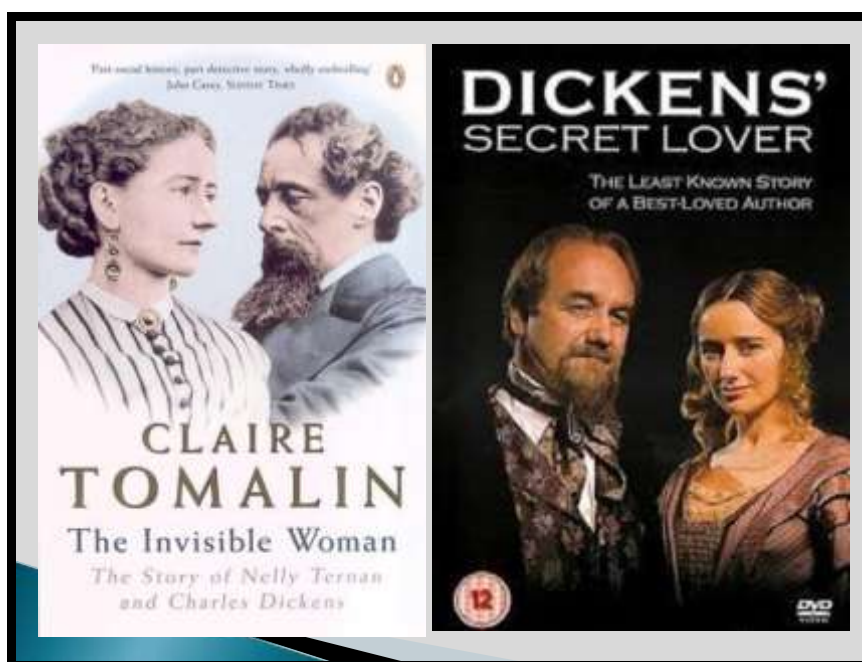


In Bed with Dickens: Questioning the Neo-Victorian Codes of Representation in Ralph Fiennes's Film *The Invisible Woman* (2013)

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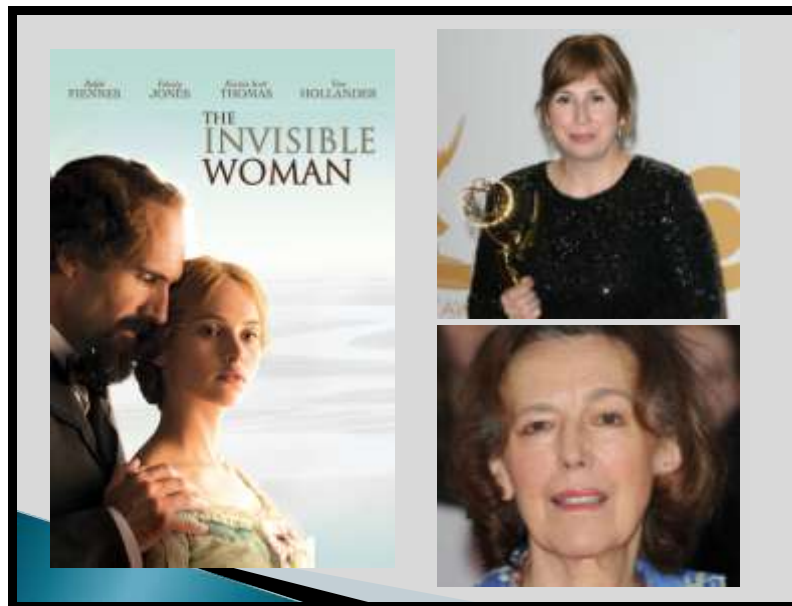
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NOTE: This is a working paper, written for the "1 International Seminar on (Neo-)Victorian Studies in Spain", 10-12 May, 2017, Universidad de Málaga, organized by VINS (Neo-Victorian Network in Spain), <https://vins-network.org/>, of which I am a member.



