Neo~Victorian Cities

Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics

Edited by
Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben

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Neo-Victorian Series

Series Editors

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The Neo-Victorian Series aims to analyse the complex revival, revision and recycling of the long nineteenth century in the cultural imaginary. This contemporary phenomenon will be examined in its diverse British and worldwide, postcolonial and neo-colonial contexts, as well as its manifold forms, including literature, the arts, film, television, and virtual media. To assess such simultaneous artistic regeneration and retrogressive innovation and to tackle the ethical debate and ideological consequences of these re-appropriations will constitute the main challenges of this series.

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Troping the Neo-Victorian City:
Strategies of Reconsidering the Metropolis

Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben

Abstract:
The reinvention of nineteenth-century cities in and for the present involves extensive troping within the contexts of writing, reading, sensual apperception, and physical remodelling. The period's metropolises are variously resurrected as heritage sites to be preserved and financially exploited, as nexuses of Gothic fascination and terror, and as eroticised matrixes of capitalist romance and exchange. Although hardly limited to remediated nineteenth-century cityscapes, tropes of the city as palimpsest, labyrinth, and Whore of Babylon feature particularly prominently in neo-Victorian fictions, films, radio plays, and urban conservation and redevelopment programmes. Nineteenth-century metropolises continue to actively haunt present-day cityscapes and inform our kaleidoscopic engagements with postmodern urbanity in aesthetic, affective, and cognitive as well as physical and sensual terms.

Keywords: capitalism, the city, Gothic, kaleidoscope, labyrinth, metropolis, 'making over', palimpsest, romance, troping.

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Writing about cities, or rather writing cities, necessitates a figurative language and, inevitably, the resort to tropological discourse. For as Penelope Lively remarks in her quintessentially urban novel *City of the Mind* (1991),[1] every city is a "kaleidoscope of time and mood" (Lively 1992: 3) – doubly so in the case of cities of other times re-imagined for present-day consumption. Not least, in the latter case, what Burton Pike terms the city's "double reference, to the artifact in the outside world and to the spectrum of refractions it calls into being

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[1] Lively's novel can be considered neo-Victorian in the broadest sense of the term, as its protagonist specifically engages with London's Victorian architectural heritage and the novel also includes an interpolated nineteenth-century narrative (see below).

in the minds of author and reader", is doubled again, combining past and present examples and refractions of "real city" and "word-city" into an ever widening imagistic sweep (Pike 1981: ix, x). Yet Lively's metaphor also works in reverse, with the kaleidoscopes of past cities reshaping the physical contours of today's metropolises in globalised world economies, which self-consciously adapt and re-use the earlier period's material traces for political and practical purposes, as well as cultural and capital gains. Take London's Victorian underground system, for instance, the first of its kind in the world, twenty-six "ghost stations" of which the Old London Underground Company plans to redevelop into new attractions – "[t]hink of elevator-shafts-turned-climbing-walls and 24/7 karaoke clubs where there were once secret war rooms" during the Blitz – or the underground's "forerunner", the Thames Tunnel, built by Marc and Isambard Brunel and "[h]ailed as the 'Eighth Wonder of the World'" at its opening in 1843, which is now to be repurposed into "a proper amphitheater […] hosting concerts" (Ajudua 2014: n.p.). Past and present, one might say, function as the angled reflective mirrors of the city-as-optical-instrument through which we discern the continuously shifting, (r)evolving, and repeating patterns of human lives and societies through history.

1.   Encounters with the City

Through innovations such as intensive industrialisation, transport infrastructure, drinking water and sewerage systems, large-scale social housing projects (juxtaposed with inner city slums), the establishment of formal education and law enforcement, and the introduction of mass media and new modes of communication (the telegraph and telephone), nineteenth-century cityscapes – arguably more so than those of earlier or later historical periods – laid the foundations of modern urban living. Hence the nineteenth century continues to actively shape our experience of postmodern city spaces and configurations. Indeed, the act of physically or vicariously inhabiting cities is also a kind of troping, for cities are always encountered imaginatively as much as experientially. As Carl E. Schorske notes, "[n]o one thinks of the city in hermetic isolation. One forms one's image of it through a perpetual screen, derived from inherited culture and transformed by personal experience" (Schorske 1998: 37, see also Lynch 1975: 4). Comparably, Hana Wirth-Nesher asserts that "the

'real' city cannot be experienced without mediation", since "partly composed of literary and artistic tropes" (Wirth-Nesher 1996; 10-11). Individual apperception and living engagement meld with collective memory and the cultural imaginary that neo-Victorianism actively reflects as well as informs.

