vast factory system, tying individual towns into one vast urban web,

which makes itself noticed by a "sound, or rather the non-sound" of underground

engines emitting a dull, throbbing that accompanies many of the novel's events.[13]

While a writer's imagination is not limited by budgetary considerations, Lynch

as a director may have eminently practical reasons for displacing the representation of

the Victorian city from the visual, which is potentially very expensive, to the auditory,

which evokes images of vastness and complexity at considerably less expense. Yet the

aesthetic outcome still makes sense. Lynch's handling of sound serves as a way of

immersing audiences in the urban experience, comparable to the tracking shots in *From*

Hell and the full-page panels in *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Since MacLeod

and other writers use the same device, it seems reasonable to assume that the device is

symptomatic of a larger representational paradigm, which translates what some critics

have called the technological sublime into a kind of urban sublime.[14] The city embodies

the mixture of "the majestic, the awe inspiring, and the literally overpowering: it

[speaks] the languages of excess and hyperbole to suggest realms beyond human articulation and comprehension."[15] The urban sublime is staged as a climactic special effect, and all effects are "designed to be seen, and frequently the narrative will pause to permit the audience to appreciate (or groove on) the technologies on display".[16] This contemplative pause, this deliberate moment of hesitation, occurs in cinema and graphic novel as well. They position us so that we experience enjoyment and appreciation of an urban scene that would, without the mechanism of representation, appear overwhelming, disorienting, and thus threatening. In this positioning lies the "pervasive ambivalence" of the sublime—"the tension between diminution and exaltation."[17]

Aside from this transformation of the Victorian city into a variant of the technological sublime, another aesthetic is at work when contemporary Victoriana immerse their audiences in the shocking violence of urban experience. Immersion, as Tom Holert and Mark Terkissidis have pointed out in the context of mainstream US war films from the 1990s, is the central tenet of a new cinematic aesthetic. By and large, this new aesthetic abandons "the psychological patterns of empathy and identification" typical of classic Hollywood cinema; in other words, it de-emphasises narrative and character, a tendency initiated in contemporary Victoriana by the use of genre formula.[18] It performs a "narrowing down, analogous to that in computer games, of conventional

story elements to a bare minimum."[19] Instead, it deploys a barrage of visual and

auditory stimuli to achieve the "extensive surrender of the individual to the

neurophysical massage through the film," the viewers' "total neurophysical

engagement" and "unconditional involvement."[20] The overall effect seems to suggest

that "watching is a thing of the past, and being there is all that matters today."[21]

While Holert and Terkissides go on to draw ideological and political

conclusions from this aesthetic that are specific to the genre of the war film, the

aesthetic they describe stands as a strikingly accurate description of the city in

contemporary Victoriana. It is hardly surprising that both topics—war and the imaginary

urban—share a thematic link to the theme of violent shock. For Holert and Terkissides,

the aesthetic of cinematic immersion organises the biotechnological interface of the

neoliberal individual with a larger military and political rationale.[22] Contemporary

Victoriana are not concerned primarily with the display of "spectacular bodily

suffering," which is the device by which war films dissolve the boundaries between

possible subject positions offered to their audience.[23] They are, however, very much

concerned with the delirious state that the sensual spectacle induces in the audience, a

violent sensual overload, which, as in the new breed of war films, induces what Boris

Buden calls an "ahistorical vitalism of the war zone."[24]

It is not much of a stretch to describe the imaginary cities of contemporary Victoriana, characterised by experiences of violent shock as they commonly are, as urban battlefields. The metaphor is primarily aesthetic, driven by the experiential agenda described by Holert and Terkissidis. It is also political, but only in the limited sense that both the urban space and the space of military engagement presuppose the subjectivity of a "single combatant type" that Holert and Terkissidis regard as characteristic of neoliberal ideology.[25] In the frenzy, the delirium of both the battle and the urban experience, audiences can lose themselves. Lacking models of genuine social solidarity, identification with the Other becomes possible, at least temporarily, when sensory overload has previously exclusionary subject positions collapsing into each other. In the light of this recent neoliberal subjectivity, it is easy to understand why contemporary Victoriana continue to imagine a type of city that seems based on Benjamin's and Simmel's descriptions: here we have images of urban crowds that are both violent and ominously threatening, yet disciplined and productive; images of spaces that are both chaotic and yet produce very specific and predictable, almost preprogrammed affective states in the experiencing subject.