- Claire Tomalin's *The Invisible Woman* (1990), the biography of Dickens's secret mistress for thirteen years, Ellen Ternan, has no sex scenes, nor are they habitual in biographies.
- The 2008 documentary on the same topic, *Dickens's Secret Lover*, directed by Sarah Aspinall and broadcast by Channel 4 (which does not even mention Tomalin), includes some dramatized scenes with David Haig as Dickens and Amy Shiels as Nelly; none of these scenes is erotic or sexual in any way.
- In contrast, the film *The Invisible Woman* (2013), directed by Ralph Fiennes –who also plays Dickens– and based on Abi Morgan's screenplay adapting Tomalin's book, contains two sex scenes.

- These are not dramatizations of real-life events reported by Tomalin but invented scenes. Morgan takes, in short, a poetic licence that Ralph Fiennes, as director, translates onto the screen. In his own peculiar style.



- We need to wonder what kind of licence this is and what is gained by watching on screen Charles Dickens have sex with his mistress, Nelly; also, Nelly with her husband.
- The two scenes, while an interesting contribution to the history of the representation of Victorian sexuality in film, cannot and should not be justified in any way by our collective interest in Dickens as a literary creator. As such, these sex scenes are mere prurient voyeurism.



- Obviously, this argument may seem pure neo-Victorian prudishness rather than a proper academic approach. My intention in criticizing Morgan's and Fiennes's decisions is, however, fully academic: *I wish to deny that we truly learn more about the process of writing fiction by intruding, as we do, into the private life of authors.*

- Ralph Fiennes, himself an extremely private celebrity, stressed in an interview that although “People are still furiously protective of their privacy” there is “more license to be curious”. He grants that “I feel uneasy about this ferocious curiosity that we give ourselves licence to have” (GoldDerby 2013). Logically, this begs the question of why he has taken the licence to make a film which frontally attacks Charles Dickens’s right to protect his private life.



- The same debate surrounded the publication of Tomalin’s biography of Ternan.
- This book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the Victorian acting profession (Ternan’s mother, sisters and herself were professional actresses). Yet, it is nothing but a formidable piece of gossip about the relationship between Dickens and his young mistress, fabulously bad as biography, since most of it is a tale based on speculation. *The Invisible Woman* is not even literary biography, since Nelly Ternan is not a writer; certainly, no biography about her would have been written if it weren’t for her alleged connection with Dickens.

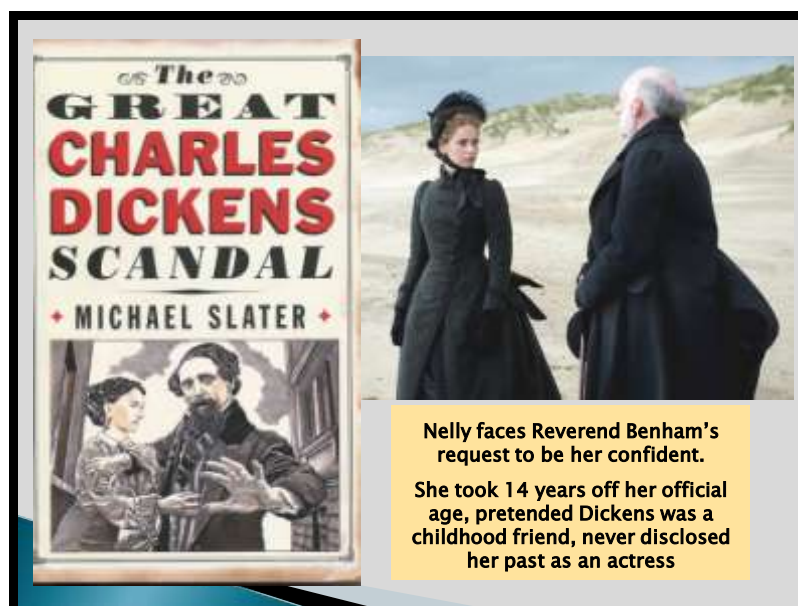


- If, nonetheless, we accept the story as the truth, we still must consider the issue of Dickens's extremely negative representation as, basically, a sexual predator and an extremely cruel husband.



