

## “Such a Dazzling Display of Lustrous Legerdemain”: Representing Victorian Theatricality in *Doctor Who*

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### **Abstract:**

Since its inception in 1963, *Doctor Who* has returned repeatedly to the nineteenth century, particularly to the United Kingdom in the mid-Victorian period. Although the programme presents these travels as the same individual returning to the same historical period, the nature of the Doctor's character (his constant regenerations) and the longevity of the programme (two discrete but connected series over nearly half a century) means that *Doctor Who*'s nineteenth century is always in flux. This article considers these fluctuations through a particular focus on the Victorian episodes' strong theatricality, arguing that this Victorian theatricality is a neo-Victorian interrogation of our nostalgia for the nineteenth century: a nostalgia that, like the Doctor himself, endures but changes shape.

**Keywords:** Charles Dickens, *Doctor Who*, illusions, ghosts, magicians, nostalgia, Queen Victoria, theatricality, werewolves.

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One key difference between the ‘classic’ series of *Doctor Who* (1963–1989) and the ‘new’ series (2005–present) is the Doctor's changing relationship to planet Earth. In the original series, the Doctor's ties to Earth, from the time he spent in a junkyard in 1963 to his three years working for UNIT in the early 1970s, were somewhat grudging. But from the moment the Ninth Doctor selected Rose Tyler as the first in a series of exclusively human companions,<sup>1</sup> he has returned repeatedly to Earth. And yet in both the classic and the new series, no time in Earth history fascinates the Doctor more than the long Victorian era. In the twenty-six years of the classic series, six serials took place in the nineteenth century. Only two of these were set outside either England or Queen Victoria's reign: ‘The Gunfighters’ (1966), an historical episode set in the days leading up to the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, and ‘The Mark of the Rani’ (1985), set during an unspecified point in the Luddite uprisings. The other four are all set

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squarely within Queen Victoria’s reign: the partially lost serial ‘The Evil of the Daleks’ (aired in 1967, set in 1866), ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’ (aired in 1977, set in the 1890s),<sup>2</sup> ‘Timelash’ (aired in 1985, set partly in 1885), and ‘Ghost Light’ (aired in 1989, set in 1883). In the first six years of the new series, four stories were set in the nineteenth century, of which only one – ‘Vincent and the Doctor’ (aired in 2010, set in 1890) – is set outside the United Kingdom. The others are all mid-Victorian and distinctly British in their locations: ‘The Unquiet Dead’ (aired in 2005, set in Cardiff in 1869), ‘Tooth and Claw’ (aired in 2006, set in Scotland in 1879), and ‘The Next Doctor’ (aired in 2008, set in London in 1851). To these, we can add ‘A Christmas Carol’ (aired in 2010, set on a Victorianesque alien planet). Even the two-part ‘Human Nature’/‘Family of Blood’ (aired in 2007, set in 1913) and ‘The Unicorn and the Wasp’ (aired in 2008, set in 1926) partake of something of the spirit of the Victorian era: the former’s world is less modernist than it is gently elegiac, prefiguring the final death of the long Victorian era in the aftermath of World War I, and the latter flashes back to a late nineteenth-century India that is ultimately more alien than colonial.

The 31 episodes that, together, make up the 14 stories listed above represent slightly less than 4% of *Doctor Who*’s total (as of early 2012) 784 episodes.<sup>3</sup> However, this is not as negligible an amount as it seems, considering that the 88 episodes that make up the program’s 26 Dalek stories represent only 11% of the total episodes. While not as dominant as the Dalek storylines or even the Cybermen episodes, the nineteenth-century episodes nevertheless exist as a recognisable subset of stories within the broader *Doctor Who* universe. This, in turn, raises the question of why. Why does the Doctor keep returning to the nineteenth century? And why does *Doctor Who* keep mining this era for storylines and imagery? The answer to these questions is no doubt partly logistic: the BBC, with its history of extravagant costume dramas, had a ready supply of nineteenth-century costumes and sets. But logistics is only one answer. It is no coincidence that the above questions so closely echo the core question of Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn’s *Neo-Victorianism*: “why does contemporary literature and culture repeatedly initiate returns to the nineteenth century?” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 8). In this paper, I posit that *Doctor Who* uses a self-conscious (and consciously nineteenth-century) theatricality to interrogate our nostalgia for the period, a nostalgia that shifts and sharpens as the programme moves from the 1970s to the new century.

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As David Lowenthal emphasises, nostalgia is an omnipresent concern in a modern age fascinated by heritage, history and the preservation process. Lowenthal argues that whether people adopt a stance of nostalgically looking backwards to a lost golden age or the contrary stance of dismissing the past entirely, the end result is the same: “Both nostalgics and amnesiacs smudge the line between then and now” (Lowenthal 2012: 2). Nowhere, suggests Lowenthal, is this smudged line more evident than in cinema and television: “The cinematic past is not foreign or different [...] the same motives and mentalities animate medieval [or Victorian] as modern folk, elemental passions enacted on a timeless stage” (Lowenthal 2012: 2). In terms of modern television programming, the 2005 revival of *Doctor Who* can itself be seen as a branch of what is called ‘nostalgia television’: although she focuses on nostalgia television specifically in terms of archival programming, Helen Piper locates this process as “part of the more general surge of public interest in memory and memory practices which some have seen as characteristic of late modernity” (Piper 2011: 413). The revival of *Doctor Who* sixteen years after its axing is a nostalgic act, and more analogous to Svetlana Boym’s “restorative nostalgia” than to her “reflective nostalgia” (Boym 2007: 13). But perhaps Boym’s binary cannot be applied directly to *Doctor Who*. As this essay will indicate, nostalgia is not a straightforward process of restoration in *Doctor Who*, neither in the show as a whole nor in the nineteenth-century episodes in particular. If “[r]estorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt” (Boym 2007: 13), then the programme’s playful and theatrical approach to the nineteenth century rests somewhere between these two points. Moreover, if nostalgia is, as Boym suggests, a desire to “revisit time like space” (Boym 2007: 8), the peripatetic Doctor – or at least his time-and-space-travel machine – is the ideal vehicle for his audience’s nostalgia.

The four stories examined in this paper include two from each series of the programme: ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’ and ‘Ghost Light’ from the classic series and ‘The Unquiet Dead’ and ‘Tooth and Claw’ from the new series. Treated chronologically, they show *Doctor Who*’s changing approach to the Victorian era. The humorous horror of ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’ (1977) presents the nineteenth century as an elaborate pantomime, a pastiche world whose inhabitants believe it to be real. ‘Ghost Light’ (1989) is also a mixture of horror and humour, but draws the modern

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socio-political consequences of unthinkingly idealising the nineteenth century much closer to the surface. With the new series comes a different playfulness. ‘The Unquiet Dead’ draws its viewers into the same metaphorical, theatrical space that the characters occupy, collapsing the proscenium theatre and the television into a single object. Meanwhile ‘Tooth and Claw’, while reminiscent of ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’ in its elaborate pastiche of earlier genres, ultimately dismisses the nineteenth century in favour of a much more contemporary theatricality.

### 1. *Doctor Who*, Theatricality, and the Neo-Victorian Impulse

Arguing for the theatricality of these nineteenth-century stories necessitates an outline of how ‘theatricality’ intersects with both nineteenth-century studies and television. Like the associated term ‘melodrama’, ‘theatricality’ risks being used so widely that it ceases to have any particular resonance, becoming, as Nina Auerbach says of one example, “so abstracted from actual theater that its meaning disappears” (Auerbach 1993: 513). Certainly, ‘theatricality’ has such broad definitions as “the defining trait of dramatic and performance texts” or “all the semiotic codes of theatrical representation” (Davis and Postlewait 2003: 31, 1). But theatricality is also as much about how we interact with the stage as it is about the stage itself. In specific relation to the nineteenth century, ‘theatricality’ has come to refer broadly to a complex inter-relationship between the visual arts, prose, and drama. So ‘theatricality’ refers not only to the defining traits of drama and theatre, but also to how those traits, those semiotic codes of theatrical representation, filter through other forms of expression, as theatre becomes a means of both structuring and understanding other texts. In the nineteenth century, then, fiction and art borrowed widely from the theatre, absorbing the latter’s semiotic codes into their own modes of expression.