Put differently, no one ever experiences a city-in-itself, directly and immediatey, but always as an already filtered, remediated image or projection – in effect, as a screen-city, with the nineteenth century constituting one such particularly prominent intervening 'screen'. Analogously, the structure of *City of the Mind* with its fluctuating system of focalisation generates a veritable rainbow of ever-changing overlaid perspectives, which obscure even as they reveal multiple aspects of the British capital. Moreover each character's perception of the city differs according to her or his particular mood; as the novel's protagonist, the architect Matthew Halland, explains, the eponymous metropolis is *created by* rather than merely dependent on the onlooker's human consciousness: "This city [...] is entirely in the mind. It is a construct of the memory and of the intellect. Without you and me it hasn't got a chance" (Lively 1992: 7). Neo-Victorian cities make a significant contribution to Schorske's earlier cited "inherited culture", which in turn shapes individual and collective mindsets and, consequently, our present-day engagements with and understandings of metropolises. Neo-Victorianism gives nineteenth-century cities a second "chance", guaranteeing their continued existence through their perpetual (re-)construction in individual and collective memory and cultural consciousness.

The same constructivism applies to cities encountered in the process of reading, since readers are called upon to generate an image out of the words on the page: the resulting screen-city exists only as long as it is held in each reader's mind. Yet even literal images derived from pictures, photographs, and films of the metropolis or the myriad visual impressions precipitated by physical immersion in the urban milieu are necessarily derivative, partial, and contingent on the selectively attending consciousness. In Wirth-Nesher's terms, "the urbanite" [...] is faced with a never-ending series of partial visibilities", which "undermine[s] the quest for a total vision" (Wirth-Nesher 1996: 8, 21). Focusing on and framing particular views while screening out alternative angles, capturing one mood and impression rather than another, responded to and interpreted differently by

different individuals at different times, visual images, just like words, cannot enable an overview of the city's multitudinousness either. Writing of London, Wolfreys thus refers to the city's recorders as "receiving a vision incommensurable with and in excess of the merely visual" (Wolfreys 2004: 4).

Our notions of the city, then, are based as much on its *unreadability* as on what Kevin Lynch deems the crucial "legibility" of identifying urban landmarks, signs and symbols (Lynch 1975: 2-3). Wirth-Nesher's notion of "city codes" aptly encapsulates this paradox, (Wirth-Nesher 1996), implying as it does the inevitable possiblilty of misreading or the failure of decipherment.[2] The metropolis is no longer apprehensible as a discrete and therefore definable entity. Fittingly, Michael Sheringham suggests that "we can think of the city as a library, an aggregation of reading material" (Sheringham 2010: 12) – which, of course, no single individual can ever read in its totality. What is at stake here is not just the transitoriness of human consciousness, but that of the golem-like city it tries (but always fails) to encompass in its mutable entirety:

> Any representation of the city is, necessarily, always going to be a reductive entity; the very size, complexity, and ever-changing nature of the city means that any attempt made to capture its essence is going to have to leave something out. (Miles, Hall and Borden 2000b: 193)

In other words, the represented city is always haunted by another vaster spectral city of unrepresentability. Iain Borden, Jane Rendell,

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[2] 'Reading' the metropolis could itself be described as an innovation of the nineteenth century, which saw the emergence of new kinds of modern "urban narratives", including illustrated rambles such as *Pierce Egan's Life in London: the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn Esq. and his elegant friend Corinthian Tom, accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis* (1821), popular city histories, and a proliferation of guidebooks, all encouraging the "public consumption of the metropolis" through personal exploration (Arnold 2000: 30, also see 31-32). This may account in part for contemporary urban re-imaginings' disproportionate resort to the nineteenth century which, in a sense, serves as such writing's metafictional 'point of origin'. Similarly Wolfreys notes that "the writing of the city [...] has remained dictated by the innovations and experiments of the nineteenth century" (Wolfreys 1998: 20).

