Medialised Britain

Essays on Media, Culture and Society

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SCREENING THE VICTORIANS
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE VICTORIAN AGE IN
CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FILMS

1. Introduction

In a mediatized society like contemporary Britain (and the Western world in
general), knowledge about and images of the past are increasingly transmitted
through TV and film. However much this might be lamented, there is no way
of denying the decisive influence of screen representations of the past on the
popular (British) imagination, and therefore their value as an object of critical
academic study. The Victorian age seems to occupy a special place in this
context, as it does more generally for British national identity. ‘Britain’s
century’, the heyday of British imperial and economic power and the time
when so many features of the modern British state, society and culture
emerged, is endlessly revisited on the screen, both big and small. At the time
of writing (October 2005), the latest adaptations of Victorian literary classics
are directly competing for an audience at the box office and on the box, as it
were: Roman Polanski’s Oliver Twist and the new BBC version of Bleak House.
These follow on from a long list of adaptations of Victorian literature since
the mid-1990s (Dickens alone has been adapted for the screen at least thirty
times during the past ten years).¹ This vogue is complemented by a series of
films not based on Victorian texts but set in the Victorian age or dealing with
Victorian subjects, including original screenplays (e.g. Wilde, Mrs. Brown or
Topsy-Turvy) as well as those based on ‘neo-Victorian’ novels or texts (such as
Angels and Insects, Oscar and Lucinda or Possession). It is this type of film that I
will be concerned with in this essay, since it seems to offer more possibilities
for a (post)modern ‘screening’ of the Victorians than an adaptation of a text
written at that time. Indeed, although there is no shortage of precedents in
this genre either,² the new picture emerging from these films challenges many
of the dearly held preconceptions and stereotypes about the period, not least
concerning its repression of sexuality and the culture of ‘propriety’. If the
Victorians become ‘sexy’ again towards the end of the 20th century (there is
even a range of underwear called “Victoria’s Secret” and a “Prince Albert”
genital piercing), one might be forgiven for speculating on the connection of this to New Labour’s rise to power at the same time – a government that has by now become (in)famous for ‘sexing up’ things. Even though this link may seem spurious and will not be in the centre of attention here, the idea that the films may be expressive of or connected to wider developments in contemporary British society very clearly plays an important part in my analysis.

In what follows, I will look at three ‘post-Victorian’ films of the last ten years as examples drawn from a more extensive corpus of films that form something of a sub-genre in contemporary British historical or heritage film (cf. the references for a longer list). My interest focuses mainly on the way they represent the Victorian age from a contemporary British perspective, on how they ‘screen’ the Victorians in the multiple sense of the word. This is above all a cultural-studies approach, but as such it is almost of necessity interdisciplinary, touching on history/historiography as well as media studies. For that reason, I will preface my discussion with a theoretical section, which is meant to raise several important issues that have a bearing on my analysis (without necessarily being directly addressed in the case studies).

2. Theoretical Contexts

The Victorians and Us

The Victorian Age in the UK must be among the most extensively studied historical periods of all time. Partly because of its proximity to the present and the ready availability of historical records, partly because of its importance for the development of British national identity, this period has certainly received more than its fair share of detailed and comprehensive studies and ‘rewritings’ from historians, sociologists, literary and cultural critics, writers and not least film-makers. However, despite or perhaps because of that, a number of popular preconceptions and stereotypes about the Victorians has developed (e.g. that they were all rigid and devout people who valued duty, religion and the imperial mission over enjoyment, personal freedom and sexuality, and were thus driven into hypocrisy, as evidenced for example in the boom of prostitution and pornography), which are very difficult to challenge. One of the most enduring of these stereotypes is perhaps that the Victorian Age can be seen as exactly that – one monolithic historical period with somehow identifiable general characteristics. Of course, this is highly questionable and relies mainly on the longevity of Queen Victoria and the (British) tradition of separating and naming historical periods according to their monarchs. One of the interests in this essay is therefore to see in how far the films I will discuss (which were all more or less widely distributed in the UK) perpetuate or perhaps challenge these stereotypes.

