Back in time for utopia: Neo-Victorian utopianism and the return to William Morris

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Abstract
When we think of the Victorian era, images of shrouded piano legs, dismal factories and smoggy streets often come to mind. However, the 19th century has been rediscovered in recent years as the home of something quite different: bold utopian visions of the future. William Morris' great literary utopia News from Nowhere, first published in 1890, is an interesting case study in this context. Morris' text is the point of departure for a number of recent returns to Victorian utopianism, including Sarah Woods' updated radio adaptation of News from Nowhere (2016) and the BBC's historical reality television series The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts (2019). In this article, I analyse these Morris-inspired texts with the aim of exploring the place of old visions of the future in the contemporary cultural imaginary. Building on previous work in neo-Victorian studies and utopian studies, the claim is made that the return to 19th-century dreams is a plural phenomenon that has a number of divergent effects. More specifically, neo-Victorian utopianism can function to demonstrate the obsolescence of old visions of utopia, prompt a longing for the clarity and radicality of the utopias of the Victorian moment, or encourage a process of rejuvenating the utopian impulse in the present via a detour through the past.

Keywords
Historical reality television, neo-Victorianism, radio drama, utopia, William Morris

The Victorian age has provided a rich storehouse of images of the future for contemporary cultural producers. From the constant reworkings in film and television of H. G. Wells’ classic science fiction novels The Time Machine (1895) and The War of the Worlds (1897) to steampunk’s elaboration of a distinctively Victorian technological futurism

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through the aesthetics of the Industrial Revolution, the spectre of the past continues to shape the cultural imaginary of the future in the present. The paradoxical appeal of yesterday’s tomorrows, or antiquated dreams of the future that were originally articulated in the 19th century, finds expression in the place of Victorian designer, poet and activist William Morris in contemporary culture. Morris’ designs have a pervasive presence in Britain, comprising part of the everyday aesthetic furniture of our lives. Artist David Mabb (2015), in his exhibition *Morris Kitsch Archive*, collected images of over 500 commercially available objects decorated with Morris’ designs, with the obligatory tea towels, bedspreads and curtains nestled among the rather more surprising toolbox, boxer shorts and Wellington boots.

This collection of Morris objects speaks to the banalisation of Morris in recent decades. As Steve Edwards (2002) comments, the presence of Morris kitsch is such that in ‘the world of the new middle class Morris goes with the National Trust, restored Victorian houses, Liberty carrier bags, [and] holidays in France’ (p. 4) as a sign of respectability. Yet, the objects also carry, however faintly, the residue of the radical political context in which the designs they are decorated with were first conceived; they are marked with the ghostly presence of the utopian Morris who imagined the complete transformation of Victorian society. As a designer, Morris pioneered new working practices, rejecting the discipline associated with factory production and prioritising joy in labour, the making of beautiful objects and craftsmanship. As a political activist, he advocated for socialism in its complete form, calling for the abolition of waged labour, money and the state. These two moments come together in Morris’ *News from Nowhere* of 1890, one of the most famous literary utopias of the 19th century, in which the liberated labouring practices of the Arts and Crafts movement are elaborated in a communistic context of equality and freedom.

A number of recent cultural productions have taken Morris’ Victorian vision of the future as a point of departure, working to excavate the utopian content that lies below the surface of the commercial objects decorated with his designs. Two texts are of particular note in this context: Sarah Woods’ updated radio adaptation of *News from Nowhere* (BBC, 2016) and the BBC’s historical reality television series *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts* (BBC, 2019). In each of these productions, reviving Morris in the contemporary moment necessitates the return to his vision of a new world, or, to adapt a title of the BBC historical reality television programme *Back in Time for . . .* (BBC, 2015–present), it involves going ‘back in time for utopia’. In this article, through an analysis of Woods’ radio drama and *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts*, I explore the meanings, functions and effects of returning to Victorian futures. More specifically, I consider what value the return to old utopias has in the contemporary context, addressing the following questions: Why do cultural producers remain drawn to visions of a new world articulated in the radically different context of the late Victorian age? Why is this detour through futures past necessary when it would seem, at least at first glance, quite possible to articulate utopias adequate to the contemporary moment without looking backwards?