Joe Kerr and Alicia Pivaro term this the "the unknown-ness of the city" (Borden *et al.* 2001b: 18), while Wolfreys, with specific reference to London, calls it the city's "excess beyond comprehension", its ineffable "reality + X" (Wolfreys 1998: 6, 8, original emphasis), and its "sublimity resistant to [...] all calculability" (Wolfreys 2007: 7). Attempts at cities' conclusive survey and demarcation, then, are predicated on a necessary failure of signification; so too their figurative and textual mappings, which are always of a particular moment and hence provisional.

It seems no coincidence that the Gothic sense of the city as an impenetrable awful jungle, confronting its observer with abrupt shocks and terrifying transformations, first developed during the Victorian age, in texts such as George W. M. Reynold's *The Mysteries of London* (1845) and Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852-1853), to cite only two examples. Joseph McLaughlin stresses the resulting affective confusion between anxiety and terror, on the one hand, and fascination and wonder, on the other: "The urban jungle is a space that calls forth a pleasurable acquiescence to something greater, more powerful, and indeed, sublime" (McLaughlin 2000:3) In similar vein, Wolfreys discerns a nineteenth-century "concatenation of discourses of the sublime and the outgrowth of terror in the face of urban immensity", as the metropolis turns into "a monster, a formless form constantly reforming and deforming itself" (Wolfreys (Wolfreys 1998: 19; 2007: 4). The modern city overawes and uplifts, but also diminishes and terrifies its denizens. Nicholas Taylor goes so far as to describe the sublime as "fundamental to the nineteenth-century city": "functionally" the sublime became the aesthetic of the city's new visual landscape of "warehouses, factories, viaducts, gas-works, lunatic asylums, country goals, railway termini, dark tunnels" and other engineering marvels, while "emotionally" it became "the aesthetic of those vast new passions" of religious Evangelical fervour and Catholic ecstasy, "the scientific wonders of panoramas and exhibition halls", the "thrill in catching trains", and the sensory overload of "the hum of mass production and the hubbub of the market" (Taylor 1973: 434).[3] Many neo-Victorian texts attempt to re-

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[3] Analogously, Michel Ganteau has described London as "a labyrinth of signs", with the city's infinitude partaking of the unsayable and unrepresentable typical of an aesthetic preoccupation with the sublime (Ganteau 2002: 225).

capture this sense of the city's overpowering novelty and excitement, its changeable and alarming fascinations too complex to be fully comprehended, which is as much an attribute of postmodernity's megalopolises.

The urban space becomes equated with a radical temporal as well as epistemological and ontological precarity, both as a quasi living entity and in its effects on visitors and inhabitants. Discussing cities in literature, Pike describes their gradual "etherealization", so that increasingly "they appear as dependencies of time; they become images which reflect transitoriness rather than stable corporeal places" (Pike 1981: 120). In similar vein, but with reference to actual conurbations in space rather than their textual representations, Schorske argues that the modern city emerging at the end of the nineteenth century was no longer conceived in terms of being

> placed [...] in phased history: between a benighted past and a rosy future (the Enlightenment view) or as a betrayal of a golden past (the anti-industrial view). For the new culture, by contrast, the city had no structural temporal locus between past and future, but rather a temporal quality. The modern city offered an eternal *hic et nunc*, whose content was transience, but whose transience was permanent. The city presented a succession of variegated, fleeting moments, each to be savoured in its passage from nonexistence to oblivion. (Schorske 1998: 49-50)

If anything, the modern city's defining "temporal quality" has only been further accentuated by postmodernity's accelerated pace of change, the creeping virtualisation of reality through the information age, and social networks' instant messaging of 'moments of being' reduced to a motley miscellany of tweets. Wolfreys thus resonanatly refers to the city not so much as a place, but an incessant "taking-place" (Wolfreys 1998: 5, see also 196, 202; Wolfreys 2004: 4). As the inception of this 'permanent transience', the nineteenth-century city constitutes a vital reference point for conceptualising and understanding today's metropolises, their kaleidoscopic sensory overload and phantasmagoric hyperreality.