In contrast to ‘Victorian studies’ per se, an approach to the period from a cultural-studies perspective – i.e. one that asks for the significance of the Victorian age for contemporary British (and perhaps American) society and identity – has been much slower in coming. Recently, however, there are signs that this is becoming a ‘fashionable’ research topic. Since the late 1990s, there have been several book-length studies on the ‘neo-Victorian’ novel (cf. Bormann 2002; Deisler 1999; Guteleben 2001) as well as more general reappraisals of the discipline of Victorian studies (cf. Jenkins & John 2000a; Jenkins & John 2000b; Williams 1999). A few books have also directly addressed the question of the relationship of our postmodern age to the Victorians, either from an academic (and mostly American) perspective (cf. Clayton 2003; Krueger 2002; Kucich & Sadoff 2000) or for a more general readership (cf. Sweet 2001). The overall emphasis is two-fold: it lies firstly on the complexity and variety of the Victorian age, on the surprising, anti-stereotypical, anachronistic elements of the period, its “undisciplined cultures”, as Clayton puts it (Clayton 2003: 8). We should keep this element in mind for our analysis of the ‘post-Victorian’ films. Secondly, the close relationship of the present to the Victorian age is highlighted, the many ways in which it is still with us, so to speak: “the Victorians shaped our lives and sensibilities in countless unacknowledged ways; [...] they are still with us, walking our pavements, drinking in our bars, living in our houses, reading our newspapers, inhabiting our bodies” (Sweet 2001: xxiii). Matthew Sweet even injects some almost Victorian melodrama into this (perhaps deliberately?) when he ends his book by saying about the Victorians: “They made us – good and bad – what we are today. We are the Victorians. We should love them. We should thank them. We should love them.” (Ibid: 232) Whether it needs to be a love relationship or not, what is clear from his and many of the other studies is that the Victorians are always invented by us, that there cannot be any other perspective than a contemporary one – and, significantly, that this insight should be in some way reflected or highlighted. This leads directly into the more general debate about ‘postmodern’ history and its representation through the media.

History and Film

The depiction of the past on film and more generally the relation of the film medium to the discipline of history has been one of the more controversially debated issues among academics and critics over the past decade or so (cf. Barta 1998; Cannadine 2004; Cartmell, Hunter & Whelehan 2001; Rosenstone
The debate about the truthfulness or otherwise of history as represented on screen has increasingly been sidelined by a discussion about the specific opportunities that film offers for representing history, now that the discipline of history itself has become more interested in issues of representation. Indeed, some see recent historical films as examples par excellence for a new kind of ‘postmodern’ history (cf. Rosenstone 1995; Rosenstone 1996). Among British academics, the relation of historical films to questions of national identity and ideology has been hotly discussed in the so-called ‘heritage-film debate’ (cf. e.g. Higson 2003; Monk 2002; Voigts-Virchow 2004).

In his essay “The Future of the Past. Film and the Beginnings of Postmodern History”, Robert A. Rosenstone claims that “filmmakers and videographers have begun to create a kind of history that we can truly label postmodern, producing works that provide a distinctly new relationship to and a new way of making meaning of the traces of the past” (1996: 202). He goes on to list several qualities of such films: e.g. they

- tell the past self-reflexively. [...] from a multiplicity of viewpoints [...];
- [... approaches the past with humor, parody, [...] and other irreverent attitudes; intermix contradictory elements: past and present, drama and documentary, and indulge in creative anachronism; accept, even glory in, their own selectivity, partialism, partisanship, and rhetorical character; refuse to focus or sum up the meaning of past events, but rather make sense of them in partial and open-ended, rather than totalized, manner [...]; never forget that the present is the site of all past representation and knowing. (Ibid: 206)

Rosenstone argues that these characteristics are exemplary of a new kind of history that takes seriously – or is in harmony with – the findings of postmodern theorists such as Michel Foucault, Linda Hutcheon, Hayden White and others, which, according to him, is not the case among historians. Whereas it is certainly right that only a minority of professional historians is actively practising ‘postmodern’ history in this sense, there has undeniably been a major shift in historiography towards a “multiplicity of viewpoints”, an acceptance of “selectivity, partialism, partisanship, and rhetorical character”, and above all the realisation that “the present is the site of all past representation and knowing” (Ibid) – if, indeed, this has ever been in doubt (cf. e.g. Jenkins 1997).

Perhaps this turn is especially obvious – and also more momentous – in Britain, a country that has traditionally been defined to a great extent by reference to its national past. Recent revisionist historical work has focused on questions such as the respective importance of the different national identities of the British Isles for historical developments and their representations, the relevance of issues such as class and gender for British history, or the problem of the history and legacy of the British Empire in the light of decolonisation, immigration and a post-imperial crisis of Britishness. More generally, the problematic question of historical truth and the subjectivity of history has entered public discourse and is being discussed widely, not only among historians. This point is made by Deborah Cartmell and I.Q. Hunter in their introduction to Retemptions. Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction, and they significantly add that “the understanding of the past by non-historians – ‘ordinary people’ if you like – is predetermined by its representation in film and fiction” (2001: 1). Referring to recent British films like The Madness of King George (1994), Elizabeth (1998) and Shakespeare in Love (1998), they point out that they demythologise the past [...]. Taking for granted that the past, like everything else, comes to us by way of previous texts and culturally bounded aesthetic categories, they self-consciously interpret history through the meshes of genre and fictional precedent [...]. In that sense they are both postmodern as academics understand the term – allusive, ironic, knowingly intertextual – and firmly in the line of popular culture’s playful and opportunistic treatment of history. Films, to the despair of historians, have always taken a ‘postmodern’ approach to the past, viewing it not as a dull chronicle but as a dynamic resource for exciting stories and poetic, morally uplifting untruths. (Ibid: 2)

Whereas these films seem to fulfil (at least some of) Rosenstone’s criteria for postmodern historical films, they are also very clearly commercial films and can sometimes be nostalgic.