The particular potency of theatricality in theories of the nineteenth century arises in part from the theatre’s conflicted status in Victorian England. As Katherine Newey phrases it, “despite the deep suspicion of the theatre and theatricality in Victorian culture, [...] such anxieties were mixed with delight in the power of the theatre and theatricality” (Newey 1997: 86). Nina Auerbach posits a darker emotion than delight, arguing that the Victorians “shunned theatricality as the ultimate, deceitful mobility”, with the theatre distrusted as “a visible reminder of the potential of good men and women to undergo inexplicable changes. Its menace was not its threat to the

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integrity of sincerity, but the theatricality of sincerity itself” (Auerbach 1990: 4, 114). Delightful or menacing, the vibrant and spectacular Victorian theatre was a source of overtly dramatic devices – ranging from the physical expression of emotion to elaborate lighting effects – that fed into Victorian prose and art, theatricalising the texts through which we now interpret the era.

Television, unlike prose, is already dependent on theatrical practices. But this does not prevent the former from consciously playing with theatricality, just as Victorian novelists did. Simultaneously, however, *Doctor Who* is of the generation of television programmes that sought to break away from the limitations of the proscenium arch, to be something other than filmed plays. In the era in which television was stretching its own boundaries, its relationship with theatricality was multi-faceted. In the 1960s and 1970s, television was still closely tied to the theatre in what Stephen Lacey calls “a combination of deference and debt” (Lacey 2005: 198): deference to the theatre as the older form of performance and debt to the theatrical profession for supplying television with its actors, writers, and producers. But for British television, this deferential indebtedness was not to ‘theatre’ in the abstract, but to a specific model of theatricality; as Tony Garnett, producer of such seminal social-realist television programming as Ken Loach’s *Cathy Come Home* (1966), claimed, in the 1960s, “television drama almost exclusively used a type of naturalism that emerged in the 1890s in the theatre” (Garnett qtd. in Lacey 2005: 200). Bertolt Brecht and others had helped dissipate such Victorian theatricality from theatres, but it was lingering in the new form of television drama. Ironically, the man who helped push television past its adherence to late Victorian theatrical conventions by overseeing the production of *Armchair Theatre* and *The Wednesday Play*, the anthology television series that specialised in social realism, was the same man who created *Doctor Who*: Canadian-born television producer Sydney Newman.<sup>4</sup>

Fifty years later, the relationship between television (and cinema) and theatricality continues to be a complex one. In 2005 Lacey wrote:

It is now so long since television drama ceased to be the small-screen version of a stage play that the time when television drama of all kinds defined itself in relation to the theatre seems almost beyond memory. (Lacey 2005: 198)

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While this might be the case for television production, it is not always so for television (and cinema) criticism. As television moves further away from the late Victorian proscenium-theatre-on-videotape model against which Garnett, Loach, and the like railed, critics continue to explore what, in their 2012 collection *Shades of Reality: Theatricality in Cinema*, André Loiselle and Jeremy Maron call “the various strands of this ongoing discussion on the problematic of the ‘theatrical’ in film” (Loiselle and Maron 2012b: 3). The four *Doctor Who* stories examined in this essay partake of this ongoing discussion: as a programme born in the push against late Victorian naturalism in the studio but one that, simultaneously, continues to revisit the nineteenth century, *Doctor Who* offers a rich intersection of theatricality and the neo-Victorian impulse.

Each of these Victorian stories belongs to a nebulous category of *Doctor Who* episodes called the ‘pseudo-historicals’: episodes in which, to quote Daniel O’Mahony, “the historical era has either been invaded by a science-fictional presence before the Doctor shows up [...] or turns out to be a fabrication mocked up by the villains for their own dubious purposes” (O’Mahony 2007: 57). In addition, they are what O’Mahony categorises as genre-as-history: that is, what is presented (to the viewer) and received (by the characters) as ‘real history’ is actually a pastiche of elements from genre fiction, particularly seminal works of fantasy, science-fiction, horror, and mystery. Each of the Doctor’s visits, the programme would have us believe, is to the ‘real’ nineteenth century, despite the presence of murderous homunculi, spaceships, gaseous ghosts, and werewolves. Viewed retrospectively, the episodes also show an engagement with concepts such as hidden traumas, spectrality and haunting, memory, and nostalgia, which are explored through specific tropes such as spiritualism (‘The Unquiet Dead’), stage magic (‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’), and mansions that are either haunted (‘Ghost Light’) or home to terrible secrets (‘Tooth and Claw’). These concepts and tropes are the same as those through which those modern writers whose work has come to be called ‘neo-Victorian’ seek to interrogate the nineteenth century. This engagement may not have been conscious when the episodes were originally scripted; that is to say, the episodes were likely not deliberately conceived as ‘neo-Victorian’. Nonetheless they share the concerns that underlie and shape modern neo-Victorian texts. What, however, makes these episodes neo-Victorian, rather than pastiches of the nineteenth century? Working from Heilmann and

Llewellyn's definition of neo-Victorian texts,<sup>5</sup> it is not enough that the episodes are set in the nineteenth century: they must also "present a critique of our own enduring attraction to the materialist and expansionist cultural hegemony of nineteenth-century Britain" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 8). This critique takes the form of what Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben call the "double temporal consciousness typical of [...] the neo-Victorian novel" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 2): the simultaneous and critical occupation of both the nineteenth century and that period's twentieth/twenty-first future. The time-travelling Doctor literalises this double temporality, drawing his human companions back to walk Victorian streets and, by doing so, questioning our desire to do the same.

To draw the two strands of this argument together, *Doctor Who's* neo-Victorian impulses are most apparent when the text is overtly, playfully theatrical. *Doctor Who* is the ideal text for such playfulness. For example, the programme is groundbreaking in its use of multiple actors to play the same character, or at least in keeping the character's persona intact and offering a narrative explanation for the change. A willingness to identify multiple actors as the same character is more characteristic of theatre audiences than of television viewers. If, as Auerbach argues, Victorians interpreted theatricality as connoting a dangerous "fluidity of character that decomposes the uniform integrity of the self" (Auerbach 1990: 4), modern television has no stronger emblem of this than the constantly regenerating/resurrected Doctor. *Doctor Who*, then, uses moments of conscious theatricality to hearken back playfully to the era when such theatrical playfulness was the dominant form of public entertainment. Such moments also critique the consequences of unthinking nostalgia, explore the relationship between Victorian spectacular theatre and twenty-first-century television, and, ultimately, question the extent to which we find ourselves confined by Victorian sensibilities.

## 2. 'The Talons of Weng-Chiang'

In 'The Talons of Weng-Chiang', the Doctor takes his companion Leela – a future human from a savage planet – to London in the 1890s, to teach her about her ancestors. Here, they cross paths with Magnus Greel, a 51st-century despot who fled his enemies in a time cabinet. Having convinced stage magician Li H'sen Chang that he is the god Weng-Chiang, Greel exploits Chang's stage act as a means of supplying himself with the

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life essences of young women to counteract the corrupting effects of time travel, while searching desperately for his missing cabinet.

The story echoes the educational purpose of the programme’s early non-science fiction ‘pure historicals’, such as ‘The Aztecs’ or ‘Marco Polo’; in such stories, the purpose of travelling back into history was to educate (albeit the viewers, not the characters), just as it is here. Similarly, the production team’s original conception of Leela as “a kind of futuristic Eliza Doolittle” (Howe, Stammers and Walker 1994: 104) is a specifically nineteenth-century link to the programme’s early educational brief. This echo of the series’ long-defunct historical episodes emphasises the pseudo-historical nature of this story, as the Doctor and Leela find themselves in a Victorian London that is a pastiche of the more florid elements of nineteenth-century genre fiction. But nobody within this environment – not the Doctor, not Leela, not the Londoners they meet – ever acknowledges that their world is more literary by-product than history, a pantomimic space that parades its theatricality in front of the viewer.