Unsurprisingly, most neo-Victorian works adopt an intensely subjectivist orientation analogous to the city-texts of the period they evoke, in which "the word-city was increasingly represented [...] as an unstable refraction of an individual consciousness" (Pike 1981: 71). In *City of the Mind*, Halland likewise voices the idea of the city as a function of ephemeral perception, hence without any lasting essence of its own. This claim echoes one of the main contentions of contemporary urban theorists like Setha M. Low, who argues vehemently against "an essentialism of the city" (Low 1999: 1). Yet herein also lies one of neo-Victorianism's fundamental paradoxes. On one hand, it attests to cities' permanent transience, underwriting their ongoing imaginative and physical transformations, reinforcing what Matthew Beaumont and Gregory Dart call "a sense of the metropolis as a site of endless making and unmaking; one in which, under the ceaseless influence of capitalist development, identities of all kinds are constantly solidifying, constantly liquefying" (Beaumont and Dart 2010b: x). On the other hand, neo-Victorianism resists and counters cities' impermanence through their tangible reifications in art, literature, and architecture, which outlast individual consciousness, thus aligning with urban theory's view of the city as a form of memory-work. Aldo Rossi, for instance, claims that "the city itself is the collective memory of its people [...]. The city is the *locus* of the collective memory" (Rossi 2000: 172, original emphasis). Similarly, Dolores Hayden stresses "[t]he power of place – the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory" (Hayden 2000: 109). Meanwhile Barry Curtis argues that "[c]ities as a matrix of routes, junctions, and structures function as a compelling metaphor for memory" and that their "buildings and space configure forcefields of memory" (Curtis 2001: 62-63). One might even say that *cities remember* – and that we remember with and through them. Yet as will be seen, neo-Victorian metropolises are spaces in which memory is not just communally fostered, produced, and preserved, but also contested, deconstructed, and sometimes deliberately distorted or fabricated.

At the same time, if the cityscape cannot exist without the creating and perceiving human mindscape, then clearly each individual mind contains its own particular evanescent city juxtaposed with any city of collective memory. Hence there must be as many

Londons, Dublins, Hong Kongs, Melbournes, Mumbais, and New Yorks as there are past, present and future observers, recorders or imaginers. Art in general and neo-Victorianism in particular cannot help being enthralled by these infinite possibilities of continuous re-creation.

2.   The Makeover of Proteus

Troping neo-Victorian spaces, writers, artists, filmmakers, documentarians, city planners, architects, flâneurs, tourists, and citizens adopt widely divergent strategies, with varied, often competing, ideological and aesthetic implications as to how they utilise the cityscape. The city is required to be all things to all peoples. As the chapter contributions to this volume make clear, neo-Victorian city tropes cover a wide spectrum: from nationalistic dreams of imperial or postcolonial romance and struggle (Ho, Mitchell, Sheils), architectural living-cum-spectral museums (Cases), blood-soaked horror chambers and places of death (Dobrazczyk, Martin), capitalist meccas of self-actualisation (Vanfasse), phenomenological palimpsests of memory and protention (Wolfreys), and playgrounds of self-destructive libidinal desire (Marks, Stetz), to uncanny domiciles and theatres of precarity (Costantini, Ganteau). The neo-Victorian city proves a veritable Proteus, continually changing its appearance into yet another guise, becoming Other over and over again. This characteristic of continuous doubling and duplication emphasises neo-Victorianism's "*quintessentially Gothic*" nature (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 4, original emphasis), which ruptures any notion of constitutive temporal difference between cities then and now. Today's cities and their re-imagined nineteenth-century referents prove to be uncanny *Doppelgänger*: both haunting and haunted by one another, each city provides a prism through which its counterpart is focalised as at once Same and Other. Just as McLaughlin remarks that the title of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) "refers simultaneously to the Belgian Congo and modern, metropolitan London, two places that come to be imagined as one" (McLaughlin 2000: 1), so too a Gothic imaginative conflation occurs between nineteenth- and twentieth/twenty-first-century cities. In neo-Victorianism, however, the collapse of one place into the other occurs along the temporal rather than, or in addition to, the geographical axis.