While Simmel and Benjamin attempt to record their urban experiences with the authority of the disinterested observer, there is clearly a hint of unease or even panic

about their writing. They stand at the end of a nineteenth-century tradition of urban

writing that regards the city with alarm and concern, operating by and large within a

crisis-driven, dystopian rhetoric. Contemporary Victoriana, by contrast, are more

difficult to pinpoint in their relationship toward the urban imagery they revel in. This

ambivalence may have something to do with the cities in which the authors who dream

up the fantasy and the audiences who eagerly consume it actually live. Strikingly

enough, our own cities bear little resemblance to the London from which the British

Empire was ruled, or the Paris that Benjamin famously nicknamed the "capital of the

nineteenth century." We all deal with cities, as part of our lived experience, that look

and feel very different from those evoked in contemporary Victoriana. To the degree

that our own cities are no longer products of industrial modernity, and thus have

overcome the experiential paradigm of violent shock, the Victorian city in contemporary

Victoriana serves not as a straightforward reflection of our own lived experience, but as

a space for the projection of desires and anxieties contingent upon this experience. The

question is: are these imaginary cities symptoms of the dream or the nightmare of

postmodern culture?

What *do* our own post-modern cities look and feel like? Fredric Jameson's and

Edward Soja's discussions of postmodern urbanity, popularised by Mike Davis's *City of*

Quartz and enlarged by Davis's follow-up *Ecology of Fear*, describe Los Angeles as the

emblematic postmodern city. Davis's own "extrapolative map of future Los Angeles"[26]

with its updating of sociologist Ernest W. Burgess's "dartboard" model of urban space

popular in the 1920s, recounts the tropes of urbanity that can be found in nearly all

representations of Los Angeles, even when they are not couched in Davis's openly

dystopian rhetoric: the "radical privatization of Downtown public space;" the

"continuing erosion of the boundary between architecture and law enforcement;"[27] the

manifold expressions of "security" related issues in Midtown areas;[28] the extension of

this urban logic through Neighbourhood Crime Watch programmes into the suburbs;[29]

and, finally, the further extension of the city into what Davis polemically refers to as the

"reckless gulagism" of prisons and other spaces of surveillance.[30]

Fredric Jameson's writing reconnects this map, its spread to an undefined

margin from a hollow centre, to a modernist aesthetic. If "it seemed before," Jameson

argues, "that the suppression of depth I spoke of in postmodern painting or literature

would necessarily be difficult to achieve in architecture itself," contemporary Los

Angeles architecture "may now serve as the formal equivalent in the new medium."[31] A

city of gleaming surfaces, Los Angeles is brighter, cleaner, safer, and more disciplined

than the London of *From Hell* or the New York of *The Alienist*. Suburbanisation has

excoriated the inner city, gated communities have retrenched social dichotomies, and

urban sprawl has redefined the outer limits of urban areas. These processes of de- and

re-territorialisation have affected the spatial organisation of urban violence, though they

have hardly erased it altogether. Mechanisms of social control have grown increasingly

subtle and systemic, which renders the violence they promote and contain largely

invisible, though no less palpable. Jameson's and Davis's Los Angeles is a city of

surfaces, of horizontal spread and dilution—nothing could be further from the depth,

density, and intensity of imaginary cities celebrated in contemporary Victoriana.