To address these questions, I begin by placing Victorian visions of the future in the context of neo-Victorian studies and utopian studies, two fields that, perhaps surprisingly, are seldom brought together in the literature. Building on these bodies of work, I consider a plurality of approaches to 19th-century utopias in the contemporary moment,
outlining three different articulations of the neo-Victorian utopian impulse. Simply put, the repudiatory approach returns to old visions to demonstrate the contemporary obsolescence of utopia, the nostalgic approach longs for the clarity and radicality of the utopias of the Victorian moment and, finally, the resonant approach carefully reinterprets and reworks 19th-century visions to rejuvenate the utopian impulse in the present. In the subsequent sections, utilising this repertoire of approaches to neo-Victorian utopianism, I offer analyses of Woods’ *News from Nowhere* and *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts*. Each of these texts, I argue, articulates a distinctive concatenation of repudiatory, nostalgic and resonant tendencies in their respective returns to Morris.

**Neo-Victorian Utopianism: repudiatory, nostalgic and resonant**

The term neo-Victorianism refers to texts that are ‘self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians’ (Heilmann and Llewellyn, 2010: 4). Neo-Victorianism has become, in recent decades, an increasingly powerful cultural tendency, with scholars noting the flourishing of representations of the Victorian past across a variety of media in the late-20th century and early-21st century, including novels such as A. S. Byatt’s (1990) *Possession* and Peter Carey’s (1997) *Jack Maggs*, film and television adaptations of classic novels by authors including Charles Dickens and the Brontë sisters, documentaries and reality television programmes such as *What the Victorians Did For Us* (BBC, 2001) and *The 1900 House* (Channel 4, 1999), and theme parks and immersive experiences based on the Victorian moment such as Dickens World (Heilmann and Llewellyn, 2010; Kaplan, 2007; Kleinecke-Bates, 2014; Whelehan, 2012).

One of the key insights of neo-Victorian studies has been that this flourishing of revivals and reinterpretations of the Victorian moment is a plural phenomenon; it fosters a variety of meanings and serves many functions (see Higson, 2003; Kleinecke-Bates, 2014; Mitchell, 2010; Primorac, 2018; Sadoff, 2010; Voigts-Virchow, 2009). In contrast to earlier approaches, particularly the emphasis in debates on heritage film on the conservative nature of depictions of the 19th century (see Higson, 1993; Wollen, 1991), my approach begins from the assumption that neo-Victorianism encompasses a variety of different attitudes towards the Victorian era, with this section outlining three different articulations of the neo-Victorian impulse: repudiatory, nostalgic and resonant. It should be noted that the three responses identified are not the only possible ones, with other forms of neo-Victorianism prompting joyfulness in the campness of period productions or metafictional historiographic questions regarding our ability to comprehend the past (Dyer, 2001; Higson, 2003; Mitchell, 2010). Yet, as this section makes clear, the repudiatory, nostalgic and resonant reactions cultivated by the neo-Victorian are of particular importance insofar that they exhibit a privileged relationship with the generic form of utopianism.

The repudiatory articulation of neo-Victorianism can be traced to the publication of Lytton Strachey’s (1918) excoriating account of the 19th century in *Eminent Victorians*, a sharply satirical dismantling of some of the exemplary figures of the Victorian era.
Strachey’s book fostered the sense that the Victorians are other to the modern. That is to say, as Matthew Sweet (2001) comments, the ‘Victorians are the people against whom we have defined ourselves’ (p. 231), with tales – both real and apocryphal – of the prudish shrouding of piano legs, the grinding poverty of Dickens’ London, and Blake’s dark satanic mills of the Industrial Revolution providing a suitably repellent (and, at times, ridiculous) foe for the contemporary moment. In this way, cultural depictions of the Victorian era have the potential to inspire a sense of ‘cathartic indignation at the injustices of [the] past and the satisfaction of distancing ourselves from these prejudices in the present’ (Monk, 1995: 122). A good example of this sense of pleasure in having overcome the repression, inequality and squalor of the Victorian era can be found in Channel 4’s aforementioned historical reality television show The 1900 House, which features a modern family re-enacting domestic life in the late Victorian era. The family is encouraged to adopt strict gender and class hierarchies, in which the women of the house are expected to complete the vast majority of domestic labour with the assistance of a hired ‘maid-of-all-works’. Emily Robinson (2015) comments that The 1900 House, in emphasising the shock and discomfort felt by the modern family towards this situation, presents ‘the past as entirely alien to the present’, thus implying that ‘classed and gendered inequality are all things of the past’ (p. 114; see also Kleinecke-Bates, 2014). In other words, the programme posits that the social relations of the Victorian moment have been rightfully left behind.