This nostalgia has been among the central points of criticism in the British heritage-film debate led by reviewers and critics since the late 1980s, in which the allegedly restricted and elite view of the British past in many heritage films and their relation to commercial heritage culture has been attacked, particularly in reference to lavish adaptations of literary classics à la Merchant Ivory, such as Room with a View, Howards End etc. (cf. Higson 2003; Hill 1999; Monk 2002; Sargeant 2000; Voigts-Virchow 2004).6 These criticisms usually imply a political critique of (post-)Thatcherite policies, which might be said to constitute a link to the political critique implicit in most postmodern theories.7 Tony Blair’s project of reinventing Britain and British identity for the consumer age (cf. the well-known pamphlet BritainTM by Mark Leonard) is increasingly singled out for criticism here, as became very clear during the Millennium Dome affair in 2000/2001. More recently, however, there has been recognition within this critical discourse of a new type of heritage film that engages more self-consciously and critically with the past and the genre itself, now sometimes labelled “post-heritage” film (cf. Monk 2002).8 This category would include many of the more recent historical films, such as the ones mentioned
above. In the following, therefore, I will discuss the ‘post-Victorian’ films in this context, asking how they can be related to the categories of postmodern historical film and (post-)heritage film, and especially how they reflect the ‘presence of the (Victorian) past’ in contemporary British society. In other words: how revisionist are these films? How ‘heritage’? How contemporary?

3. The ‘Post-Victorian’ Film Genre: Three Case Studies

The British ‘post-Victorian’ film in the sense in which I am using the term has certainly existed for more than ten years. One of the better-known early examples is perhaps Karel Reisz and Harold Pinter’s 1981 film version of John Fowles’s novel The French Lieutenant’s Woman, with its self-reflexive film-within-the-film element mirroring the complex metatextual twists of the literary model as well as enabling modern comments on the Victorian age. Jane Campion’s The Piano was a hit in 1993, but British involvement in this film was minimal (nonetheless, the themes raised do speak quite powerfully to contemporary British society from a postcolonial and feminist perspective). However, it seems to have sparked off a new interest in the Victorian age as an attractive and challenging background for modern films, since it was in the mid- to late 1990s that the vague reality took off, with films such as Angels and Insects (1995), Mrs. Brown (1997), The Governess (1998), Oscar and Lucinda (1997), Wilde (1997), Conceiving Ada (1997) and Topsy-Turvy (1999) being released within five years (four of them in 1997 alone). Most of the criticism from cultural and media studies, which were beginning to show an interest in this issue at about the same time (cf. e.g. Stewart 1995), concentrated on the literary adaptations of Victorian works (e.g. of Dickens and Eliot, but also Dracula). This is why I will here exclude these and instead look at three examples of thoroughly ‘post-Victorian’ films in the following.

Case Study 1: Mrs. Brown (1997), D: John Madden, Sc: Jeremy Brock

As a subgenre of the British heritage film, the monarchy or royalty film became conspicuous again in the 1990s: apart from Mrs. Brown, the best-known examples are perhaps The Madness of King George (Nicholas Hytner & Alan Bennett 1994) and Elizabeth (Shekhar Kapur & Michael Hirst 1998). The emphasis on monarchs in crisis displayed in these films has been interpreted as a reflection of the real-life problems of the British monarchy in the 1990s or perhaps more generally the crisis of British (national) identity. What is striking, in any case, is the concentration on the private lives of the monarchs and the conflict with their public persona, a theme that seems very contemporary. In the case of Queen Victoria, this can be seen as part of an ongoing revaluation of her character and her significance for Britain in the 19th century and beyond, be it in her role as a woman in power or as the ‘first media monarch’ (Plunkett 2003; cf. also Horns 1998; Horns & Munich 1997; Jansohn 2003; Munich 1996). Mrs. Brown retells the story of Victoria’s ‘love affair’ with her Scottish servant John Brown after the death of Prince Albert in 1861. Even today, this is fairly sensitive material, and the sources on the nature of the relationship are scarce (an earlier film project involving Sean Connery was shelved partly because of that, and the film team of Mrs. Brown was denied access to royal properties). This allowed the film-makers to indulge in some historical re-writing or at least visualisation and dramatisation of their own, including the nature of the relationship of Victoria (played by Dame Judi Dench) and John Brown (although it is still kept ambivalent in the film), Victoria’s relationship with her children and family (depicted as rather strained) and Brown’s role in the royal household, among others. Overall, the film manages to challenge stereotypical images of Queen Victoria (at several points, she is indeed amused) and of the Victorian age more generally. Kara McKeechne sums up her analysis of the film as follows:

History films of this kind can open a door to a period too far removed for us to have any personal knowledge of it, by conjuring up a sense memory through visual imagery. The denial that the films have any concern with ‘serious’ history is part of a debate about the ideological function of heritage films. (McKeechne 2001: 112)

Which leads us directly to the genre discussion of the film.

From the technical (or media-studies) point of view, Mrs. Brown has a few innovative elements, such as regional accents of leading characters (the casting of Scots comedian Billy Connolly as John Brown is a triumph) and an almost thriller-like opening sequence, but it still qualifies as a fairly traditional heritage film. In fact, much of the film has the vintage castles and grand mansions as well as the typical painterly mise-en-scène of the classic period film (the paintings of Edwin Landseer being an obvious influence here). However, the self-conscious and strongly contemporary stance towards history that John Madden was to display so memorably in his next film Shakespeare in Love is already hinted at in Mrs. Brown. Among the contemporary resonances are the scenes of ‘paparazzi’ following Victoria and Brown to the Scottish highlands (this was the year of Princess Diana’s death, of course) and the comments of Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli – a brilliant performance by Antony Sher – on politics: “This country is not governed by wisdom but by talk” (this was also the year of spin-doctored New Labour’s rise to power). Most conspicuously, the ending of the film puts a clear question mark to its historical accuracy by stating that “John Brown’s diary was never found.” This alerts the
audience to the considerable constructivist element in a film that so consistently focuses on Brown’s point of view, and is in stark contrast to the alleged ‘authenticity’ of earlier films, or even to the much more traditional TV mini-series Victoria & Albert (John Erman, BBC 2001). It can therefore be linked to similar imaginative reconstructions of the Victorian age by its awareness of its own provisional and hypothetical narrative, without at the same time denying the usefulness, legitimacy and above all joy of telling a good, coherent and plausible (hi)story. It thus avoids pure heritage-film nostalgia while at the same time being anything but an outright postmodern deconstruction of (Victorian) history. I would posit that this is a fairly typical strategy in the ‘post-Victorian’ genre.

Case Study 2: The Governess (1998), D & Sc: Sandra Goldbacher

While Mrs. Brown was clearly interested in Victorian gender relations and sexuality at the top end of society, Sandra Goldbacher’s film signals in its title an involvement with one of the stereotypical female figures of the (lower) middle sections of society. The choice of title is certainly deliberate, since the expectations and preconceptions that it will bring to viewers’ minds (connected perhaps to the literary representations of women by the Brontës in particular) are confronted here with a very different portrayal of a lively and self-confident young Jewish woman who is interested in fashion, photography, science and not least sex. The story is set in the 1830s/1840s and centres on Rosina da Silva (Minnie Driver), one of the daughters of a Sephardic Jewish family living in London, who passes herself off as the gentle Mary Blackchurch after the death of her father, in order to find work as a governess. She gains a position with the Cavendish family on the Isle of Skye, where she not only helps the scientifically inclined father Charles (Tom Wilkinson) to discover the process of permanently fixing photographs but also falls passionately in love with him. After causing uproar in the family when the teenage son also falls in love with her, she leaves Scotland again at the end of the film to set up her own photographic studio in London. It is not only this proto-feminist element of Rosina/Mary’s intelligence, self-confidence and openness about sexuality that makes this film a piece of revisionist Victorian history; at almost every turn in the plot clichés about the Victorians are challenged: from prostitutes baring their breasts and a conversation about sex between Rosina and her sister near the beginning, via the dysfunctional family of the Cavendishes and Mary’s ‘advanced’ teaching methods to the depiction of Jewish life and customs as well as the beginnings of the science and art of photography as an example of Clayton’s “undisciplined cultures” (2003: 8).
image of the present – and of the present’s own image systems […] is the true double exposure of Victorian culture in contemporary film” (Stewart 1995: 195).