The pseudo-ness of the history in ‘Talons of Weng-Chiang’ was an organic element of the script from its conception. Robert Holmes, the story’s script-writer, reflects that

I am not a fan of Sherlock Holmes [...] but I am a fan of that fictitious Victorian period, with fog, gas lamps, hansom cabs and music halls. We look back on it and say that’s what it was like, although of course it wasn’t – people were slaving in dark, satanic mills and starving in London gutters. But the popular concept of Victoriana is this, with colourful language. (Howe, Stammers and Walker 1994 106)

The nineteenth-century influences permeate every level of this story, in which London is built up on paving stones of Sherlock Holmes and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1909-1910), Gilbert and Sullivan and *The Mystery of Dr Fu Manchu* (1913), *Dracula* (1897) and Jack the Ripper. The Doctor’s defeat of Magnus Greel is underlaid with quotations, visual jokes, and oblique references to these earlier texts, out of which the ‘Victorian-ness’ of this version of Victorian London is constructed. As Heilmann and Llewellyn argue, neo-Victorianism partakes of “the palimpsestuous nature of adaptation, the interlocking and interpenetrating engagements between



adaptations not only of the same text but also texts of the same period that invoke a sense of heritage Victoriana or televisual nostalgia” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 32). So ‘Talons of Weng-Chiang’ looks back eighty years to *Dracula*, but it also looks back four years to the BBC’s 1973 series *Jack the Ripper* and even, for the modern viewer, forward eight months to the December 1977 airing of the BBC’s *Count Dracula*.<sup>6</sup>

Though the story is strongly theatrical in numerous ways, its most problematic aspect is the troubled issue of racial representation, which hindered the broadcast of the story in the United States: particularly, the casting of English-born Caucasian actor John Bennett as Chinese conjurer Li H’sen Chang. As Lawrence Miles and Tat Wood argue in *About Time: 1975-1979*, the story

is a parody of British imperialist fiction rather than an example of it, and *everybody* is stereotyped here, with the British exclusively shown as pompous, incompetent and self-deluded. It’s telling that the script replaces all Li H’sen Chang’s “r”s with “l”s *only when he’s on the stage*, suggesting that it’s just part of the act that he puts on for the sake of the ignorant British. (Miles and Wood 2004: 146)<sup>7</sup>

Bennett’s role as Chang reinforces the pseudo-ness of this story: the characters accept a pastiche of a Chinese conjurer in the same way as they accept the pastiche of Victorian London, accepting both as real when both are, to the viewer, clearly artificial. Underlying this (as the viewer’s scepticism indicates), however, is also a specifically Victorian theatricality, evident in the way in which Li H’sen Chang invokes Chung Ling Soo (1861-1918), another ‘Chinese’ stage magician who was not Chinese.

Born on 2 April 1861 in Westchester County, New York, William Ellsworth Robinson sought to differentiate himself from the late nineteenth-century glut of stage magicians. Inspired by (actual) Chinese magician Ching Ling Foo, he reinvented himself on the British stage as Chung Ling Soo, an artificial stage persona to which he was devoted:

He never spoke during his performance. At several points, one of his main assistants, Kametaro, offered the few necessary words of explanation, apologizing that Chung Ling

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Soo could not speak English. Soo listened intently to Kametaro’s words, eyes half closed, smiling and nodding in casual agreement. (Steinmeyer 2006: 5)

In an era when the magician was, as Sarah Dadswell points out, “ever the master of patter” (Dadswell 2007: 14), Robinson relied on the attraction of the exotic on the Victorian stage. For audiences, Robinson’s illusion of Chinese ethnicity lasted until 1918, when his trick of catching a bullet failed onstage: fatally shot, he cried out in English, clearly audible to parts of the audience (Steinmeyer 2006: 16). Yet his origins were an open secret within the theatrical community itself. Henry Ridgely Evans, writing in a magicians’ trade journal while Chung was still performing, notes that “[s]o well was the secret kept that for months no one, except the attachés of the theatre, knew that Chung Ling Soo was a Yankee and not a genuine Chinaman” (Evans 1905: 462). However, though Robinson’s nationality became generally known backstage, “this information never came to the public ear generally” (Evans 1905: 463). Robinson’s career is metonymic of Victorian stagecraft (and theatre) generally: ‘real’ to the audience, illusory to those backstage, and both real and illusory on the stage itself, where one person, the performer, occupies both states.

John Bennett/Li H’sen Chang, however, occupies a space in the viewer’s mind that is not precisely analogous to that occupied by William Robinson/Chung Ling Soo. Anecdotal evidence from the period suggests that Chung Ling Soo’s audiences were unaware that Robinson was Robinson: the simultaneous intimacy and distance of the stage allows him to keep these two roles in play. But television demands a different audience position. The viewer of ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’ is well aware that John Bennett is John Bennett: his name appears in the credits, and they have doubtless seen him in other programmes, including his appearance three years earlier in *Doctor Who* as General Finch in ‘Invasion of the Dinosaurs’ (1974). Indeed, the story consciously plays with this aspect of its theatricality via intertextual recognition:

DOCTOR: Don’t I know you?  
 LI H’SEN CHANG: I think not.  
 DOCTOR: Yes. I’ve seen you somewhere before.  
 LI H’SEN CHANG: I understand we all look alike.

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DOCTOR: Are you Chinese? (Maloney and Holmes 1977:  
Episode 1, 13:55-14:05)

The fact that the Doctor has actually recognised Li H'sen Chang from the advertising posters outside the theatre reinforces the playfulness of this scene's theatricality. Robinson can keep his two personas in play simultaneously, because the stage acts as both a physical and a metaphorical barrier between those who pierce the illusion and those who do not. The television screen, however, collapses Bennett's two personas into one, so that the audience simultaneously experiences him as real and fake. That which the nineteenth-century stage relied upon is denied by twentieth-century television. In this sense, the racially problematic figure of Li H'sen Chang becomes a complex engagement with not only the Victoriana from which Robert Holmes borrowed, but also with the very process of borrowing from the past itself, ergo with the neo-Victorian impulse.

Ann Heilmann argues that this delicate balancing act between illusion and reality, which she calls "artefactuality", is central to the functioning of neo-Victorianism as a genre (Heilmann 2009/2010: 39). Examining the concept through texts that explore Victorian stage magic and mediums, she argues that

[t]he position of the neo-Victorian author and film director can then be compared to that of a conjurer: like the audience of a stage magician, we know from the start that it's all an act, but judge the quality of the performance by its ability to deceive and mystify us. (Heilmann 2009/2010: 18-19)

The textual emphasis on illusion and magic mirrors the neo-Victorian impulse itself, which, as Heilmann notes, "is sustained by illusion" (Heilmann 2009/2010: 18). The fabrication of the Victorian past is a sleight of hand that the neo-Victorian author seeks to make as plausible and credible as possible. 'Talons of Weng Chiang', however, seeks to convince the audience of the credibility of a consistently *implausible* nineteenth century. Exploiting the recognisability of certain nineteenth-century devices, Holmes presents us with a pastiche world, a pantomimic Victorian era balanced on one thing that television shares with the Victorian stage: a

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knife’s edge between illusion and reality. For 1989’s ‘Ghost Light’, this edge becomes sharper still.