Yet, repudiatory pleasure in the otherness of Victorian life does not exist alone; it is accompanied by an undercurrent of nostalgia.1 There is a sense that, while ‘social progress is evident and should be celebrated, it has also gone “too far”’, something valuable – a simpler life stripped of technological distractions, the centrality of the close-knit family unit, and so on – has been lost in the transition to the contemporary moment (Robinson, 2015: 117). It is precisely this nostalgic sensibility that was promoted by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, whose emphasis on the ‘Victorian values’ of thrift, self-reliance and enterprise – recently revived by influential Conservative right-winger Jacob Rees-Mogg (2019) – provided a key ideological element of the neoliberal political project (Samuel, 1992). A conservative sense of nostalgia, as Andrew Higson (1993) discusses, is manifest in terms of the visual image of the past constructed in film and television depictions of the Victorian era. While a repudiatory impulse is often evident at the level of the narrative and dialogue of neo-Victorian productions, they also offer ‘apparently more settled and visually splendid manifestations of an essentially pastoral national identity and authentic culture’ (Higson, 1993: 110), with images of luscious green landscapes and ‘the aestheticization of [. . .] the grim reality of life in the Manchester cotton factories’ producing a rich and alluring spectacle of the English past (Hadley, 2010: 11). The nostalgic articulation of neo-Victorianism prompts a sense of lack in the present, encourages a desire to return to the past, and positions the Victorians as a corrective to the corruptions of the contemporary moment.

The repudiatory and nostalgic articulations of neo-Victorianism, despite their differences, are predicated on the assumption that there is something radically other about the Victorian era: it is either worse or better than the present, but not the same. Another strand of contemporary neo-Victorianism is focused not on the differences between the past and the present but instead on the possibility for resonance between them. An affinity between
the 19th century and the present is posited, with the Victorian era identified as the origin of many phenomena that define contemporary existence; ‘the stuff that surrounds us in the early twenty-first-century world, both good and the bad’ – from feminism to the football league, Christmas crackers to corporate capitalism – emerged in embryonic form in the 19th century (Sweet, 2001: xii; see also Day, 1998; Sanders, 2005). Historian Raphael Samuel (1994), on first seeing photographs of the labouring classes of 19th-century England, felt a strange sense of affinity; the faces looking back at him were both recognisably Victorian and ‘startlingly modern’ (p. 315), simultaneously unfamiliar and contemporary. Given this feeling of closeness, neo-Victorianism provides a means of working through the anxieties and tensions of the present through the reprisal and reimagining of the 19th century. For instance, recent adaptations of Jane Austen’s novels, with their emphasis on strong female characters fighting to ‘have it all’ in the face of patriarchal social relations, function as fables on the postfeminist condition (Ascheid, 2006; Primorac, 2018; Sadoff, 2010). In turn, neo-Victorian cultural artefacts, imbued with the distinctive concerns of the 21st century, recuperate lost, forgotten and repressed aspects of the ‘Victorian underworld’ (Voigts-Virchow, 2009: 109). Good examples here include the exploration of lesbian lives in 19th-century Britain in Sarah Waters’ (1998) novel Tipping the Velvet and the BBC’s Gentleman Jack (2019–present), as well as the focus on the radical movements, sexual politics and multiculturalism of late 19th-century Whitechapel in Ripper Street (BBC, Amazon, 2012–2016).

What happens, however, when neo-Victorianism is mediated through utopia? In one sense, neo-Victorianism already contains an incipient utopianism, with the nostalgic articulation, in particular, involving a desire to return to a world better than that of the present. As Patrick Wright (2009: 74) comments more generally, ‘national heritage [. . .] engages hopes, dissatisfaction, feelings of tradition and freedom’, the ‘positive energies’ prompted by the past having the potential to alter our perception of the present. However, the repudiatory, nostalgic and resonant articulations of the neo-Victorian impulse cannot be straightforwardly or simplistically transposed onto neo-Victorian utopianism. The generic conventions of the utopian form pose a number of challenges to neo-Victorianism as previously conceived. Two elements of the genre of utopia should be stressed here. First, speculative utopian texts are concerned with elaborating societies that are either spatially or temporally displaced from the context in which they are articulated. As Reinhart Koselleck (2002) traces, the utopias of the pre-modern period, as exemplified by Thomas More’s Utopia (first published in 1516), focused on a traveller who discovers an ideal commonwealth situated in a distant place, but by the 19th-century utopian dreams of a new society, such as Edward Bellamy’s (1888) Looking Backward and Morris’ News from Nowhere, were increasingly located not elsewhere in the world but in the future. Second, utopia is ‘the negative of contemporary social, historical reality’ such that it is not ‘the “without-place”, “the imaginary” or “unreal place” [but] rather it is the no-place’ (Marin, 1984: 196). While utopian visions may appear to be the epitome of an affirmative perspective, they involve an important negative element. Within the utopian ‘yes’, there is a ‘no’; the positive vision of a good place involves the negation of a particular state of affairs (Elliott, 1970). These two elements mean that the revival of 19th-century visions of utopia does not involve the return to Victorian society as it actually existed, but rather the return to its radical other. The mediation of the neo-Victorian
impulse through the utopian form results in the transfiguration of the repudiatory, nostal-
gic and resonant tendencies.