As alienation and loss of affect—not shock and violence—become the central

tropes of the contemporary city, authentic sensual experience becomes the object of

postmodern nostalgia. Asked about the industrial imagery in *The Elephant Man*, David

Lynch explained: "It makes me feel good to see giant machinery … working: dealing

with molten metal. And I like fire and smoke. And the sounds are so powerful. It's just

big stuff…. Now it's computers and robots building everything. It's cleaner, smaller,

more efficient."[32] Photographed with meticulous attention to surface texture, Lynch's

London serves as an antidote to this loss of authentic sensual experience. As Lynch

conjures up fire, smoke, and large machines, the film's grittiness refutes

postmodernism's sneaking suspicion, or explicit acceptance, of the inauthenticity Lynch

associates with the small, the smooth, the quiet, the unobtrusively elegant. Instead, and

typical of virtually all contemporary Victoriana, he celebrates an aesthetic that breaks

away from austerity, miniaturisation, and efficiency.

This new aesthetic resembles much postmodern architecture, as it abandons the

strict functionalism of high modernity. Moore's and O'Neill's *League of Extraordinary*

Gentlemen opens with vistas of the Channel Causeway, a spectacular bridge between

England and France encrusted with Greek and Roman Revival ornament. In Gibson's

and Sterling's *The Difference Engine*, the Central Statistics Bureau, a vast structure in

the heart of Victorian London, is "vaguely pyramidical in form and excessively

Egyptianate in its ornamental detail."[33] Its "walls are pierced by towering smokestacks"

and those walls are "riddled top to bottom with thick black telegraph lines." Touching a

lavishly ornamented column, someone burns his hand on a column that turns out to be a

smokestack, "emitting the muffled roar and mutter of a badly adjusted flue."[34] In one

scene, the protagonist is taken underground and sees "the largest and most ancient of

these engines," as "vast boilers throbbed and bubbled."[35]

This aesthetic stands in sharp contrast to the dream cities of modernism, as

envisioned on the cover pages of pulp science fiction magazines or designed by Frank

Lloyd Wright and Walter Gropius. They are, by and large, functional and uncluttered,

exuding visual austerity, often verging on sterility, and a sense of grandeur and

spaciousness. Cities like Brasilia or Albert Speer's Germania—their clean, symmetrical,

depopulated vistas laid out with a generosity that disavows all awareness that urban

space is an expensive commodity—are modernity made manifest. In stark contrast to

the experience of immersion I mentioned earlier, they presuppose a panoramic

perspective—to appreciate them, the observing eye must be suspended at great height

above, safely removed at a distance that de-emphasises all the senses that postmodern

Victoriana brings into play. These cities reflect the fact that both the urban malaise of

the nineteenth century and its imagined remedies originate within the same historical

and architectural paradigms, one of which, obviously, is that of overcrowding (with its

effects on public hygiene, social stratification, and disciplinary surveillance). The

utopian impulse that motivates modernity's urban daydreaming testifies to the need to

distance the future from nineteenth-century urbanity. The reality of nineteenth-century

Manchester, as, for example, Friedrich Engels describes it in *The Condition of the

Working Class in England*, is rendered as the dystopian nightmare from which cities like

Brasilia or Germania are trying to awaken. What Engels describes as the "irregular

cramming together of dwellings in ways which defy all rational plan"[36] as well as the

withdrawal of the middle-class to "remoter villas with gardens" on the "breezy

heights"[37] of outlying areas, has yielded to a vision of a vast socially and economically

integrated urban space, cleansed of all traces of class struggle, and organised by a

reasonable rational principle (whether that of the free market, the state, or human reason

is a matter of the individual utopian approach). Significantly enough, Engels's

description also echoes the experience of immersion—not as a thrilling joy ride but as a

claustrophobic nightmare, from which the observer can only awaken if removed to

panoramic heights.

