STEFFEN HANTKE

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 films of Merchant-Ivory or A. S. Byatt's "Morpho Eugenia" are reincarnated for the screen as Philip and Belinda Haas' Angels and Insects, belong to this type. On the other hand, there are the best-sellers 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 hardboiled writers and noir filmmakers who popularised this trope long after the last eminent Victorian had passed on. In much

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 life in cities 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-in-the human body in 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 o001 Toahpi(p)-4(l)-6(ace 4(s)n Pc4 -3 Td 6e 4(9(s) 6e 4(9e)]TJ.04 -3 Td -3 Td -3)Tj 0.(>12

modern experience, a trope first grounded 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 center 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 center. 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 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, yet emphasizing 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 ahe ca-32.77T2(m)-2v(ne)4(m)-2(e)4(nt1)-2(i)-2(s)-1n(how)on

noise remains outside the frame altogether. Rendered 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 adopting 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. In 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-emphasizes 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 viewer's "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 organizes 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 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

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 avowedly 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 Neighborhood Crime Watch programs 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 infinite margin from a hollow center, 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. Suburbanization has

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

t(t)-121(e)4 (he)2(e)4((t)-2(o)]TJJ619368 -3 Td 0(di)-2(s)-t l)-2(a)n6(c)3(e)4(t)-2(he) f(r)u4(t)-u2

heights"[37] of outlying areas, has yielded to a vision of a socially and economically integrated urban space, cleansed of all traces of class struggle, and organi

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's *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, visualized 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, the narrator concludes; modernity's utopia "had all the sinister.001 5/u2(on, ue)-4(ae5s0(g)10(h)-10(.o(t)-2(,a

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 modeled on an Orientalist blueprint of a dehistoricized "timeless" Cairo or Tangiers.[42] These fictional cities make it difficult to think the conventional distinctions that used to color-code 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, its 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

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 profascist 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:

constructed, and thus ideologically charged, terms

Notes

An earlier version of this essay has appeared in German translation in Diskurse der Gewalt – Gewalt der Diskurse, edited by Michael Schultze, Joerg Meyer, Britta Krause, and Dietmar Fricke (Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang, 2005). I would like to express my gratitude to these editors for their helpful suggestions and constructive criticism.

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 Jl