### 3. ‘Ghost Light’

In ‘Ghost Light’, the Doctor takes his companion Ace – a twentieth-century London teenager – back to her own suburb in 1883 to confront the ghosts of her past in the form of Gabriel Chase, a Victorian house that terrified her when she was a child. Fleeing to Gabriel Chase after her friend Manisha is killed in a racially motivated fire-bombing, the young Ace set fire to the house as a reaction to its malignant aura. The Doctor demonstrates that the house’s sinister aura comes from its concealment of an alien spacecraft that, thousands of years earlier, had arrived to catalogue all life on Earth. After its leader, Light, entered an extended sleep, the ship’s survey agent rebelled and took control of the house, murdering its owner Sir George Pritchard and incorporating his widow Lady Pritchard and their daughter Gwendoline into his process of evolution into what he determines to be the planet’s dominant life form: “Ah, Josiah,” the Doctor says when the process is complete, “so you’ve finally evolved into a Victorian” (Wareing and Platt 1989: Episode 2, 22:09-22:13). Assuming the role of Josiah Samuel Smith, “a man of property” (Wareing and Platt 1989: Episode 3, 16:39-16:40), he plans to assassinate Queen Victoria and take control of the British Empire. Of all the stories covered in this paper, this is the most overtly theatrical: even the title, ‘Ghost Light’, is taken from the name for the lamp left burning on stage when the rest of a theatre’s lights are dark. The ghost light is associated with contradictory theatre superstitions, said to either keep ghosts away from the theatre or to appease resident ghosts by allowing them the chance to perform when the theatre is empty. Contradictory though these superstitions are, ‘Ghost Light’ actualises both: the house’s ghosts are both banished and given a chance to perform.

The mysterious mansion Gabriel Chase functions as a locus of trauma in ‘Ghost Light’. Because *Doctor Who* is a time-travel narrative, however, Gabriel Chase is not merely haunted by *past* trauma. For the viewers, whose experiences are focalised through the Doctor and Ace, the house is also haunted by *future* trauma: Ace’s destruction of the building in a century’s time and before that – in Ace’s past but the house’s future – the fire-bombing of Manisha’s flat. Kohlke and Gutleben argue that because

neo-Victorian literature involves a “superimposition of conflicting temporalities”, the now and the then, it may “function as a belated abreaction or ‘working through’ of nineteenth-century traumas, as well as those of our own times, albeit more obliquely” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 3). The time travel central to *Doctor Who* allows a literalisation of this process. The Doctor takes Ace to the nineteenth century to face a trauma that began then, but the central narrative of Josiah Samuel Smith’s pursuit of leadership of the British Empire – with all its connotations of racial superiority and domination – is surrounded by and grounded by much more contemporary notions of the same.

Unlike ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’, whose Victorian setting was in place from the moment of conception, script-writer Marc Platt originally conceived ‘Ghost Light’ as a science-fiction narrative called ‘Lungbarrow’, set on the Doctor’s home planet of Gallifrey. As then script editor Andrew Cartmel recalls,

Coming on like an unholy hybrid of Mervyn Peake and Agatha Christie, it featured the Doctor’s return to his ancestral home on Gallifrey, which was no ordinary house. One of Marc’s notes accompanying a revised draft of the story read, “The furniture is getting more aggressive.” (Cartmel 2005: 171)

So the constant throughout the variants of this narrative is not the nineteenth century, but the ancestral home. When ‘Lungbarrow’ was vetoed, Cartmel decided to shift the script’s core elements into a nineteenth-century setting, and his description of the result epitomises the functioning of the pseudo-historical *Doctor Who* narrative: “it was an inspired notion because, when given the familiar reference points of an historical Earth setting, all the weirdness of ‘Lungbarrow’ suddenly became focused and gained power” (Cartmel 2005: 172). The haunted mansion – so central, as Heilmann and Llewellyn argue, to the “re(dis)covery of a personal and/or collective history” in neo-Victorian fiction (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 34) – grounds the wilder science-fictional impulses of the story’s origins.

Like ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’, ‘Ghost Light’ takes place in a Victorian era that is constructed, at least partially, from elements of genre fiction. Furthermore, ‘Ghost Light’ emphasises its debt to the earlier *Doctor*

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*Who* story: from Redvers Fenn-Cooper’s “Chinese fowling piece” to the Doctor calling Ace “Eliza” (Wareing and Platt 1989: Episode 1, 8:54-8:56, 11:30), ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’ trickles through this later story, mingling with such other fictional elements as an H. Rider Haggard-style explorer and a missing-mother-as-domestic-servant subplot lifted directly from Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861). However, one significant aspect of ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’ that is treated entirely differently in this text is theatricality. The earlier episode made its theatricality explicit by setting the story, at least partly, in the theatre (as too does ‘The Unquiet Dead’, twenty-eight years later). ‘Ghost Light’, on the other hand, has no explicit connection to the theatre: the action takes place entirely within a gloomy Victorian mansion – which may be the most theatrical setting of all.

In the history of Victorian stage magic, one text has particular significance: *Modern Magic*, published in London in 1876, by ‘Professor Hoffmann’ (Angelo Lewis). The first book to comprehensively describe the functioning of many illusions and tricks, *Modern Magic* was enormously influential on the burgeoning illusionists who would become the stage magicians of the late nineteenth century. Steinmeyer notes that “[e]ven today, bibliographies of magic use the year 1876 as a dividing mark: books before and after *Modern Magic*” (Steinmeyer 2006: 33). However, Steinmeyer also points out that the book is distinctly of its time,

filled with the silly accoutrements of Victorian culture, which had been subverted to magicians’ goals: small metal tables with velvet-draped tops, fussy little trays, containers, decorative metal covers, cones, ‘reticules,’ and boxes. Any of these would have looked perfectly ordinary in a cluttered Victorian parlour. (Steinmeyer 2006: 36)

Like *Modern Magic*, ‘Ghost Light’ draws its magic from Victorian accoutrements, imbuing everyday objects with an uncanny and ultimately theatrical aura. From the Doctor and Ace first stepping out of the TARDIS into an ambiguous attic room – “It’s a laboratory!” says Ace. “Or no: could be a nursery. But the kids’d have to be pretty advanced. And creepy.” (Wareing and Platt 1989: Episode 1, 2:25-2:33) – to a radioactive snuffbox to the taxidermied animals and preserved insects with which Ace and the Doctor hold cheerful conversations, ‘Ghost Light’ is as cluttered as any

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nineteenth-century parlour. But this is sinister clutter. The taxidermied specimens, for example, include Inspector Mackenzie of Scotland Yard, hypnotised and kept in a display cabinet for two years as a “bluebottle” (Wareing and Platt 1989: Episode 1, 1:48-1:49). Similarly, during the course of the story, Reverend Ernest Matthews, an opponent of theories of evolution, finds himself ‘devolved’ (artificially regressed to an apelike state), killed, and displayed in a glass case as a specimen of “*Homo Victorianus ineptus*” (Wareing and Platt, 1989: Episode 2, 19:58-19:59). Moreover, the clutter is consciously and performatively theatrical.

Ace calls the inhabitants of Gabriel Chase “toys” (Wareing and Platt 1989: Episode 2, 19:49-19:53), but we might as readily call them ‘props’. The story moves through a series of distinctly nineteenth-century stage effects. Though the day-time servants appear to be real people with lives outside the house (none of them will stay in the house once darkness starts falling), the night-time inhabitants are not. Stored away in cabinets, cupboards, and under dust sheets, they remain mute until prompted by nightfall to come to a semblance of life. Indeed, the gun-toting night-time maids glide from their cupboards on skateboards (invisible to the viewing audience), increasing their resemblance to stage properties rather than characters. When the stone spaceship in the basement is revealed, the curtain quite literally rises on it. The insane explorer Redvers Fenn-Cooper, who believes he is searching for himself, recognises his reflection in a windowpane and says, “What have they done to you? You look like a ghost” (Wareing and Platt 1989: Episode 1, 9:34-9:41), evoking the illusion of Pepper’s Ghost. Likewise, the story’s key artefacts are unmistakably nineteenth-century: a locket and a snuffbox. The eventual fate of the reconciled mother-and-daughter pairing of Gwendoline and Lady Pritchard is a morbid *tableau vivant*, as Light turns them into stone statues as they clasp hands. Everybody and everything in the mansion – despite existing in 1883 – is consciously *performing* the nineteenth century.