The type of contemporary Victoriana that is still grounded in a more modern

than postmodern sensibility continues to reproduce this split between utopian and

dystopian urban imagery. Karel Reisz's cinematic adaptation of John Fowles's *The

French Lieutenant's Woman*, for example, presents the urban itself as a dystopian other

to the English countryside. Though the film strives to argue that mechanisms of

repression and social control are as nightmarishly omnipresent and efficient in the

bucolic idylls of Lye and its surrounding countryside, it sabotages its own agenda with

an imagery and visual style that switches from lyrical beauty in the Lye sections of the

narrative to dystopian images when it moves to London. Here, the female protagonist of

the film's Victorian plotline vanishes into an anonymity that is visualised as a nightmare

of social and sexual exploitation; visually, London is synonymous with the sweatshop

and street prostitution. In Eric Larson's bestseller *The Devil in the White City*, the older

dichotomy between city and country has already made room for a more exclusively

urban dichotomy. Larson expounds this dichotomy in his true-crime thriller by telling

the parallel stories of the architect who designed the 1883 Chicago World Fair (the

utopian White City of the future), and the serial killer who set up shop next door in the

filthy, overpopulated, and anonymous streets of Chicago (the dystopian nightmare of the

nineteenth-century city). Chapters of the book alternate between the two figures,

portraying them, respectively, as the embodiment of "an element of the great dynamic

that characterized the rush of America toward the twentieth century."[38] Similarly, David

Lean's adaptation of Dickens' *Oliver Twist* ends with a climactic scene in which Oliver

is rescued from the slums of the London East End, which are dark, dirty, crowded, and

noisy, and is reinstated in his proper middle-class position, visualised as a blindingly

white house on a wide, clean, depopulated street. In Lean's film, the nightmare of

nineteenth-century urbanity makes way for the utopia of twentieth-century modernity.

The popularity of postmodern Victoriana suggests that contemporary audiences would

readily trade in both modernity's "White City" and the postmodern "City of Quartz" for

a nineteenth-century city in which squalor is sublimated into authentic experience. As

the historical pendulum swings, nostalgia for the nightmare of modernity pervades

postmodern Victoriana.

The same nostalgia already appears in another postmodern variant of a high
modern genre—the cyberpunk movement within science fiction. Starting in the 1980s
and thus predating the current neo-Victorian boom, cyberpunk imploded notions of
urbanity it had inherited from utopian traditions in earlier science fiction. It is no
coincidence that one of the seminal texts of cyberpunk, William Gibson's story "The
Gernsback Continuum," already denounces the utopian cities of modernity as proto-
fascist fantasies.[39] Catching a hallucinatory glimpse of "an idealized city that drew on
Metropolis and *Things to Come*, but squared everything, soaring up through an
architect's perfect clouds to zeppelin docks and mad neon spires," Gibson's protagonist
realises that modernity's urban utopia is based upon "a dream logic that knew nothing
of pollution, the finite bounds of fossil fuel, or foreign wars it was possible to lose."[40]
The "Future [sic] had come to America first, but had finally passed it by," the narrator
concludes; modernity's utopia "had all the sinister fruitiness of Hitler Youth
propaganda."

With this indictment, Gibson's "Gernsback Continuum" rings in the changes.
Once the modern utopia has been dismissed, cyberpunk recognises the realities of
uneven global development under late capitalism, and displaces its nostalgia for

nineteenth-century urbanity into the future. Cyberpunk cities like William Gibson's

Chiba City or the BAMA, the Baltimore-Atlanta Metropolitan Area, provide the

experience of violent shock similar to that of imagined Victorian cities. But they do not

anchor the reader's urban experience in some real or imagined past. Instead, they

disrupt the disavowal of the Third World city as a paradigm for the postmodern,

foregrounding what Fredric Jameson has referred to as "the Third World side of

American life today."[41] Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, for example, makes Los Angeles

look like Calcutta or Shanghai, while George Alec Effinger's novels take place in

Budayeen, a future metropolis modelled on an Orientalist blueprint of a dehistoricised

"timeless" Cairo or Tangiers.[42] These fictional cities make it difficult to think the

conventional distinctions that used to countdown global development from the First to

the Third World, a countdown in which postmodern cities like Los Angeles represent

the zero point of development. In *Blade Runner*, with its noir overtones, this

paradigmatic dissolve may still look like dystopia; in Gibson, it is already accomplished

fact.