This adaptation of A.S. Byatt’s successful 1990 novel (winner of the Booker Prize and a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic) is one of a growing number of adaptations of ‘neo-’ or ‘post-Victorian’ novels, i.e. contemporary novels with a Victorian theme or setting, including the above-mentioned Fowles’ adaptation, Angels and Insects (1995; Byatt again) and Oscar and Lucinda (1997; Peter Carey), as well as the BBC versions of Sarah Waters’s Tipping the Velvet (2002) and Fingersmith (2005). As it is generally the case with literary adaptations, it is pointless to directly compare the film version to the novel in order to arrive at some comparative value judgement. What is interesting in our context, however, is to see whether the film emulates the novel’s complex treatment of the Victorian past and history in general. As a prime example of what has become known as ‘historiographic metafiction’ (Linda Hutcheon), Byatt’s novel has a dual plot with a pair of contemporary academics researching the lives of two imaginary Victorian poets, which allows her to constantly comment on the (incomplete) reconstruction of the past from the present and thus on the question of history/historiography in general. It is also a kaleidoscope of poems, letters, diaries, criticism etc., both (mock-) Victorian and contemporary, from which readers have to reconstruct their versions of the (hi)story. As Catherine Burgass has remarked (before the film was actually released), “[t]he technical problem with Possession is the incidence and variety of these inset texts. In short the complexity of the novel presents a great number of technical problems.” (Burgass 2002: 77) However, the abovementioned precedent of The French Lieutenant’s Woman shows how film-makers can profitably use the opportunities offered by the medium to address these challenges, as she also points out. The result in this case is much less spectacular, it must be said. Possession is a fairly traditional and middle-of-the-road heritage film which has the obligatory high aesthetic value (sumptuous mise-en-scène, beautiful houses and landscapes, meticulous historical costumes etc.) without seriously challenging the genre. This is perhaps surprising, since LaBute is also a playwright and is known for his gritty, cynical plays and films about contemporary society. However, he is also American, and it seems that a certain Anglophilia played a part in the making of this film, which was also clearly intended for the American market. This is obvious from the director’s commentary on the DVD, where nostalgia for the Victorian age is accompanied by a love of British “period films” (Jennifer Ehle and Jeremy Northam were chosen for the Victorian roles mainly because of their background in heritage films).

This said, there are several elements that make this film interesting in the context of the ‘post-Victorian’. First of all, the “presence of the past” is more tangible here than in the other films because it has a contemporary as well as a Victorian plot. Maud Bailey (Gwyneth Paltrow) and Roland Michell (Aaron Eckhart) – the contemporary scholars – are ‘possessed’ by their ‘subjects’, the Victorian poets Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash, and by their discovery of a secret relationship between these. Not only is Maud found to be a descendant of the Victorian couple at the end, but the two lovers affairs constantly illuminate each other (Roland remarks at one point: “we came to investigate them, not us”) – the revisionist element being that it is the modern relationship that seems repressed and complicated (and is not shown to be consumed in the film), while the Victorian affair is passionate and uninhibited and produces a (illegitimate) child. Related to this is the view of modern academia as derivative and exploitative versus the creative and original work of LaMotte and Ash. All of this is echoed by filmic means: the atmosphere and colours in the Victorian part are usually warm, lush and comfortable, whereas the modern part feels cold and distanced, almost sterile. However, the essential continuity between the two ages is strongly suggested by the way they are intercut: the transitions usually happen seamlessly – the modern characters are emerging in their car from under a bridge and at almost the same moment a steam train is passing above, taking us back to the Victorian storyline; LaMotte and Ash leave their hotel room in Whitby and close the door behind them, which is immediately reopened to let Maud and Roland in, who are staying in the same room (now refurbished in modern style) almost one century and a half later. Indeed, the Victorian context slowly ‘takes possession’ of the modern one, and Maud and Roland (whose names already echo Victorian culture) are changed through their relation to the past.

The “rhetorical character” of their and the film’s representation of the past is also frequently stressed: one character states at the beginning that if the relationship between LaMotte and Ash really happened, “this would be rewriting history”; and Maud asks Roland at one point when he is picturing a scene involving Ash: “Are you writing fiction now?”, to which he replies: “Maybe…” Most obviously, the ending of the film (a version of the novel’s postscript), highlights the selectivity of all reconstructions of history by revealing an event of the Victorian story that none of the modern characters has found out about and showing the contingencies to which the preservation of
‘historical records’ is subject (in this case a little girl carelessly dropping a letter she was meant to deliver to Christabel). While questioning the objectivity of history, this device also implicitly privileges film as a vehicle of representing history: at the end, the audience knows ‘the whole story’ that evades the scholars. It is the typical double gesture of the ‘post-Victorian’ film: telling a satisfying and coherent story while at the same time emphasising (more or less clearly) its incompleteness and hypothetical character as well as its essential foundation in the present.