Catherine Dickens (b. 1815, née Hogarth): 1838 (23), 1852 (47)

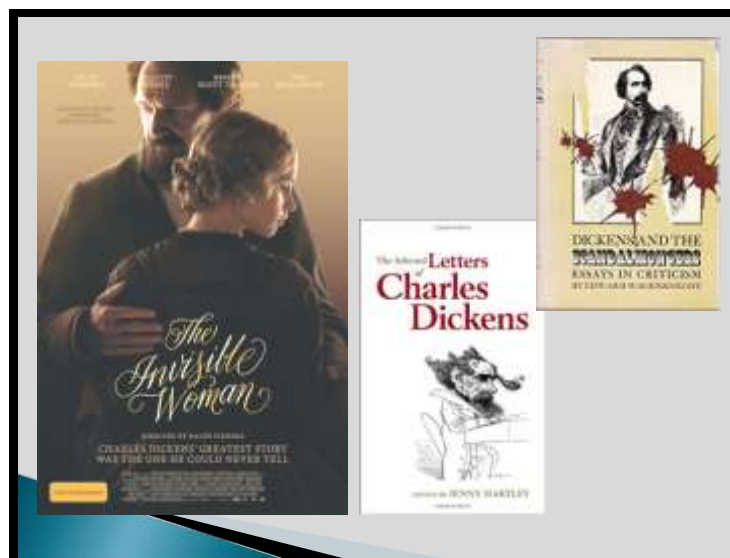
- Asked about the message of his adaptation by a concerned (female) spectator, Fiennes replied that stories need not have messages. He was moved to make the film because it “was about a woman seeking closure with a relationship, with a past love affair, past intimacy. That moved me, the idea that someone is haunted by something in their past, in this case a love affair, which they still have not had reconciliation with.”
- Fiennes further explained that he asked Abi Morgan to add a scene in which Nelly finally pours her heart out to Reverend Benham, because “I wanted to witness some kind of closure, not total closure, something where she speaks”. For him, the story is “about the vulnerability of the human heart which I hope that you witness in the film” (all quotes here SAG-AFTRA Foundation 2013).



Nelly faces Reverend Benham's request to be her confidant. She took 14 years off her official age, pretended Dickens was a childhood friend, never disclosed her past as an actress



- Fiennes deals with Nelly in a combined gentlemanly and feminist manner, not caring how negatively he portrays Dickens.
- Tomalin, however, warns us that the film, which she likes, lies about her life after Dickens: “The film portrays a love story and is given a happy ending. It leaves out Nelly’s deviousness and suggests that she finds resolution by confessing to a benevolent clergyman, but this is not what happened. The Margate life, and the school, failed. Her husband George had a breakdown. The clergyman betrayed Nelly’s confidence. Never mind” (Tomalin 2014).
- In tension with the biography, then, the film reads Nelly as an abuse survivor, even a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder. It refuses to be a simple love story but also a mere exposure of the man Dickens. This makes it complicated to read.



- Or not...
- A disgruntled spectator on IMDB, from Canada, complains that “given Dickens’s reputation as the tireless champion of the poor and downtrodden, it is pretty horrifying to watch him for two hours making the most of his social status to have his ways with a poor innocent, fatherless girl half his age”.

- Another spectator, from Australia, complains that the film does no justice to any of the persons involved: we should instead “read Dickens’ letters or other biographies or more of Dickens’ own writing or Edward Wagenknecht’s *Dickens and the Scandalmongers* or more about the social and sexual mores of the time”.
- Those who enjoy the film utterly fail to see the sexual exploitation involved in the affair. Mostly they observe that, though well made, the film lacks something, namely passion.