Let us begin by returning to the repudiatory sense of neo-Victorianism discussed earlier. In one sense, it is unclear what it would mean to reject Victorian utopianism. The hopes of Victorian utopian socialists, for example, are for the most part unrealised; we do not live in Morris’ craftsperson’s paradise. Yet, there is another sense in which the repudiatory disposition can be combined with a return to Victorian utopianism: that we have in some sense surpassed utopia itself. Victorian visions of socialism, as liberals have long argued, appear hopelessly naïve, and even dangerous, in the context of the experience of 20th-century totalitarianism (Shklar, 1957). Furthermore, after the so-called ‘end of history’, famously declared by Francis Fukuyama when the Berlin Wall fell, a pervasive if not totalising sense of historical closure emerged, with the utopian impulse shrivelling in the face of triumphant neoliberalism and conservative backlashes (Traverso, 2016). To borrow Gustav Landauer’s (2010) terms, it appears that Victorian utopias, visions of the new, were appropriate only for the Victorian topos, the delimited historical context in which they were articulated, but have lost their hold today. Miranda Miller’s (2010) novel Nina in Utopia, which features a Victorian woman called Nina who time travels to London in the mid 2000s, is instructive here. Although there are hints that Nina cannot fully comprehend the complexity of modern London, there is a clear sense of its utopian quality. Easy access to clean water, abundant supplies of food and the absence of corsets imply that the ‘March of Progress’ (p. 40) has completed its course. Neo-Victorian utopianism, on this repudiatory understanding, returns to the 19th century to warn against the excesses of utopianising and demonstrates the limita-
tions of visionary attempts to imagine the future.

The nostalgic articulation of neo-Victorianism also undergoes a change in its confron-
tation with utopianism. Given the oppositional nature of many 19th-century utopian texts, the return to them cannot be said, in any straightforward sense, to involve the celebration of the dominant tendencies of the Victorian moment. The utopias of Morris and others were set against the ‘Victorian values’ that have been celebrated by conservatives from the 1980s onwards. Instead, as Eckhart Voigts-Virchow (2009) notes of the quietly utopian disposition of authors such as Sarah Waters, neo-Victorians ‘harbour nostalgia for the more clearly defined enemy: the Victorian mainstream’ (p. 122; see also Ascheid, 2006). The overt misogyny, extreme capitalism and rampant racism of the Victorian era are thus, perhaps paradoxically, valued because of the clarity and boldness of the utopian visions that they helped to provoke. In a case of what Wendy Brown (1999) calls ‘left melancholy’, neo-Victorians hold fast to old visions of utopia as a means of keeping the desire for utopia alive in times when it no longer appears possible. Eugene Byrne’s (1999) satiri-
cal novel Thigmoo is interesting in this context. The novel focuses on a university project to use artificial intelligence technology to recreate historical figures, including the stereotypically Victorian cockney Nelly, for educational purposes. However, the figures, led by Nelly, escape into the wider world and, after coordinating with the last remaining socialist in Britain, succeed in building an anti-capitalist utopia. The return to the consciousness of the past is a necessary first step to political change; after the end of history, a detour through the Victorian moment becomes one way to salvage a form of oppositional con-
sciousness. However, nostalgic neo-Victorian utopianism, in transposing the visions of
the past into the present, pushes aside contemporary complexities and ambiguities, thus producing a one-dimensional, anachronistic utopia. Rather than the past and present being brought together in a critical confrontation, the dreams of the former are simply transferred into the latter.