This excursion into cyberpunk is not so much a digression as a tracing back of

themes to their origins—the desire for immersion in rough, abrasive urban

environments I have discussed in the opening section of this essay, which cyberpunk

shares with more genteel, generically diverse forms of contemporary Victoriana.

Because a thematic preoccupation with simulation technologies runs through cyberpunk,

and because this preoccupation at times manifests itself as a nostalgic longing for

authentic experience, it is hardly surprising that cyberpunk quickly developed an

offshoot—steampunk—which no longer relied on the projection of postmodernism's

"repressed other" into the future, but instead performed the historical displacement into

the past.[43] Steampunk, with its carnivalesque rewritings of official history perhaps the

most radical of all contemporary Victoriana, recuperates Victorian London or New York

as cities of modernity, but, like cyberpunk, strips their representation of the older

modernist dichotomy of utopia/dystopia. It gives postmodern nostalgia a proper

object—not one that, by being projected, raises the paradox of a nostalgia for the future,

but one that places its object, appropriately, in the past. Dissociated from present

experience, these imaginary cities become spaces for the projection of a desire to

recuperate authentic experience, even, or especially, if it comes in the form of violence

or violent shock.

"The 1990s," Mike Davis has written, "have been a funeral decade, interring

many of the hopes and fantasies of the earlier twentieth century."[44] The rising popularity

of postmodern Victoriana during this period may be a symptom of this very transition in

the collective imagination. However, it does not mark the passing of clearly defined

models of urbanity—the dystopian nightmare of the Victorian city submerged in a

postmodern wave of sappy sentimentalism and delusional nostalgia, or the farewell to

the utopian ideal of the clean, open, white dream-city brought about by postmodern

awareness of its proto-fascist political cost. Granted, postmodern writings of the

Victorian city do indulge in nostalgia; they do propose these imaginary cities, as I have

tried to demonstrate, as alternatives to our own urban spaces. But it is a self-conscious,

reflexive nostalgia. As I mentioned earlier, these texts do not place us in the urban

environment and have us awaken to the new reality. When films like *From Hell* or

graphic novels like *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* insert us into the urban text,

they perform the insertion in a manner that makes it part and parcel of the experience.

They remind us of the ironies involved in living in houses wired with security systems

or commuting home on fenced-in freeways leading to gated communities while longing

for an imaginary London East End: of complaining about the gentrification and

disneyfication of Times Square under Giuliani while dreaming of Lynchian landscapes

of fire, smoke, and steam. As much as we may long for authentic experience, for the

rough and tumble world of a grittier, sensually more satisfying city, contemporary

Victoriana make it difficult to forget that even "authenticity" and "experience" are

constructed, and thus ideologically charged, terms.

Notes

1 Diane Sadoff and John Kucich use the expression "explosion" in their introduction to Victorian Afterlife, the only full-length publication to explore the phenomenon of postmodern Victoriana. Their discussion and some of the terminology they have coined, such as the term "postmodern Victoriana" itself, have informed this essay. See John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff, eds., *Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), x.

2 It is in this preoccupation with detail that Linda Hutcheon sees an essential quality of the postmodern historical novel, in contrast to the traditional historical novel, which, according to Georg Lukacs, "is defined by the relative unimportance of its use of detail," i.e. by typification, that is, by simplification and abstraction, of period detail. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), 114.

3 Sadoff and Kucich also speculate that "postmodernism's revival of narrative has evoked nostalgia for nineteenth century aesthetic forms" (xvi), which also accounts for a return to popular narrative models that stand in contrast to modernism's experimentation with, and critique of, linear narrative.

4 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 127.

5 Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 159. Benjamin provides such a list of synonyms in his discussion of the "principles of journalistic information," in which "brevity" and, above all, "lack of connection between individual news items" figure prominently.