- I return, then, to how sex is presented in *The Invisible Woman*.
- I cannot survey here the history of the representation of human sexuality on the screen. Nevertheless, I must point out that one matter is nudity, abundant in art since ancient times, and quite another sexuality, until recently the object of clandestine representation and still very problematic.
- We need to distinguish, in any case, between mainstream cinema in which sex scenes are simulated and porn cinema, in which sex is actually performed.
- The 1933 film *Ecstasy* offered the first sex scene ever filmed for a mainstream movie (actress Hedy Lamarr reaches orgasm during sex with a man).
- Sex scenes, however, became generalized much later, between *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), now the object of much controversy surrounding the manipulation of actress Maria Schneider by fellow actor Marlon Brando and director Bernardo Bertolucci.
- Since *Basic Instinct* (1992), neither aspiring stars nor well-established actors have hesitated to simulate sex on screen whenever the screenplay requires it, as they explain.
- Romantic love stories, like *The Invisible Woman*, used to be more moderate than films primarily about sex, yet the barrier separating pure sex from love was broken long ago.
- Surprisingly, the extremely successful romantic film *Pretty Woman* (of 1990) has no sex scenes, although Julia Roberts plays a prostitute and Richard Gere her client. Twenty-five years later, *50 Shades of Grey* ended seemingly for ever the disconnection between the romantic love story and explicit onscreen sex.
- Sex scenes are now almost compulsory in any contemporary film, with or without a central love interest. Audiences seem to welcome them.



- Until recently, period films seemed to be the exception to that rule. This, however, is beginning to crumble.
- It might take a while before someone shows us Elizabeth Bennett and Darcy in bed (ironically, bloody horror has already contaminated Austen's plots, as seen in *Pride and Prejudice with Zombies*). But it is bound to happen.



- Despite the inclusion of abundant sex scenes in diverse films about the Romantic poets since the 1980s, and leaving aside early examples of eroticism in period films like Jane Campion's *The Piano* (of 1993), the sexing up of the period film is possibly attributable to television.



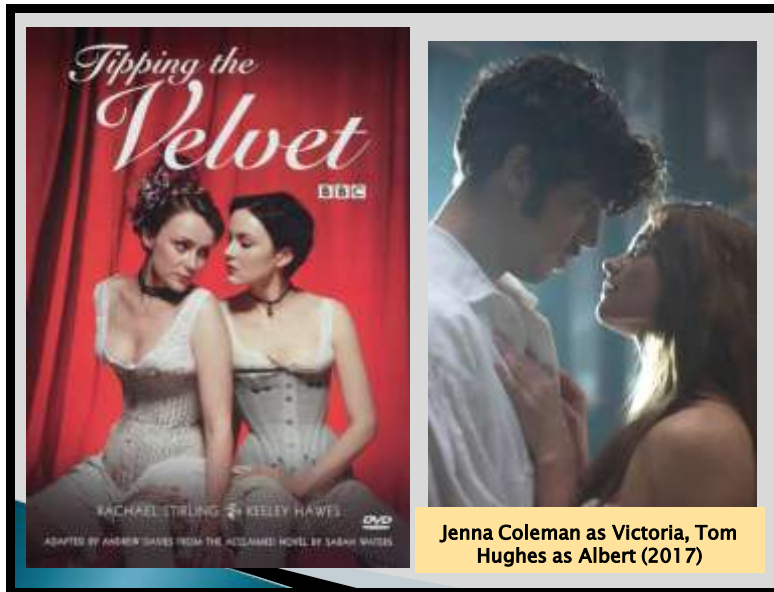
Ken Russell's *Gothic*, 1986

- Series set in the present with a high sexual content, from *Sex and The City* (1998-2004) to *Queer as Folk* (1999-2000), have made graphic sex scenes common. This new trend has been also transferred to period drama.
- Popular series like *Rome* (2005-7), *The Tudors* (2007-10), *Spartacus* (2010-13), the still ongoing *Game of Thrones* (2011-), or the recent *War and Peace* (2016) have broken new grounds by bringing a contemporary view of sex into (pseudo-) or historical fictions.



- As regards specifically neo-Victorian fictions, no doubt the 2002 BBC mini-series adaptation of Sarah Waters' lesbian love story *Tipping the Velvet* (of 1998), was quite a revolution (as was the novel, of course).
- The later adaptation in 2011 of Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (of 2002) brought heterosexual passion up to date.

- How fast sex scenes are gaining ground can be gauged by the differences between the more restrained film *The Young Victoria* (2009) and the TV series *Victoria* (2016), directly publicized as hot and steamy.