Resonant neo-Victorian utopianism occupies a position between the repudiatory and nostalgic approaches. It negotiates between the desire to leave behind old visions of utopia (the repudiatory approach) and the desire to transpose them into the present (the nostalgic approach). The resonant approach brings 19th-century utopian visions to bear on the present to stress the affinities between the two historical moments. The aim is to use archaic visions to stimulate utopian desire in the contemporary moment, with 19th-century dreams for a new world retaining the potential to reshape, if not define, hopeful horizons today. The careful critical task of juxtaposing the old and new brings to the fore the unfinished nature of the past and its untimely hold on the present (Bloch, 1991). Kate Mitchell’s (2010) discussion of the Science Museum’s fully functional model of Charles Babbage’s Difference Engine, which was designed but never built in the 19th century and is widely credited as the world’s first computer, is suggestive in this context. For Mitchell (2010), the model is an ‘anachronism’ in both the 19th and 21st centuries: it does not belong fully to the Victorian era ‘because it was not yet built’ (p. 61) but nor does it belong to the present where computer technology takes a very different form. As such, it has an ‘uncanny presence that somehow produces both alterity and recognition’ (Mitchell, 2010: 61), mixing the past and the future to disturb dominant understandings of both the Victorian era and the present world.2 The model, as with resonant neo-Victorian utopianism more generally, implies that by reviving and revising unrealised Victorian futures we can imagine our own future otherwise.

We’re all in this together: austerity and utopia in Woods’ News from Nowhere

With this repertoire of responses to neo-Victorian utopianism, we are now in a position to turn to Sarah Woods’s radio adaptation of News from Nowhere, which was first broadcast in 2016. Woods’ News from Nowhere sits at the intersection of two tendencies of radio drama production. First, News from Nowhere, which was broadcast as part of BBC Radio 4’s Dangerous Visions series, contributes to a tradition of science fiction radio drama (Milner, 2012). Radio has proved a particularly propitious medium for the adaptation of utopian texts, with Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed (CBC Radio, 1987), James Tiptree Jr.’s ‘Houston, Houston, Do You Read?’ (NPR, 1990) and Thomas More’s Utopia (BBC, 2016) all having been subject to audio adaptations. Significantly, none of these foundational utopian texts have been filmed (Spiegel, 2017). Second, Woods’ drama also reflects Radio 4’s penchant for 19th-century novels, with its schedules crammed with dramatisations of the works of Charles Dickens, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot. The classics are a rich seam for producers, the cultural output of the 19th century offering a cheap yet popular resource to be mined. News from Nowhere, sitting at the fulcrum of science fiction radio and the traditional Victorian canon, looks in two directions at once, both forward to a radically other future and backward to a stable point in the past.
This divided temporal consciousness, caught between past and future, is mediated by Woods’ distinctive concern for the present, and in particular, the contemporary political conjuncture. Woods, a politically committed playwright and performer, foregrounds the relevance of Morris’ utopian vision to contemporary British politics and, in particular, the Conservative Party’s austerity programme initiated after 2010. The drama begins with three activists loading leaflets into a car in preparation for a major demonstration. This activity quickly descends into acrimony after one of the participants declares that the demonstration is akin to the Boatey McBoatface affair, when an online poll for a new scientific vessel resulted in it being given the name Boatey McBoatface by the British public. The claim that the Boatey McBoatface protest is about as radical as British people get, ‘the nearest we get to revolution is trying to give a boat a stupid name’, recognises contemporary scepticism to utopian politics. In line with the repudiatory articulation of the neo-Victorian utopian impulse, the drama thematises the post-utopian context of its audience. There can be no simple transposition of Morris’ vision from the 19th century to the 21st and, instead, the suspicion of the audience of the often outlandish and sometimes dangerous prospect of utopianising is first addressed. The drama is marked by a sense of its own historicity: the return to the utopian vision propounded by Morris is a cautious one, with the listener warned that it should not be taken too seriously. The Boatey McBoatface scene thus acknowledges the potentially ironic relationship between the listener and the utopia that follows.\(^3\)