This performativity centres on the house’s chief inhabitant: Josiah Samuel Smith. Desperate though he is to become a nineteenth-century gentleman, Smith is ultimately nothing but a functional component of an alien spacecraft. In ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’, consciousness of the theatricality was reserved for author and viewers: all the characters moved through a pastiche nineteenth century as though it were the real thing. In ‘Ghost Light’, the characters’ theatricality is conscious and deliberate, at

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least on the part of the man who controls the household: Smith is playing the role of a nineteenth-century gentleman, both within the house (as he assumes the role of *pater familias* with his ‘niece’ Gwendoline) and without (as he undertakes debates, via correspondence, on evolution with leading churchmen). And like the prototypical nineteenth-century gentleman, his behaviour forms the model for the behaviour of all his household’s inhabitants, even those who, like Gwendoline and Lady Pritchard, are genuine nineteenth-century women. The result is a pocket of theatricality in a world in which theatricality is deceptive and slippery. Auerbach argues in *Private Theatricals* that “the source of Victorian fears of performance lay not on the stage, but in the histrionic artifice of ordinary life” (Auerbach 1990: 114). This is the nineteenth-century anxiety that the episode’s pseudo-historical story brings to the surface: the fear that even the intimate domestic relationships that shaped the long Victorian era were a series of stage pieces.

The sharpness in this vision of Victorian theatricality comes from the fact that this story aired scant years after British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher began calling for a return to “Victorian values”.<sup>8</sup> This correlation between modern politics and modern television is no coincidence: the Seventh Doctor era of *Doctor Who* focused on strongly politicised science fiction (keenest, perhaps, in 1988’s ‘The Happiness Patrol’). Neo-Victorianism in this story, then, exists in a state of tension between two competing definitions of the prefix ‘neo’: the adaptive, progressive desire that ‘neo’ implies when used to describe a literary movement (as in neo-Gothic) and the conservative yearning backwards that it evokes when combined with a political movement (as in neo-Fascism) (see Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 5). In ‘Ghost Light’, Josiah Samuel Smith longs for Victorian values, and this longing corrupts and ultimately destroys those around him, even those who were born into and raised with those very values. ‘Ghost Light’ forces the audience to rethink how an unthinking nostalgia for the Victorian past limits and manipulates our understanding of the present.

When, in 2007, Svetlana Boym revisited her 2001 monograph on nostalgia, she emphasised that nostalgia can be prospective as well as retrospective: “The fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the future, have a direct impact on the realities of the future” (Boym 2007: 8). As a time-travel narrative, *Doctor Who* literalises this movement between the fantasies of the past and the realities of the future. In taking Ace back to



the moment before her fear of Gabriel Chase began, he hopes to explicate her future violent act. The Doctor believes that her ghosts, like Gabriel Chase's, can be exorcised returning to and unravelling the fantasies of the past (a process continued in the following two stories). However, the secret history of Gabriel Chase in the 1880s was only one trigger for Ace's arson, and all the Doctor's time travel does not erase the other: Manisha's death in a racially motivated attack in the 1980s. Beware of nostalgia, says this story: it is theatrical and artificial, and addressing past sins risks ignoring present problems. 'Ghost Light' was the last story ever produced for the classic series of *Doctor Who*.<sup>9</sup> How, then, does the programme's neo-Victorian theatricality shift after a sixteen-year production hiatus?

#### 4. 'The Unquiet Dead'

The first pseudo-historical story of the new series drops the Doctor and his companion into the heart of the mid-Victorian period. Having already shown her the future, the Doctor aims to show his companion Rose – like Ace, a London teenager – the past by taking her to Naples in 1860, but lands instead in Cardiff in 1869. They find that the Rift (essentially a wormhole) that centres on Cardiff has attracted a species called the Gelth, badly affected by the Time War that devastated the *Doctor Who* universe between the original and new series of the programme. Gaseous creatures, they wish to occupy human corpses. Driven by guilt over his own complicity in the war, the Doctor agrees to their request, only to find the Gelth less benign than they implied. The Doctor's encounter with the Gelth is filtered not only through the actual theatre but also Charles Dickens, one of the nineteenth century's most theatrical novelists. Of these four stories, 'The Unquiet Dead' is the one that most explicitly positions the television screen as a variant on the proscenium arch. In this story, the proscenium arch operates as a quasi *mise-en-abyme* for the overall fascination with liminality within the story: both the liminality of the Gelth (in stasis between two worlds) and that of the neo-Victorian viewer (in stasis between two times).<sup>10</sup>

Two significant scenes in this story centre on an arch: when Dickens recites *A Christmas Carol* in the Taliesin Theatre, Cardiff, and when the mortician's servant girl, Gwyneth, bridges the Rift to allow the Gelth to enter our world. Of these, only the first is an actual proscenium arch. The scenes in the fictional Taliesin Theatre were filmed in Cardiff's New

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Theatre; though not a Victorian building (it opened in 1906), it is a proscenium theatre, with a narrow apron extending out from the main stage. Yet the story both negates and foregrounds the proscenium arch in this overtly theatrical scene. When Dickens steps out onto the apron, the red curtains are a prominent part of the *mise-en-scène*. They are never fully opened – Dickens pushes one partly to the side and steps through – and the back stage is never revealed to the audiences either in the theatre or at home. One effect of this is to negate the proscenium arch, which the at-home audience cannot see: the camera remains closely focused on Dickens and his red-velvet background. Paradoxically, however, this negation foregrounds the proscenium arch: by framing the action as it does, this scene reminds us that nineteenth-century proscenium drama took place, like modern television, behind an invisible screen, the fourth wall. In essence, the at-home audience’s television sets become individual proscenium arches. Though two audiences are watching Dickens’s performance – the 1869 Cardiff audience and the 2005 worldwide audience – both occupy precisely the same metaphorical space, layered over one another in front of the stage.

Because television is not, after all, theatre, this scene also demonstrates a series of theatrical slippages (between illusion/reality and between actor/audience) that are only possible on a stage. Dickens is positioned in a liminal performance space. He is on stage, but not the main stage: performing from the apron, with the red-velvet curtains prominently shutting off the main stage behind him, he occupies a narrow strip between the main stage and the stalls, directly under the proscenium arch. His liminal position prefigures his sequential performances of the roles of actor and audience. These shifts are triggered by the presence of the Gelth, who have been inhabiting bodies in the local morgue. In this instance, one has occupied the late Mrs Pearce. Since her last conscious desire was to see Dickens perform, the Gelth and its dead host make their way to the Taliesin Theatre, where Dickens moves smoothly through the appearance of Marley’s ghost. As the Gelth exits Mrs Pearce’s body, what was fiction becomes reality, as Dickens points out the phenomenon to the unwitting audience: “It looked like ... oh my lord. It looked ... like *that*” (Lyn and Gatiss 2005: 10:42-10:53, original pauses). As the audience turns to see what he is pointing out, the roles shift: Dickens is now the audience and the audience are now the performers. Their performance – unrehearsed and terrified – sharply contrasts to Dickens’s assured, polished, but overtly

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weary reiteration of a performance he has given many times before. Dickens attempts to regain control of the performance, exhorting the audience neither to flee nor to trust their own senses: “I beg you. It is a lantern trick. It’s trickery” (Lyn and Gatiss 2005: 11:15-11:19). The audience’s performance outweighs his own polished and assured stagecraft.

Until the closing scenes of this story, Dickens insists on the illusory nature of the Gelth. For example, when the Doctor pushes him to trust his own observations, Dickens responds, “I saw nothing but an illusion” (Lyn and Gatiss 2005: 18:46-18:50). For Dickens, this is not only a question of empirical observation, but also an ideological stance. As he tells the Doctor,

I’ve always railed against the fantasists. Oh, I loved an illusion as much as the next man, but that’s exactly what they were: illusions. The real world is something else. I dedicated myself to that, injustices, the great social causes. I hoped that I was a force for good. Now you tell me that the real world is a realm of spectres and jack-o-lanterns (Lyn and Gatiss 2005: 20:38-21:07).

