

Meeting Report
CUSVE-DRC Neo-Victorian Decadence Research Group
Webinar 1 April 2022

Dee Wu (Sun Yat-sen University, China)

Start: April 2, 2022, 3 p.m.

End: April 2, 2022, 5 p.m.

Hosts: Kostas Boyiopoulos, Jo Thorne

After warmly welcoming 20 attendees, Dr Kostas Boyiopoulos from Durham commenced the Webinar by introducing himself and co-host Dr Jo Thorne from Liverpool John Moores University. They also introduced a book project they have been working on lately, which developed from a successful Neo-Victorian Decadence conference they organised in 2017 at Durham University. Then, Kostas invited attendees to do some ice-breaking self-introduction to get to know each other better. It is a fascinating part for me personally. Even though every person in this meeting is a scholar in the same field of Decadence and Neo-Victorian studies, different scholars' research projects and directions are very different and eye-opening.

Moreover, as this conference was organised by Goldsmiths in collaboration with the University of Chieti-Pescara in Italy, many Italian scholars presented their perspectives on Neo-Decadence and Neo-Victorian Studies in Italy, which is an area that I have never been exposed to. In addition, Dr Robyne Calvert's research in Neo-Victorian fashion and visual art is exciting to me. Her perspective on contemporary Neo-Victorian and Dark Academia style that became popular among young people is refreshing, and especially she suggests that young people's desire to dress up in retro fashion is not always necessarily nostalgic or even conservative. Instead, it could be expressing purely aesthetic preference and an identity statement connected with a specific motif or unique cut that is unfounded in contemporary culture. I feel somewhat connected with her opinion. In my doctoral thesis, I dedicated a chapter on how Neo-Victorian/Dandy fashion has influenced Mainland Chinese men's fashion choices and their perception of a new mode of masculinity that is deviant from the past steely, tough, and very idealistic communistic hero images in mainstream films. I argue that such desire to dress up like an "Oriental dandy/gentleman" is not always due to Western cultural hegemony, nor does it have anything to do with the colonial-mentality people of non-European culture look down upon their own culture. On the contrary, I argue that the current Chinese craze for retro-style and Neo-Decadence is essentially a dissident identity statement that the highly-educated younger generation is expressing their anti-establishment political expression.

I, an attendee from East Asia, had an opportunity to introduce the reception and re-mediation of Neo-Victorian and Neo-Decadence in China, Japan, and South Korea, respectively, towards the end when we moved our topic to Global Neo-Decadence/ Neo-Victorian. I hope that my study on these regions will encourage more cross-continent cultural dialogue within the field of Victorian/ Neo-Victorian and Decadence study.

Neo-Victorian Decadence Research Group
Meeting Notes

Alice Condé (Goldsmiths, University of London)

This was the inaugural meeting of the CUSVE-DRC Neo-Victorian Decadence Research Group and as such it was a space for introductions between members, and an opportunity to consider some important questions that will shape our discussions going forward. These notes record these questions, which remain open-ended for now.

Is neo-Victorianism inherently decadent?

- This depends what is meant by ‘decadence’, which is often a question of aesthetics and taste
- The neo-Victorian practice of indulging or luxuriating in the past might be considered decadent (indeed it happens in a number of decadent texts)
- From the perspective of fashion subcultures, it can be suggested that neo-Victorianism is decadent. Neo-Victorian fashions don’t necessarily correspond with actual Victorian fashions, there is therefore a kind of ‘out of time’ quality to them; neo-Victorian fashion is about pleasure, not fetishizing the past. The appeal of the past is about its aesthetics, and neo-Victorianism is a subculture, another significant connection with decadence
- Walter Pater might help us consider the attraction and aestheticization of the past, e.g. *Marius the Epicurean* and seeing the past in aesthetic terms
- Mannerism and derivation are key to neo-Victorian culture, and are aspects that might relate to its decadence

What qualifies as a neo-Victorian text? How is this affected by periodization?

- To decide what is neo-Victorian, we first need to know what is ‘Victorian’. How do we identify Victorian characteristics in texts?
- And where does decadence fit? Is it solely Victorian, is it modern, is it a critical concept that can be applied across periods and genres?
- What is the boundary between a historical novel and a neo-Victorian text?
- Slippery boundaries are inherent to decadence: as a concept it resists categorization and definition. We need to consider the signifiers, or aesthetic markers, we should look out for in neo-Victorian/decadent texts
- There is a tension between the faux-Victorian novel, e.g. the work of Sarah Waters, and graphic metafiction. Is it productive to adopt ‘neo-Victorian decadence’ as an umbrella term and make distinctions from there?
- We can’t fully separate decadence from the Victorian era but is there a possibility of decoupling neo decadence and neo-Victorianism? (for example, the early use of ‘neo-Victorian’ in fact means ‘late Victorian decadent’)
- A proposal was made for a case study of William Somerset Maugham, a writer who is temporally late-Victorian/early twentieth-century but not Modernist.
- In considering neo-Victorian decadence we should acknowledge irony and lack of sincerity

- What process of textual communication is involved in neo-Victorian texts? We should think about subject, message, addressee. Decadence is a polysemic/polyphonic term, but many critical studies exist that provide definitions. We are in need of similar definitions for neo-Victorian/decadence.
- What is neo-Victorian? Is it contemporary Victorian-style fiction? How does it manifest in popular culture? Is it to do with setting or style or simply simulating the Victorian period in the present day?
- Could we consider Prince as an example of neo-Victorianism, for example? His dandyism takes signifiers from Victorian fashion but makes them cutting edge for his age. Also Glam Rock – is this something new or recycling the past?
- We need to pay attention to communicative processes and linguistic bases. What did the Victorian decadents think about language, what were the functions and targets of their literature?

Does neo-Victorian decadence have transcultural dimensions?

- Neo-Victorian decadence transcends boundaries – it is cosmopolitan and can be located in different cultures, countries, languages
- However it is under-researched in some areas, such as Italy/Italian literature
- Do we need to consider multilingualism as representative of different influences manifesting in language and text? For instance Curzio Malaparte's *La Perla* [*The Skin*]
- It may be helpful to focus on themes. Neo-Victorian decadence is primarily thematic – shared subjects are drawn from across Europe (and worldwide).
- It's also important to pay attention to decadence outside the British Empire, for example the Chinese appropriation of Oscar Wilde as a signifier of anti-establishment sentiments, rebellion, and queerness, in contrast to South Korean references to Dorian Gray in pop music as a representative of beauty and prosperity but with the homosexual implications toned down.
- Other areas of interest include Dark Academia and the neo-Victorian revival of dandyism by Les Sapeurs in the Congo – also with potential to consider the impact of colonialism

How does the choice of media shape the decadence of neo-Victorianism?

- It was suggested that 'neo-Aestheticism' might in fact be a useful umbrella term for the 'gesamtkunstwerk' of a Victorian/decadence inspired lifestyle that encompasses fashion, interior design etc.
- Michael Field are a good example of interdisciplinarity/mixing media, for example through ekphrasis
- Transmediality was suggested as a productive topic for the next session.