- Actually, the representation of sex on the screen has had an impact on the way we have sex privately since mainstream cinema and TV have made us far more self-conscious about how we have sex. Internet porn, as we know, is shaping the expectations of its young consumers about their actual sex life.
- In these neo-Victorian audiovisual fictions there is, then, a clear attempt to update sex to represent it as if it were contemporary. This anachronistic representation of Victorian sex is preferred over a more historically accurate view.
- In contrast, Fiennes disregards current fashions, choosing instead to film sex in quite a subdued way. This produces an odd estrangement which often puzzles spectators and reviewers alike.



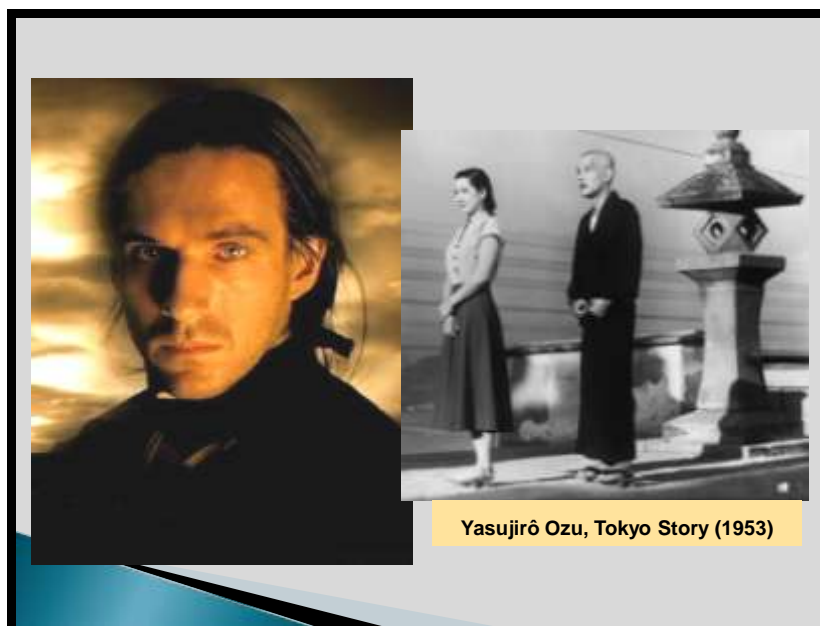


- Let me describe the two scenes.
- Early in the film, we see Nelly having sex with her husband George. Both are wearing long nightgowns and Nelly is on top. Fiennes portrays, without exaggerating it, her orgasm as George looks on, a bit puzzled by her intense pleasure, which he does not match. Nelly then lies down and the pair share a very brief moment of sweet intimacy. The camera is throughout placed at the bedhead, offering an unusual foreshortened view.
- In the second scene, much later in the film, and also quite brief (both are below one minute), Dickens and Nelly are seen in bed having sex, he on top of her. They are also clothed, only their shoulders and heads are visible. The focus falls mainly on Nelly's face, as she moans softly, not as pleasurably as with George.
- Nelly, then, and not the men, appears to enjoy herself but it is difficult to read either scene.
- Perhaps we should assume that whereas she was sexually submissive to Dickens, she controls her relationship with George. Whatever reading we choose, we actually learn very little from either moment. This begs the question of why the scenes were filmed at all.
- In Morgan's screenplay, the two scenes are more stereotypically passionate, with intertwined fingers and so on. Dickens, not Nelly, reaches orgasm before rolling onto his back to enjoy an intimate moment (which, incidentally, Fiennes ignores).
- When asked why their relationship is not more overtly sexualized, Morgan explained: "I wrote *Shame* [a film on male sexual addiction] so I probably would have pushed it a bit more sexually. I think that what is great about Ralph is that he's not only an actor, he's a maker and he really understands what an audience needs and what it wants. So, I think he was right to sort of restrain it" (Red Carpet News 2013).
- Morgan prefers the, in her words, "incredibly sexy scene" (Red Carpet News 2013) when, as Nelly's mother naps on the sofa, Dickens and Nelly count the money collected at a charity event.
- Morgan bypasses, however, the disruptive intertextuality that actors contribute to films.
- Mrs. Ternan is played by the elegant Kristin Scott-Thomas. Back in 1996 she was Ralph Fiennes' romantic interest in *The English Patient*. Scott-Thomas (aged 53), however, plays in Fiennes film the mother of an 18-year-old (though Felicity Jones was actually 20) about to be seduced by a much older man (Fiennes was 51; Dickens met Nelly aged 45).