Superficially, Dickens’s stance seems to be broadly anti-theatrical: illusions (and the theatrical space in which they occur) are separate from and less than a frequently brutal reality. In fact, however, Dickens’s statement does not separate him from the illusionists, but rather aligns him with them. As Sarah Dadswell points out:

many leading magicians were at pains to debunk fashionable trends in the occult, necromancy, and the recent fad for Theosophy. Their efforts to expose and distance themselves from ‘fraudsters’ who advertised the power of the supernatural were designed to enhance their own status as professionals. (Dadswell 2007: 3)

So even before Dickens is forced to admit the reality of what he wants to believe are illusions, his stance on illusion is more complicated than it appears. As such, it forces the audience into a similarly complicated position. As television viewers, we *know* that the Gelth are illusions. They may not be projections on glass, as Dickens believes, but we know them to

be digital images that never actually interact with the actors. Dickens’s repeated insistence that the Gelth are illusions, however, pushes the viewer into arguing for their reality: his scepticism reinforces the fact that they are actually real, at least within the world of the programme. Rosario Arias, in her analysis of spirit photography, notes that “our current fascination with virtual images mirrors the Victorian interest in ghosts, spectres and shadows” (Arias 2009: 94). Just as the television audience and Dickens’s Cardiff audience overlapped in his earlier reading, so do Dickens and the audience overlap here: Dickens sees Pepper’s Ghost and the at-home audience sees digital trickery, but both see “ghostly machines which serve to create spectres and spirits” (Arias 2009: 102). Only when Dickens accepts the reality of the Gelth at the story’s end can the viewers slip back into their accustomed, sceptical position: once all the characters accept the reality of the illusions, the viewers can return to thinking of them as mere illusions.<sup>11</sup>

Dickens’s acceptance of the Gelth’s reality is the second scene in which the arch makes a prominent appearance. This is not the proscenium arch, but a load-bearing arch in the undertaker’s morgue, the section of the building in which the most ‘ghosts’ have appeared. This room is the “weak spot” in the Rift (Lyn and Gatiss 2005: 31:28-31:29), allowing the Gelth to cross from their world to ours, with Gwyneth acting as a bridge. If the Taliesin Theatre’s proscenium arch was obscured during Dickens’s performance, the arch here is strongly emphasised:

DOCTOR: Where’s the weak point?

GELTH: Here, beneath the arch.

GWYNETH: Beneath the arch

(Lyn and Gatiss 2005: 32:43-32:48).

The reiteration of the word “arch” reinforces the theatricality of this scene. The proscenium arch is also “the weak point”: the point at which reality (the observant audience) and illusion (the performance) collide. Reality and illusion also collide under the arch in the morgue: as the Gelth stream across the ‘bridge’, they abandon their blue angelic guise (and their claim to be few in number) in favour of a red demonic appearance and a genocidal agenda. Like the backstage crew of a theatrical production, the Gelth use the arch as a tool for controlling what the audience (in this case, the Doctor and his companions) see and do not see. As in Dickens’s earlier performance, the

roles of actor and audience shift rapidly in this scene: the Doctor believes he is acting, but he is really an audience for the Gelth's performance of vulnerability and harmlessness. Similarly, Gwyneth believes that she is acting to assist the 'angels' who have been singing in her head since childhood, but she is merely the Gelth's prop: she is, in fact, already dead, and has been, in the Doctor's words, "dead from the minute she stood in that arch" (Lyn and Gatiss 2005: 39:30-39:32). The Gelth control the performance in this story. Like Dickens faced with a stampeding crowd, the Doctor never manages to reclaim the performer's role.

Like 'The Talons of Weng-Chiang', 'The Unquiet Dead' makes its fascination with theatricality overt, by setting the programme partly in the theatre itself. However, theatricality in 'The Unquiet Dead' is an unstable force: illusion and reality, actors and audience, shift roles throughout the performance. Even the at-home audience, watching from outside the modern-day proscenium arch that is the television, cannot occupy a stable viewing position, constantly challenged as they are by the programme's refusal to settle on a firm concept of illusion or reality. This playful instability separates the new series' approach to Victorian theatricality from the approach of the classic series, and carries over into the former's second Victorian story.

##### 5. 'Tooth and Claw'

In Nancy Mitford's 1931 novel *Highland Fling*, her protagonist, Alfred 'Memorial' Gates, declaims:

Scotland, as you will no doubt have noticed, was invented by the Almighty for the delectation of Victoria and Albert. Forseeing their existence, He arranged really suitable surroundings for them, and these purple mountains and mauve streams will stand as a reminder of the Victorian age long after the Albert Memorial has turned to dust. (Mitford 1986: 60)

Fifty years later, Hugh Trevor-Roper, arguing for the comparative modernity of the Highland 'tradition', emphasised that "Queen Victoria's cult of the Highlands gave a new impulse to clan tartans, as to Highland scenery, Highland cattle, Sir Edwin Landseer and the ghillie John Brown"

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(Trevor-Roper 2000: 39). In ‘Tooth and Claw’, the Doctor again misses his destination, landing Rose in Scotland in 1879 instead of Sheffield in 1979. Here, they intersect with Queen Victoria who, diverted from Balmoral by a series of suspicious accidents, takes refuge at the nearby Torchwood estate. Once there, she realises that her actions have been directed by a lupine alien that, with the aid of the local monks who are in its thrall, hopes to infect her and thereby control the British Empire. While reminiscent of ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’ in its enthusiastic co-opting of genre fiction, ‘Tooth and Claw’ shows one significant difference: ‘Talons of Weng-Chiang’ built on specifically nineteenth-century genres, but ‘Tooth and Claw’ borrows widely from tropes that are largely unfamiliar to both *Doctor Who* and English fiction more generally, such as werewolves and warrior monks.<sup>12</sup>

The function of the werewolf in English mythology and literature is a somewhat disputed point, but Sabine Baring-Gould, writing in 1865, presents the traditional interpretation: “English folk-lore is singularly barren of were-wolf stories, the reason being that wolves had been extirpated from England under the Anglo-Saxon kings, and therefore ceased to be objects of dread to people” (Baring-Gould 1995: 100). His argument is of interest here less because of *what* he argues as of *when* he argued it. The nineteenth century is bracketed by periods of interest in creatures both supernatural (from Polidori’s *The Vampyre* in 1819 to Stoker’s *Dracula* in 1897) and science fictional (from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in 1818 to Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in 1886 and Wells’s *The Invisible Man* in 1897). Even the Egyptian mummy – more often associated with the twentieth century and early film-making – makes an appearance in nineteenth-century literature, in Jane C. Loudon’s *The Mummy! Or a Tale of the Twenty-Second Century* (1827). But the werewolf is curiously absent. Even those nineteenth-century texts that do touch on the werewolf tend to position it as a cross-Channel threat, for example, in G. W. M. Reynolds’s *Wagner the Wehr-wolf* (1847), set in Germany, and Clemence Houseman’s *The Were-wolf* (1896), set in Scandinavia. Unlike vampires, ghosts, or even mysterious ‘Oriental’ gentlemen, the werewolf was not a particular threat to an orderly British life in the nineteenth century, either in folklore or fiction. The *Doctor Who* episode ‘Tooth and Claw’ juxtaposes the supernatural creature perhaps least representative of nineteenth-century anxieties with the woman whose longevity, fertility, and domesticity helped to shape those anxieties.

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Just as the nineteenth century is bracketed by supernatural and science-fictional texts, ‘Tooth and Claw’ is bracketed by seemingly contradictory stances on science and ethics. In the early section of the story, while the visitors admire the telescope built by the father of Sir Robert MacLeish, current owner of Torchwood House – a telescope that the Doctor describes as “a bit rubbish” but “very pretty” (Lyn and Davies 2006: 10:31-10:43) – the dialogue suggests a flexibility in the Victorian intellect:

VICTORIA: Sir Robert’s father was an example to us all. A polymath. Steeped in astronomy and sciences, yet equally well versed in folklore and fairytales.

DOCTOR: Stars *and* magic. I like him more and more. (Lyn and Davies 2006: 11:03-11:16)

Yet by the end of the episode, Queen Victoria employs the same terminology to foreground her inherent *inflexibility*:

I don’t know what you are, the two of you, or where you’re from. But I know that you consort with stars and magic, and think it fun. But your world is steeped in terror and blasphemy and death, and I will not allow it. You will leave these shores, and you will reflect, I hope, on how you came to stray so far from all that is good. (Lyn and Davies 2006: 40:15-40:40)

In a sense, these contradictory stances embody how ‘Tooth and Claw’ approaches the Victorian era: as something capable of both great flexibility and great conservatism.

