

The Power of Things: The Material Turn in Neo-Victorianism

Hatunnur Ciftci

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

hatunnur.ciftci@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

Neo-Victorian Things offers material readings of popular neo-Victorian multimedia that broaden the concept of neo-Victorianism and provide new insights into our contemporary fascination with the Victorian past. Each essay in the edited volume favors a particular 'thing' studied through the emerging strands of material culture. The book demonstrates that the things that appear in neo-Victorian multimedia play a central role in the revival of Victorian culture, identity and history. The volume makes a timely contribution to the field by critically examining ordinary objects, from a teapot to a haunted house.

Die Macht der Dinge: Die materielle Wende im Neo-Viktorianismus

German Abstract:

Neo-Victorian Things bietet materielle Lesarten populärer neo-viktorianischer Multimedien, die das Konzept des Neo-Viktorianismus erweitern und neue Einblicke in unsere zeitgenössische Faszination für die viktorianische Vergangenheit bieten. Es wird gezeigt, dass die Dinge, die in den neo-viktorianischen Multimedien auftauchen, eine zentrale Rolle bei der Wiederentdeckung der viktorianischen Kultur, Identität und Geschichte spielen. Durch die kritische Auseinandersetzung mit Alltagsgegenständen, von der Teekanne bis zum Geisterhaus, leistet das Buch einen zeitgemäßen Beitrag zu diesem Thema.

How to cite:

Ciftci, Hatunnur: "The Power of Things: The Material Turn in Neo-Victorianism [Review of: Maier, Sarah E., Brenda Ayres, and Danielle Mariann Dove (eds.). *Neo-Victorian Things: Re-Imagining Nineteenth-Century Material Cultures in Literature and Film*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.]." In: KULT_online 69 (2024).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2024.1434>



The Power of Things: The Material Turn in Neo-Victorianism

Hatunnur Ciftci

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Maier, Sarah E., Brenda Ayres, and Danielle Mariann Dove (eds.). *Neo-Victorian Things: Re-Imagining Nineteenth-Century Material Cultures in Literature and Film*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 233 pages, 139,09 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-031-06200-1.

The enduring popularity of the Victorian era informs and even shapes today's mainstream culture ranging from fiction and video games to fashion and architecture. What stands out in these real and imaginary worlds are the materials that carry the memory of the past. Edited by Sarah E. Maier, Brenda Ayres, and Danielle Mariann Dove, *Neo-Victorian Things: Re-Imagining Nineteenth-Century Material Cultures in Literature and Film* gathers compelling essays under the roof of material culture. The volume argues that contemporary revivals of the Victorian past have been invoked substantially by specific objects that inform about a historical moment, person, or place. Accordingly, materiality becomes a major focal point in each of the ten chapters of the edited volume, including the introduction, creating a dialogue between the past and the present.

At the very outset, the volume connects with foundational works in neo-Victorian studies that are also interested in the material, such as the works of Ann Heilmann, Mark Llewellyn, and Cora Kaplan. While the title of the volume signals its primary concern, the strategic choice of the term 'things' hints at its methodological approach. In the introduction, Maier and Dove unpack the terms "objects, things, and materiality" (p. 8), which often seem identical and indicate that 'things' draw attention not only to the concrete objects but also to the dynamic relationship between humans and matter. In that sense, humans and things are mutually forming, blurring the lines between animate and inanimate and disrupting the subject/object dichotomy. This subverted ontology that gained ground in literary criticism with Bill Brown's seminal essay "Thing Theory" (*Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2001, p. 1–22) and the recent developments in new materialism, phenomenology, and sensory studies form the theoretical and methodological backbone of the volume.

Following the introduction, Rosario Aries examines Deborah Lutz's biography *The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects* (New York 2015) through an object-oriented approach, showing how Lutz's use of everyday objects brings the Brontë sisters to life for contemporary readers. Aries pays particular attention to three chapters in the biography, but her reading of the chapter "Memory Albums" is particularly noteworthy in terms of capturing the importance of materiality in linking past and present. According to Aries, Charlotte Brontë's only album, her fern book, not only reveals a material interest in collecting during the Victorian era but also offers a female perspective on the Victorian past (p. 33). While the album is Charlotte Brontë's personal property, it simultaneously contains and objectifies her own self, her family, and friends. This imprecise division between people and things also guides the discussion in chapter five, where Daný van Dam explores the character-like qualities of pianos in Jane Campion's film *The Piano* (1993) and Daniel Mason's novel *The Piano Tuner* (New York 2002). In Campion's film, the piano is an extension of the mute protagonist Ada's body, allowing her to communicate and express her emotions, even becoming a "sexual stand-in" (p. 99) for her since touching the piano mirrors touching Ada's body. In chapter nine, "Criminal Things: Sherlock Holmes' Details of Detection and Their Neo-Victorian Revisions," Sarah Maier provides another example of how to upset the human/thing dichotomy. She argues that, on the one hand, through interpreting and reading objects in relation to their context, they become data for Holmes, while, on the other hand, Holmes himself becomes an object through the narrative of his friend Dr John Watson and the machine-like characteristics with which he is described.