It seems strangely fitting for the protagonist of *City of the Mind* to be engaged in the task of taking the brick frame and staircase of an 1823 building in Cobham Square to create its double and replacement: a modern construction "with a new significance" (Lively 1992: 26). Using and converting a nineteenth-century structure to build a contemporary artefact is clearly one of the definitions of a neo-Victorian undertaking, intimately linked to processes of adaptation, whether fictional and filmic or architectural. Halland metatextually proposes another definition when he compares his renovator's work to his mother's habit of revamping old pieces of clothing: "My mother used to do something with clothes called making over – turning collars and cuffs inside out, putting in new elbows. We're making over" (Lively 1992: 25). Physically or imaginatively rebuilding, rewriting, and rereading Victorian cities, then, is essentially an art of making over, of making new from old (and sometimes also making old from new), retaining (or simulating) recognisable 'vintage' traces of the nineteenth-century past, even when these are self-consciously estranged from their former significance, appearance, or intended purpose. As much is evident in today's urban environments: in UK cities, for instance, the sight of Victorian chapels turned into cinemas, restaurants, nightclubs, and private homes has become commonplace, and even the least likely spaces are not exempt from fashionable redevelopment. Witness the subterranean "Victorian 'gentlemen's loo'" on Foley Street, Fitzrovia, London, transformed into a coffee shop "with bright-green barstools facing the original porcelain urinals" – but, ironically, with no provision of bathroom facilities for its customers (Ajudua 2014: n.p.).[4]

Halland's sartorial metaphor of making over can be self-reflexively applied to the practice of artists as much as architects. In Lively's own case, her novel proliferates a whole series of metaphors

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[4] Such urban makeovers, of course, are not a prerogative of neo-Victorianism, having already been prevalent in the nineteenth century and before. Writing about Ratcliffe Highway in 1894, Montagu Williams reported that "one of the vilest houses […] was the 'White Swan,' better known as 'Paddy's Goose'; oddly enough, its site is now occupied by the Wesleyan Methodist Home Mission Hall. This excellent institution has done much to purify the neighbourhood" (Williams 1894: 74). Similarly, Washington Square Park, part of one of New York's most desirable neighbourhoods since its 1830s gentrification, had previously been used as the city's burial ground, including at times of horrific epidemics (see Schechter 2004: 61).

to convey the complexity of the capital: "the jigsaw of time and reference", "a catalogue of elsewhere; a chronicle of suggestion", "one babble of allusions", "a medley of style", "the urban stew" (Lively 1992: 4, 35, 66, 177). Most noticeable in Lively's urban tropes is the systematic double scope of the metaphoric semantics, applying simultaneously to the city and the text, the referential and the fictional space. As a result, the city is aestheticised and the text is spatialised, and the affinity between the novel of geography and the geography of the novel centres around the distinctively postmodernist principle of amalgamation. The recurrent intrusive presence of cement-mixers in the narrative can similarly be read as a quasi syllepsis, manifesting the idea of blending various ingredients (also present in the metaphors of the medley and the stew), suggesting postmodernism's mixture of codes and modes, and highlighting Lively's syncretic strategy, so typical of neo-Victorianism generally.

Lively's aesthetic pluralism as a response to the city's historical, material, and cultural pluralism can best be evidenced in the structure of her novel. The chronological narrative of Matthew's endeavours to make sense of the city and his life is sporadically interrupted by micro-narratives of various characters from other epochs: an Elizabethan Arctic explorer, a Victorian palaeontologist, a child of the timeless slums, and a World War II air-raid warden. Introducing temporal disruption and generic variation, each episode throws another light on the city and gives the kaleidoscope another turn, shifting the pattern. This temporal stratification of the novel's construction, combined with sundry references to the historically multi-layered physicality of the metropolis, also points to the text's main paradigmatic trope, one which seems to be used (and sometimes abused) in most neo-Victorian works dealing with metropolises: the palimpsest.

3.   The Fascinations of the Palimpsest
Originally defined as a manuscript page which has been scraped off and re-used, the term palimpsest is also employed in architecture and archaeology to describe the accumulated modifications and sedimentations detectable in a building or a site. Similarly, it is now used by historians to describe the historical current moment as the compacted result of faded but nonetheless discernible pasts. The crucial idea here is that of layering, which links the present (in the