Part of this arises from the fact that this episode, of all the *Doctor Who* stories to have nineteenth-century settings, is the first to flirt with steampunk aesthetics.<sup>13</sup> In the first shot of Torchwood House, in which the story’s action takes place, the most dominant item is the brass and wood telescope protruding from the rooftop conservatory. Though the central premise of this story is identical to that of ‘Ghost Light’ (in that an alien entity wishes to destroy Queen Victoria and take control of the British Empire), the werewolf’s planned ‘Empire of the Wolf’ will unfold in a distinctly different pattern from Josiah Samuel Smith’s plans. Considering

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the Victorian gentleman to be the planet’s dominant life-form, Smith had no plans to alter the Victorian era, but simply to position himself as its leader. Of the putative Empire of the Wolf, the Doctor muses, “Imagine it. Victorian Age accelerated. Starships and missiles fuelled by coal and driven by steam. Leaving history devastated in its wake” (Lyn and Davies 2006: 32:14-32:26). This difference between the two assassination plots (airing seventeen years apart) indicates this story’s different approach to the Victorian era. Its predecessors all recreated the nineteenth century as a combination of what it was and what we retrospectively imagine it to be: take, for example, ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’ and its blending of Jack the Ripper with a fifty-first-century despot. ‘Tooth and Claw’, however, is much less interested in actual history than it is in modern revisionings of the nineteenth century.

Even more than the steampunk telescope, this modern revisioning of the nineteenth century is evident in the story’s warrior monks. The suggestion of the hidden horrors of the church and the potential for cloistered environments to descend into sadistic cults is pure eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Gothic horror, via Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis. Despite this lineage, the monks in ‘Tooth and Claw’ do not manifest in a nineteenth-century fashion. The programme makes this explicit when the monks, facing the Torchwood House servants, strip away their homespun robes to reveal Eastern clothing. The nineteenth-century stylisation is stripped away to reveal a much more contemporary manifestation of the sinister and the supernatural. This is reinforced when the monk-servant fight scene partakes of elements of what is widely known – especially after the 1999 release of *The Matrix* – by the trademarked term ‘bullet time’.<sup>14</sup> The underlying cinematic techniques of ‘bullet time’ date back to nineteenth-century photographic experiments, but the device itself is very much a late twentieth-century cinematic obsession. This is not to say that ‘Tooth and Claw’ has departed from the inherent theatricality in *Doctor Who*’s approach to the nineteenth century. Indeed, Bruce Barton argues that bullet-time itself is inherently theatrical, and that “the dual materiality/immateriality of the cinematic body in motion [...] can be seen as a highly appropriate site to interrogate the contemporary nature of theatricality” (Barton 2012: 220). The scene does not evoke the stage, either nineteenth century or otherwise, but it is nonetheless theatrical – and in a way that, within the context of the narrative, is both implausible (where do



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nineteenth-century monks obtain Asian-style clothing and martial-arts weapons training?) and unnecessary (why the Asian styling, when neither the monks nor the werewolf have any connection to Asian cultures?). Unlike the theatricality of the previous stories, this scene does not interrogate either the nineteenth century or our nostalgia for it: it exists simply as a highly modern, highly theatrical moment of the human body in motion.

Yet at the heart of this story is an entirely different human body in motion: Queen Victoria herself. Around her, the nineteenth century sprouts fantastic accoutrements: a brass telescope protruding from a stately home, monks spinning through the air in slow motion, a library slathered in mistletoe oil. Only Queen Victoria herself has no fantastic embellishments: diminutive and stately, dressed in heavy mourning and a widow's cap with Whitby jet mourning jewellery swinging from ears, neck, and wrists, she moves through the story relatively untouched by the fantastic events around her – barring the suggestion, never confirmed on-screen, that she was bitten by the werewolf, became infected with lycanthropy, and then passed the affliction on to her children. So we return to the same device evident in 'Talons of Weng-Chiang': one individual becomes a metonymic representation of an age's complexity and contradictions. This is no new position for Queen Victoria to occupy; it recurs in discussions ranging from the origins of white wedding dresses to the increasing respectability of the theatre in the nineteenth century. Often co-opted as a positive trait (as, for example, by Margaret Thatcher), it here becomes restrictive. "This is not my world", say Victoria, confronted by a rampaging werewolf (Lyn and Davies 2006: 29:51-29:54). Yet a close reading of 'Tooth and Claw' suggests that it *is* precisely Victoria's world and that one risk of modern 'Victorian' texts' focusing their historical reconstruction around a single individual – even one as significant as Queen Victoria – is to ignore the complexities and paradoxes inherent in any period of time as substantial as the long Victorian era. Where the metonymic use of a single individual to represent the Victorian era brings richness to 'Talons of Weng-Chiang', here it risks narrowing and undermining the neo-Victorian impulse of this story.

So in the new era of *Doctor Who*, 'Tooth and Claw' stretches outside Victorian theatricality to structure the narrative. The long shots of Torchwood House are as misty, purple tinted, and highly romanticised as anything Nancy Mitford's painter could have desired. But just as the

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inhabitants of the house are trapped by a ring of red-robed, mistletoe-wreathed monks, so too are the Victorian accoutrements of this story constrained by narrative elements and theatrical impulses that owe little (if anything) to the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century, this story suggests, is not something we visit for its own sake, as the Doctor and Leela did in ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’. Neither is it something we visit in order to exorcise old ghosts, as the Doctor and Ace did in ‘Ghost Light’. And neither is it something to which we travel deliberately, as an ecstatic fan, as the Doctor does in ‘The Unquiet Dead’. Instead, the nineteenth century is something that we cannibalise and exploit for its recognisability, but also something that, like the monks’ homespun robes, we can adopt and cast off at will, thus rendering the carnivorous shape-shifting lycanthrope an apt metafictional device.

## 6. Conclusion

Perhaps only a text of *Doctor Who*’s longevity could take such a varied and complicated stance in regard to the long nineteenth century. *Doctor Who*’s approach to televising history emerged not with pseudo-historicals such as the stories covered here, but with the stories known as the ‘pure historicals’, in which the only science-fiction elements were the Doctor and the TARDIS. The pure historicals operated on a continuum that ranged from high tragedy (such as ‘The Aztecs’, aired in 1964) to pure farce (such as ‘The Romans’, aired in 1965). Though the pure historicals are now themselves a historical curiosity, this continuum still underlies the programme’s approach to history. ‘The Fires of Pompeii’ (aired in 2008) is a direct descendant of ‘The Aztecs’ in the Doctor’s insistence that history cannot be changed, no matter the death toll, while an undercurrent of farce runs through all the Eleventh Doctor’s historical adventures: in ‘A Town Called Mercy’ (aired in 2012), for example, the Doctor responds to his companion’s dismissal of the electric streetlights as “only a few years out” with “That’s what you said when you left your phone charger in Henry the 8th’s *en suite*” (Metzstein and Whithouse 2012: 2:29-3:03). The four stories covered here (spanning nearly thirty years of television and with the latter two separated from the former by the sixteen-year production hiatus from 1989 to 2005) fall into this established continuum of farce to tragedy.