Chapters three, four, and eight focus on the ship, opium paraphernalia, and the teapot respectively. They present stimulating examples of Elaine Freedgood's "strong metonymic reading" (p. 10) that requires taking fictional objects literally to retrieve material and historical information, beyond what literary texts cover. In line with this method, Lewis Mondal, particularly in his reading of Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (New York 1990), examines the physicality of the ship as vehicle that brings Britain and colonial America closer together. By privileging the study of the ship, Mondal deconstructs the center/periphery dichotomy and offers a broader and more global understanding of neo-Victorianism beyond the borders of Britain. In chapter four, Nadine Boehm-Schnitker surveys the material history of opium, cultivated in India and sold in China, which is closely intertwined with Britain's nineteenth-century capitalist and imperialist agenda. By analyzing Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (London

2008) against this historical background, Boehm-Schnitker unpacks the discourses surrounding opium through the characters' relationship to the substance – who has access, how it is regulated and consumed. Like Mondal and Boehm-Schnitker, Claire Nally traces the story of Mary Ann Cotton (1832–1873), focusing specifically on Mary Ann's teapot – a domestic object – as she allegedly killed her family by lacing their tea with arsenic. The infamous teapot was, interestingly, featured in the TV series *Dark Angel* (2016), after having been displayed at the Beamish Museum. Nally comments that in a sense this makes the teapot a proxy for Mary Ann's body, conveying her criminal history to contemporary audiences (p. 161).

The idea that “all matter is alive” (p. 11) marks the new materialist approach and is aptly utilized in the discussions of Victorian dresses, houses, and magic in chapters six, seven, and ten. Danielle Mariann Dove examines clothes as matter with agency in Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (London 2004), a neo-Victorian rewriting of the moment when the Victorian novelist Henry James drowned the dresses of his friend Constance Fenimore Woolson in the Venetian lagoon after her suicide in 1894. Dove discusses at length the material qualities, tactility, and sensory responses that the clothes evoke, in order to draw out their “agentic ability” (p. 113). Loaded with memory and history, the inanimate clothes take on a life of their own, functioning as one of the characters with the power to unsettle the narrative. Like the haunted dresses, Brenda Ayres shifts perspectives on haunted houses in neo-Victorian adaptations, arguing that the haunting is not simply a reflection of the inhabitants' repressed desires and troubled psychology. Conversely, the house itself appears as “a living thing with agency” (p. 146), that is, haunted and personified by the inhabitants' emotions. In the final chapter, Ayres provides cross-cultural, historical insights into the personhood of things, and offers an etymological study of the term ‘magic’ to draw a parallel between magicians and philosophers as people with knowledge and control over the reality of things. From this analogy, Ayres argues that the function of neo-Victorianism, like performing magic, is to reimagine and reshape what was in Victorian times.

Neo-Victorian Things successfully situates itself at the intersection of neo-Victorian studies and material culture studies, meticulously examining previously unexplored or overlooked objects. It demonstrates the applicability of emerging strands of material culture as an illuminating reading method, and insists on the productivity and future potential of interpreting seemingly insignificant things. In doing so, the volume encourages the reader to see through the

embedded histories of material things and to change the way we perceive everyday objects. Each chapter revolves around a clearly identified focus, which is to undertake a material reading of a specific neo-Victorian thing in order to retrieve the knowledge and history that surrounds it. A further addition to the volume can be read as multiplying theoretical frameworks. While many of the contributions in the volume rely on postcolonial theory, it would benefit from incorporating disability, ecocriticism and queer theory. Nevertheless, the volume succeeds in vividly illustrating the centrality of neo-Victorian objects in reviving the past and in speaking to our current anxieties about the Victorian past. With its unique and innovative critical approach to neo-Victorian media, the volume broadens and enriches the concept of neo-Victorianism as it has been studied in the postmodern tradition – thus fulfilling its main premises. It is highly recommended for scholars in the field, or anyone simply with an interest in the Victorian past and its relevance today. The use of reader-friendly language and popular media makes the volume appealing not only to the academic reader but also, as the editors dedicate it, “to lovers of Victorian things.”