4. Conclusion

It should be evident from the case studies above that contemporary cinematic representations of the Victorian age transport an image of the period that is more diverse and contradictory (and sometimes uncomfortably ‘modern’) than some of the critics (e.g. in the heritage debate) allow, and which counterbalances the more stereotypical view of ‘the Victorians’. They nevertheless share the more general fascination of contemporary British society with the Victorian age and thus testify to its undiminished significance for (post)modern British identity. This leads to a curious mixture of reverence and nostalgia on the one hand and iconoclasm and revisionism on the other, which seems to be characteristic of the present attitude towards the period (cf. e.g. Sweet 2001). The films also very clearly highlight a limited number of ‘fashionable’ themes, in particular issues of sexuality, class and gender. They generally focus on ‘deviant’ (or ‘un-Victorian’) sexualities, such as extra-marital sex and adultery (The French Lieutenant’s Woman, The Governess, Possession), homosexuality (Possession, Wilde, Tipping the Velvet, Fingersmith) or even incest (Angels and Insects); they are interested in uncovering the (secret) private lives of ‘celebrities’ (Mrs. Brown, Possession, Wilde, Topsy-Turvy, Victoria & Albert); they often emphasise the emergence of modern (scientific and technological) ideas (The Governess, Angels and Insects, Conceiving Ada); and they bespeak an awareness of the variety of British cultural identities beyond the (Southern) English upper middle class (Mrs. Brown, The Governess, Angels and Insects, The Piano). In this way, they present an image of the Victorian age that is strongly ‘contemporary’ and certainly shares some of the anxieties and obsessions of ‘Blair’s Britain’. While this can be criticised from a historian’s point of view (cf. below), it certainly makes the period ‘relevant’ to a large cinema-going public who might not otherwise be challenged to revise a frequently stereotypical view of ‘the Victorians’. In any case, it does not vindicate the oft-quoted view that the Victorian age is frequently set up by the present (or by ‘postmodernism’) as the ‘other’ from which it has to distance itself in order to stress its own superiority (cf. e.g. Kucich & Sadoff 2000; Sweet 2001). In these films, the extremes of either disgust and abhorrence or rosy-eyed nostalgia are usually avoided in favour of a sense of the complexity and contradictory nature of the period, which is also being emphasised in ‘serious’ historical studies. In one sense, they can even go beyond these by imagining the individual, the personal and emotional dimension of the ‘foreign country’ that is the (Victorian) past, and thus allowing the audience to get involved with the characters and therefore the period on a much more personal level. In so far, ‘post-Victorian’ films aim at evoking what Raymond Williams has called ‘structures of feeling’ of the Victorian age, and, I would argue, they are more often than not successful in this.

Do we therefore accept the ultimate validity of popular film representations of the (Victorian) past as ‘proper’ history? As we have seen, this is a vexed question on which it is difficult and probably impossible to reach universal agreement. There seems to be a growing consensus, however, on the irreversible impact that the media (and film and TV in particular) have had on the representation of history, and historians themselves are increasingly aware of the need for a narrative or ‘story-telling’ element in history, as well as some degree of generalisation and simplification, if they aim to reach beyond a small circle of experts – well-known examples for this approach would be Simon Schama or Sir Roy Strong (cf. Cannadine 2004). Ian Kershaw recently commented in the TLS on the issue of television history:

from a professional historian’s point of view, television history has enormous strengths, but also significant weaknesses. Yet if historians agree that the purpose – or at least one major purpose – of history is to take the subject beyond specialists in the academy, then they must look with some favour on the medium which, par excellence, is capable of doing just that. (Kershaw 2003: 16-17)

Even though the emphasis is here on TV and historical documentaries, it should be obvious that the same is true for historical films. As my discussion of ‘post-Victorian’ films has shown, they are both ‘postmodern’ and popular, in that they balance a necessarily commercialised and sometimes nostalgic version of history (as demanded by the American market in particular) with a certain revisionism and demythologising of history. Several of the films stress the ‘presence of the past’ by introducing a parallel plot set in the present, in which the significance and reconstruction of the past for/from the present becomes evident and the clear separation of past and present is challenged (Possession, The French Lieutenant’s Woman, Conceiving Ada), while in other films this link is more implicit but equally pertinent (cf. the ‘contemporary’ topics mentioned above). In addition, many of the films stress the selectivity/partialism/rhetorical character of their reconstruction of the past, as evidenced in the last scenes of both Mrs. Brown and Possession, where vital docu-
ments proving the historical reality of the story are said or shown to be destroyed or lost. I would argue that this kind of ‘mildly postmodern’ historical film has become more frequent during the past decade or so and is perhaps on the one hand a sign of the acceptance of postmodern notions of history in society at large, and of the rejection of the more extreme claims of a ‘crisis of historicity’ or even an ‘end of history’ on the other.