- Scott-Thomas's presence highlights our rejection of ageing women as love interests –both on and off screen. Fiennes's Dickens reminds us that ageing men prefer much younger women as sex partners.



- Ironically, despite having often played romantic leads, including Heathcliff, as a director Fiennes prefers avoiding passion.
- An interviewer observes that his portrait of the love between Dickens and Nelly is not “overtly lustful, overtly passionate. It’s more of an intellectual love”. Uncomfortable, Fiennes replies that “I was very keen to avoid what I feel are the tropes of sort of, people looking, sort of passionate, so restless, across rooms. I don’t believe that”. Incidentally, he names as an inspiration to narrate “the complicatedness and delicacy of human passion”, Japanese film director Yasujirô Ozu.





- Some critics have connected Fiennes's film with an essential neo-Victorian film, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (of 1981), directed by Karel Reiz and based on Harold Pinter's screenplay adapting John Fowles's post-modern eponymous novel.
- The many scenes showing an older Nelly walking furiously fast on Margate's beach, trying to exorcise memories of Dickens, somehow recall Sarah's habit of walking the Cobb in Lyme Regis in stormy weather, part of her strategy to build her public image.



- These, though, are very different stories. The comparison is useful, nonetheless, to see that the brief sex scene between Sarah and Charles in Reiz's film is quite close in historical accuracy to Fiennes' presentation of Victorian sex.
- There is, however, a major difference: Sarah and Charles are fictional characters and the sex scene is designed to introduce a major turning point in their love story. Far from being a fallen woman, Sarah is a virgin who lures Charles to bed with the false story of her disorderly sexual

conduct. In contrast, Charles and Nelly are historical persons, which adds awkwardness to the sex scene between them.

- Fiennes declares that “sometimes we can understand ourselves better through the prism of period films and classic drama” (Hollywood Reporter, 2013). If this is the case, then, the sex scene is not useful to characterize Dickens and Nelly; it is nothing but a comment on our current obsession with sex.
- Fiennes may have made the right decision to tone it down and portray the sexual encounter trying to imagine what sex could have been like in the Victorian age; still, the scene is irrelevant, for it tells us nothing about Dickens and Nelly, not even as fictionalized characters.
- It is, excuse me, as irrelevant as the unnecessary scene showing Dickens pissing.



- Of course, Fiennes’ film goes further than Tomalin’s biography because what is mere suggestion in her book is transformed into actual event in the film. Sex is implied in the book, directly shown in the film. Yet, both biography and film adaptation are complicit in their *voyeurism*.
- As part of current ‘Dickens bashing’, the two texts stress the point that a great writer may be an appalling man in his private life; details of Dickens’s cruelty to his wife Catherine impact readers and viewers more directly than his tainted love for Nelly.
- The film insists that their affair inspired marvellous fiction like *Great Expectations*, to the point that, rather than declare his love, Dickens uses Pip’s words to Stella to win Nelly’s heart.
- Yet, the mystery of literary creation remains a closed book, whereas, regrettably, the stereotype of the female muse is perpetuated, no matter how reluctantly Nelly accepts the role.
- Neither Tomalin’s book, nor Fiennes’ film can be undone; both, besides, are too good as narrations to be easily avoided.
- If, despite the warnings, your curiosity –your licence to pry into Dickens’s sex life– overcomes you, at least bring into your reading (or viewing) an examination of why you want to know Dickens through his bedfellows rather than his books. One thing is certain: whatever insight you gain, it won’t be about Literature but about yourself.



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