6 Ibid., 159.

7 Ibid., 174.

8 Ibid., 175.

9 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" in *Simmel on Culture*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, [1903] 1997), 179, 175.

10 Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, vol. I (La Jolla: America's Best Comics, 1999). Pages in the graphic novel are not numbered.

11 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde*, ed. Martin A. Danahay (Peterborough: Broadview, [1886] 1999), 39.

12 Ibid., 52.

13 Ian MacLeod, *The Light Ages* (New York: Ace, 2003), 21.

14 See, for example, Joseph Tabbi, "Machine as Metaphor and More than Metaphor," in *Postmodern Sublime* (Ithaca: Cornell

University Press, 1995), 1-30.

15 Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 91.

16 Ibid., 95.

17 Ibid., 92.

18 Tom Holert and Mark Terkessidis, *Entsichert: Krieg als Massenkultur im 21 Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 2002), 246. Unless otherwise identified, all translations from the original German in Holert and Terkessidis are my own.

19 Ibid., 247.

20 Ibid., 245, 246, 247.

21 Ibid., 245.

22 "Hence, this intense cinema of the body pleads not only for unconditional involvement, but also indirectly for a military strategy of computer-guided air wars with minimal enemy contact." Holert and Terkessidis, 247.

23 Ibid., 246.

24 Quoted in Holert and Terkissidis, 247.

25 Ibid., 186.

26 Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 363.

27 Ibid., 366.

28 Ibid., 377-82.

29 Ibid., 387-91.

30 Ibid., 416.

31 Jameson, 43.

32 Chris Rodley, *Lunch on Lynch* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 110.

33 William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, *The Difference Engine* (New York: Spectra, 1992), 127.

34 Ibid., 129.

35 Ibid., 67.

36 Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1845] 1993), 60.

37 Ibid., 58.

38 Eric Larson, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America* (New York: Vintage, 2003), xi.

39 "Then I looked behind me and saw the city…. Spire stood on spire in gleaming ziggurat steps that climbed to a central golden temple tower ringed with the crazy radiator flanges of the Mongo gas stations. You could hide the Empire State Building in the smallest of those towers. Roads of crystal soared between the spires, crossed and recrossed by smooth silver shapes like beads of running mercury. The air was thick with ships: giant wing-liners, little darting silver things (sometimes one of the quicksilver shapes from the sky bridges rose gracefully into the air and flew up to join the dance), mile-long blimps, hovering dragonfly things that were gyrocopters.... And saw them. They were blond. They were standing beside their car…. He had his arm around her waist and was gesturing toward the city. They were both in white: loose clothing, bare legs, spotless white sun shoes … they were Heirs to the Dream. They were white, blond, and they probably had blue eyes. They were American. Dialta had said that the Future had come to America first, but had finally passed it by. But not here, in the heart of the Dream. Here, we'd gone on and on, in a dream logic that knew nothing of pollution, the finite bounds of fossil fuel, or foreign wars it was possible to lose. They were smug, happy, and

utterly content with themselves and their world." William Gibson, "The Gernsback Continuum," *Burning Chrome* (New York: Ace,

[1981] 1986), 32-3.

40 Gibson, "The Gernsback Continuum," 32.

41 Jameson, 128.

42 Again, it is striking that cyberpunk favors formulaic pop cultural narratives and genres—Gibson's Neuromancer is a heist or caper thriller, as much as the rest of his fiction resorts to the hardboiled detective genre; so is fiction by Pat Cadigan, Richard Russo, and George Alec Effinger. The exploration of the fictional universe, i.e. of the novel's setting, is as much a priority here as is the unfolding of the thriller plot.

43 I have commented elsewhere on the generic origins of steampunk and on its thematic inventory; for further information see

Steffen Hantke, "Difference Engines and Other Infernal Devices: History According to Steampunk" (*Extrapolation* 40.3, 1999),

244-55.

44 Davis, 418.