What separates the subset of Victorian stories from other *Doctor Who* historicals and pseudo-historicals is the explicit way in which the

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stories feed into one another, presenting the Victorian era as a single, continuous space. So in ‘Ghost Light’, the Doctor asks the gun-wielding Redvers Fenn-Cooper, “That wouldn’t happen to be a Chinese fowling piece?” (Wareing and Platt 1989: Episode 1, 8:54-8:56), harking back to his ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’ encounter with Professor Lightfoot. Each story points to the comparative savagery of the Doctor’s companions. Of Leela in ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’, the Doctor says, “Savage. Found floating down the Amazon in a hatbox” (Maloney and Holmes 1977: Episode 2, 8:43-8:44). In ‘Tooth and Claw’, he explains Rose’s modern clothing by saying, “She’s a feral child. I bought her for sixpence in Old London. It was either her or the Elephant Man” (Lyn and Davies 2006: 8:41-8:46). Even when Rose appears in Victorian costume, in ‘The Unquiet Dead’, Gwyneth says to her, “You’ve got all the clothes and the breeding, but you talk like some sort of wild thing” (Lyn and Gatiss 2005: 23:00-23:04). This emphasis on the companion’s clothing is another constant. Leela, questioning her restrictive Victorian attire, is told firmly, “you can’t go wandering around Victorian London in skins. You’d frighten the horses” (Maloney and Holmes 1977: Episode 1, 3:34-3:47). Ace, in ‘Ghost Light’, is called a “shameless wanton” (Wareing and Platt 1989: Episode 1, 11:14-11:15) for her tight-fitting top and combat boots. Rose, the only companion to visit the nineteenth century twice, is first sent to the TARDIS wardrobe room for suitable attire – “Go out there dressed like that, you’ll start a riot, Barbarella” (Lyn and Gatiss 2005: 5:05-5:06) – and then chided repeatedly by Queen Victoria for her state of relative nudity. This in-show intertextuality implies that the Doctor is not visiting multiple different variants of the nineteenth century, but continually (re-)visiting the same nineteenth century, only to find it in flux each time.

Flux is at the core of our enduring neo-Victorian nostalgia precipitated and indulged in by *Doctor Who*. The Doctor changes faces, costumes, and personalities, yet we keep returning to him as a constant. Analogously, while our fascination with Victorian theatricality shifts and flexes, we keep returning to it. In the introduction, I asked: why does the Doctor keep returning to the nineteenth century? The question invites a deceptively simple answer: access to the BBC props department makes the nineteenth century a logistical practicality. But as this essay has demonstrated, the answer is more complicated than that. Hence I would like to end the essay with another question that invites a simplistic answer: is the

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Doctor himself a substitute for the audience’s neo-Victorian desires? In part, yes. In ‘The Unquiet Dead’, Rose says to the Doctor, “Think about it, though. Christmas 1860. It happened once. Just once, and it’s ... gone, it’s finished. It’ll never happen again. Except for you” (Lyn and Gatiss 2005: 4:32-4:45, original pause). Had Rose read Svetlana Boym, she might have replaced this speech with Boym’s description of nostalgia as the desire “to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of the human condition” (Boym 2007: 8), and the sentiment would have been identical. But there is more to *Doctor Who*’s nineteenth-century narratives than a straightforward literalisation of a nostalgic desire for return. Perhaps only the Doctor, who has so often regenerated onscreen and yet remained the same, is capable of showing his audience so many different facets of the neo-Victorian impulse.

### Notes

1. Barring the ill-fated one-off companion Astrid Peth in the 2007 Christmas special.
2. This article’s title derives from ‘The Talons of Weng-Chiang’, in which the character Jago exclaims early on: “Have I ever, in my thirty years in the halls, seen such a dazzling display of lustrous legerdemain, so many feats of superlative, supernatural skill? The answer must be never, sir, never!” ((Maloney and Holmes 1977: Episode 1, 0:55-1:08).
3. In its 2012/2013 series, *Doctor Who* added three more nineteenth-century stories: the Western ‘A Town Called Mercy’, set in an American frontier town in the 1870s (dir. Saul Metzstein, 15 September 2012); the Christmas special ‘The Snowmen’, set in England in the 1892 (dir. Saul Metzstein, 25 December 2012); and ‘The Crimson Horror’, set in Yorkshire in 1893 (dir. Saul Metzstein, 4 May 2013). The programme’s fascination with the nineteenth century shows no signs of abating.
4. For an extension of Stephen Lacey’s argument, see Billy Smart, who examines 1960s television adaptations of Brecht’s plays as a means of interrogating “the use of the television studio as a location that could replicate or reinvent the theatrical space of the stage” (Smart 2013: 113).
5. Heilmann and Llewellyn themselves point out that “it is noticeable that there remains a tension about the definition of this field, and that there is continuing evidence of the rather selective and self-perpetuating notion of a neo-Victorian

canon” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010:10), which problematises the use of any single definition of ‘neo-Victorian’. But Heilmann and Llewellyn’s definition does well to encompass the breadth of a field that is still in flux.

6. As *Doctor Who* gazes into these texts, these texts gaze back. Two of the actors from *Count Dracula* had also played roles in *Doctor Who* in the 1970s: Susan Penhaglion had appeared in ‘The Time Monster’ (dir. Paul Bernard, 20 May-24 June 1972) and George Raistrick in ‘Day of the Daleks’ (dir. Paul Bernard, 1-22 January 1972). Both the leads from *Jack the Ripper*, who were already calling on their earlier roles in *Z Cars*, were to play roles in *Doctor Who* in the 1980s: Stratford Johns in ‘Four to Doomsday’ (dir. John Black, 18-26 January 1982) and Frank Windsor in both ‘The King’s Demons’ (dir. Tony Virgo, 22 November-6 December 1983) and ‘Ghost Light’. In the latter text, to make the process even more palimpsestuous, Windsor played Inspector Mackenzie, the “cream of Scotland Yard” (Wareing and Platt 1989: Episode 3, 17:32-17:34).
7. Miles and Wood do acknowledge that other racially problematic moments, such as Leela describing Chang as “the yellow one” (Maloney and Holmes 1977: Episode 4, 1:44-1:45) or the Doctor commenting on being surrounded by “little men” (Maloney and Holmes 1977: Episode 1, 7:53-7:54), are more difficult to read as part of a pastiche of Victorian fiction. This does not, however, negate the reading of Chang’s function as a character.
8. For example, in a television interview given on Sunday 16 January 1983, for the television programme *Weekend World*, Thatcher emphasised, “Yes, I want to see one nation, as you go back to Victorian times.” When asked by the interviewer to outline “an approval of what I would call Victorian values. The sort of values, if you like, that helped to build the country throughout the 19th Century”, Prime Minister Thatcher’s response was less about personal traits and more about socio-economic structures: “Those were the values when our country became great, but not only did our country become great internationally, also so much advance was made in this country. Colossal advance, as people prospered themselves so they gave great voluntary things to the State. So many of the schools we replace now were voluntary schools, so many of the hospitals we replace were hospitals given by this great benefaction feeling that we have in Britain, even some of the prisons, the Town Halls. As our people prospered, so they used their independence and initiative to prosper others, not compulsion by the State.” In the rhetoric of the Thatcher government, “Victorian values” became political shorthand for sweeping and divisive socio-economic changes. See transcript at: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105087>.

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9. It was not the last story to air: both ‘The Curse of Fenric’ (dir. Nicholas Mallett, 25 October-15 November 1989) and ‘Survival’ (dir. Alan Wareing, 22 November-6 December 1989), the other two stories in what is sometimes loosely called the ‘Ace Trilogy’, aired after it. It was, however, the final story to be produced before the programme was cancelled.
  10. I am indebted to Marie-Luise Kohlke for suggesting this reading of the proscenium arch.
  11. Tom Gunning, focusing on the relationship between spirits and technology (see Gunning 2007), makes a similar argument to Arias; however, Arias focuses more on nineteenth-century spiritualism and Gunning more on nineteenth-century technologies.
  12. ‘The Greatest Show in the Galaxy’ (dir. Alan Wareing, 14 December 1988-4 January 1989) does feature a werewolf, Mags, so they are not entirely unknown in the *Doctor Who* universe. But the fact that Mags is explicitly referred to as “rather an unusual little specimen” in the episode does reinforce the fact that werewolves are not a common foe for the Doctor (Wareing and Wyatt 1988: Episode 1, 14:51-14:53).
  13. This aesthetic recurs in the later nineteenth-century story ‘The Next Doctor’ (dir. Andy Goddard, 25 December 2008), which, like ‘Tooth and Claw’, was scripted by Russell T. Davies.
  14. The scene is not, strictly speaking, in ‘bullet-time’, since it manipulates only time (in a perceptible slowing of the action), whereas bullet-time simultaneously manipulates space (in the shifting of the audience’s point of view through variable camera angles). Nevertheless, the scene evokes modern cinematic devices.

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