How, then, do the ‘post-Victorian’ films discussed here fit the heritage film genre? From my analysis, it is clear that they inherit from the traditional heritage film a careful period reconstruction that pays attention to ‘authentic’ settings, costumes etc. and frequently indulges in nostalgic representations of period interiors, stately homes or castles, and scenic landscapes. This can be seen as a tribute to the commercial success of this type of film (especially in the US). However, apart from the fact that these films are not adaptations of (Victorian) literary classics, they exhibit several other ‘anti-heritage’ elements, such as stylistic experiments and sometimes self-reflexivity (The Governess, Wilde!), regional accents of leading characters (Mark Rylance in Angels and Insects, Billy Connolly in Mrs. Brown), focus on class conflict or strong criticism of the aristocracy/upper (middle) class, open depiction of (homo)sexual scenes etc. In so far, they can be seen as belonging to the ‘post-heritage’ genre as discussed by Claire Monk (cf. 2002). She also criticises the whole debate as ideologically problematic, and questions the usefulness of the term. Indeed, there is frequently a sense of simplification involved on the side of the critics, who seem to read the films from one perspective only (usually political-ideological, as expressive of a certain view of class, national identity etc.) and neglect other important angles (such as the gender issue, or questions of audience reactions, also the ‘subversive’ elements in many traditional heritage films). In view of these terminological problems, Eckart Voigts-Virchow writes:

Following Monk, one might be tempted to abandon the term ‘heritage film’ entirely, but the terms ‘period film’, ‘historical film’ or ‘costume film’ merely open up different cans of worms and by no means lend themselves to clearer generic delineation. The very fact that the category has stimulated so much criticism illustrates how productive it continues to be. (Voigts-Virchow 2004: 16)

I would certainly agree, even if Voigts-Virchow goes on to state that “the heritage market has reached the point of saturation” (ibid.) — his own volume and the comprehensive overview of the debate he provides in the introduction testify to the undiminished fascination of the genre, for film-makers as well as critics. On the other hand, his discussion also clearly shows that the question of terminology should be relegated in favour of the discussion of the actual films and ‘culture’ from a variety of perspectives (cf. his helpful schematic overview of different criteria and conceptualisations, ibid.: 27). In this sense, I hope that my discussion of the subgenre of the ‘post-Victorian’ film in this essay has made a valid contribution to the debate.

It seems to me that the recent film representations of the Victorian age are not at all a bad thing for the image of the Victorians and their place in the British cultural memory. Every one of them may be criticised for its particular view of the period, its anachronisms or infidelities etc., but taken together they do represent a fascinating and thought-provoking panorama of Victorian society and above all its individuals, which goes a long way to challenging some long-held stereotypes, and in the process manages to highlight the hypothetical and selective nature of all representations of the past. In the context of the more general recent ‘boom’ in history in the UK, this may well lead to the question David Cannadine poses in his introduction to History and the Media: “Was it because the advent of New Labour, in May 1997, determined to eradicate much of what they saw as the outmoded and inhibiting past, had the unintended consequence of making that past seem more interesting, immediate and important than hitherto?” (2004: 1) This is a debatable point, not least because such developments are seldom one-dimensional but have many different causes, as Cannadine himself goes on to point out, but also because the same claim could easily be made for other cultures (certainly for Germany at the present moment) and for other times. Be this as it may, it can certainly do the Victorians no harm if they continue to undergo multiple ‘screenings’ in this sense, and it can help their descendants ‘reinvent’ them all over again.

Notes
1 This is not to say that there have been no screen adaptations of Victorian classics before that time. The opposite is clearly the case; but it does seem as if a ‘boom’ in this genre started at that point. Whether or not it is related to the ‘Austen mania’ in film arguably started by the BBC adaptation of Pride and Prejudice and Ang Lee’s Sense and Sensibility (both 1995) is another question. The latest BBC version of Middlemarch at least was broadcast one year before, in 1994.
2 The Victorian age has served as a film setting from the very start — indeed, the first British films were made towards the end of the period and depicted elements of Victorian everyday life and society (there are film images of Queen Victoria herself, of course, including her Diamond Jubilee and her funeral). Famous early feature films include Victoria the Great (1937) and Sixty Glorious Years (1938). While these films are celebratory, the Victorian setting soon acquired a particular and usually negative connotation, as Matthew Sweet notes: “British films with nineteenth-century subjects reinforced the association of the period with themes of brutality and hypocrisy” (Sweet 2001: xix), in reference to the 1930s films of Tod Slaughter and the 1950s-1970s’ Hammer horror cycle in particular.
My use of the term ‘post-Victorian’ refers to contemporary (i.e. ‘postmodern’) films that represent the Victorian age while also (more or less explicitly) reflecting their own perspective on it. As I have said above, I do not include adaptations of Victorian texts in this category. The use of the term ‘British’ is always controversial in the context of contemporary films, which are almost by necessity multinational and are usually subject to strong American/Hollywood influence. I am concentrating on films with a substantial British involvement, which can manifest itself in the director, actors, settings, literary model etc. Not all of these need be British, but the overall significance of the British context should be clear.

Not only was the 19th century the heyday of the British Empire, it was also the only century in history in which all parts of the British Isles were united under one political system and one government in London.

In his introduction to Revisiting History, Rosenstone states that all examples of what he there calls the New History film ‘lie outside the boundaries of normal cinema’ because ‘traditional drama and documentary are incapable of handling the densities and complexities of serious historical representation’ (Rosenstone 1995: 7).

Period films or ‘heritage films’ are frequently referred to as a specifically British (and more particularly English) genre (cf. Monk & Sargeant 2002); it is one of the relatively few film genres in which British films have been consistently successful internationally.

On the other hand, there is of course Fredric Jameson’s interpretation of postmodernism as “the cultural logic of late capitalism”, in which heritage culture is exactly an expression of this logic and of a perceived “crisis of historicity” (cf. 2002: 30).

This is obviously an extremely cursory glance at the debate. For the general problem of the heritage film debate and the usefulness of the term cf. the Conclusion. Cf also Voigts-Vruchow 2004

Notwithstanding McKechnie’s dislike of the term for this film, which she sees as a “critically suspect category” (McKechnie 2001: 104) – this is just one more indication of the problematic nature of the term and its varying meanings.

The 1937 film Victoria the Great, for example, stressed at the outset that “every incident was founded on fact” and that it used “authentic statements by politicians”.

The mother is grumpy, bored, and none too bright (about as far away from the ‘Angel in the House’ cliche as it gets), her young daughter Clementina, Mary’s pupil, is wilful and has a morbid imagination, the teenage son has been sent down from Oxford for frequenting opium dens and generally leading a ‘debauched’ life.

In particular, the fact that Rosina at the end of the film starts a project of “capturing the beauty of her people” (i.e. the London Jewish community in portraits, and the look of these portraits, strongly suggest Cameron’s work. Unfortunately, I have not been able to ascertain whether the photographs used in the film might in fact have been reproductions of Cameron’s works. To be historically precise, Cameron did not, in fact, start taking photographs until the 1860s – but this would be part of the film’s “creative anachronism”, to quote Rosenstone (1996: 206) again.

13 The Israeli singer Ofra Haza is featured on the soundtrack of the film, and the stereotypical heritage ‘ballroom’ scene is here turned into a Jewish-Oriental dance.

In terms of audience numbers, they are even more influential. This is also why historical films are regularly discussed and criticized by professional historians. Recently, controversies have focused on ancient history, with a series of big budget Hollywood films taking on the topic, among them Gladiator (2000), Troy (2004), and Alexander (2004).

In the sense of the term as used by Cartell & Hunter (2001) rather than Rosenstone (1996), it should be added – cf. my comments on “History and Film” in section 2. However, several of Rosenstone’s criteria are also met by the films discussed here, as we have seen.


There is a particularly interesting crossover to the Western genre at the beginning of the film, while at the same time the heritage-style Beardsleyan opening credits are still showing.

This is one of several instances where the heightened contemporary awareness of the different national and regional identities of the British Isles can be observed in the films.

Kershaw starts his article by saying that “if in Britain, history has never been more popular” (2003: 16). Cannadine likewise states: “In Britain, the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed what was widely regarded as an unprecedented interest in history: among publishers, in the newspapers, on radio and on film, and (especially) on television; and from the general public, who, it seemed, could not get enough of it” (2004: 1).

It can also, significantly, help contemporaries from other cultures discover them for the first time. I am thinking here of German students of English culture, for example: I have been using film representations of the period successfully (I like to think) in teaching the Victorian age for some time. Even though they are clearly no alternative to studying Victorian texts themselves or academic works on the period, they can serve as a complementary avenue to the culture of the Victorians – one that it is instructive and rewarding as well as enjoyable to travel.

Filmmography (chronological)


Dreamtold (UK 1985, D: Gavin Millar, Sc: Dennis Potter).


Bormann, Daniel Candel (2002), The Articulation of Science in the Neo-Victorian Novel A Poetics (and Two Case Studies), Frankfurt/Main: Lang.


Homans, Margaret & Adrienne Munich, eds. (1997), Remaking Queen Victoria, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.