However, the unsustainability of utopian politics is not left unchallenged. Will, the earnest protagonist of the drama, angrily counters his friend that ‘this isn’t some post-ironic clicktivist day out’ and that the demonstration has no point if it does not ‘change everything’, before storming out. On his way home, Will pleads ‘if I could but see a day of it’, before being transported to a transformed England. Morris’ world of equality, communal self-government and radical deurbanisation finds an echo in the radio drama, with the original text partially transfigured into an object of nostalgia in Woods’ rendering of it. The radio adaptation reconstructs a number of the key scenes in the text that indicate the communistic nature of Nowhere. For example, the misunderstandings between Will and Dick, one of his hosts, are retained: Dick takes offence when Guest offers him money for a boat journey, cannot understand what Will means by a school and assumes it must mean a school of herring, and decides that Will’s reference to poor people must mean poorly people. In other words, Woods – in emphasising the absence of money in Nowhere, its libertarian processes of learning, and lack of a conception of poverty – takes the original text as authoritative in the attempt to imagine a utopian world. Indeed, the radical otherness of Morris’ original vision is stressed by Woods, with Will experiencing a sense of estrangement and alienation in these misunderstandings with Dick (Suvin, 1979). Will’s expectations, whether formed in the 19th century (in the text) or the 21st century (in the radio drama), are disturbed and reformed in the confrontation with Nowhere.

Woods’ \textit{News from Nowhere} is situated between the repudiatory and nostalgic renderings of the neo-Victorian impulse. The resonant quality of the text – its fragile but incomplete hold on the present – emerges from the tension between these two dispositions. Woods’ reimagining of Morris’ chapter ‘How the Change Came’ is of particular significance here. In the original, Morris’ narrator William Guest learns, from the figure of old Hammond, how the utopian society that he experiences came into being. Woods, while
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retaining the dialogue between the visitor and Hammond, changes its content, imbuing it with the specific concerns of the mid 2010s British political scene. The drama splices into Hammond’s tale clips of speeches from major political figures, including Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown talking about the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and his Liberal Democrat deputy Nick Clegg addressing the government’s austerity programme, and Labour opposition leader Ed Miliband discussing government debt. Snippets of anti-austerity protests are also heard, with chants of ‘no ifs, no buts, no education cuts’ and ‘save our NHS’ interposed into Hammond’s speech. These references to contemporary politics then move, almost seamlessly, into the speculative part of Hammond’s history, where he describes how the austerity politics of the government set in train a series of events that eventually resulted in the revolutionary transformation of British society. As Richard J. Hand and Mary Traynor (2011) comment of the use of this technique in radio drama more generally, the ‘clever contextualization of the recording from real life [. . .] turns the recording from a piece of factual information into audio drama’ (p. 43). In the context of News from Nowhere, the technique has a very specific effect. The meaning of ‘news’ in the title of the drama is doubled: it comes to refer both to the mundane realities of contemporary politics, as connoted by the snippets from speeches, and the possibility of the world remade, as indicated by the dream-like descriptions of Will’s sojourn in Nowhere.

The emphasis on the contextually bound questions of British politics in the 2010s could be seen to limit the scope of Woods’ News from Nowhere, with one reviewer noting that the reference to Boatey McBoatface is ‘destined to wither faster than the speed of meme’ (Horáková, 2016). However, the ephemeral nature of political references in Woods’ drama can be understood to be part of their point. Woods stages a juxtaposition between the transient events of British politics in the 2010s and the transtemporal potential of Morris’ utopianism. In presenting utopia as unfolding out of the contingent phenomena of the present, there is the implication that Morris’ future is our future and vice versa. In the movement between the original text and the radio drama Woods fosters a sense of resonance between the visions of the 19th century and possibilities in the contemporary moment: to return to Landauer’s (2010) terms, the contemporary topia – austerity, financial crisis and clicktivism – finds a response in the Morrisian utopia – equality, freedom and abundance.

This entwinement of the 19th-century past and 21st-century present is encapsulated in the final moments of the drama. Will, having returned to the 21st century and found himself in the midst of the demonstration he was preparing for before he entered Nowhere, repeats the final lines of Morris’s text, stating ‘if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream’ (Morris, 1912b: 211). These words, however, are spliced with snippets of a speech delivered by a demonstrator in which she states ‘we’re all in this together [. . .] and this is the beginning’. There is thus a repetition of Morris’ original text but, tellingly, with a difference (Hutcheon, 2006). The demonstrator satirically references a famous, and much-mocked remark, by Prime Minister David Cameron in which he suggested of the government’s austerity programme that ‘we’re all in this together’, a fact belied by evidence that the poorest and most vulnerable were hardest hit (Brady et al., 2012). In placing Morris’ words next to Cameron’s, Woods draws out the closeness of Victorian futures to austerity Britain. In
the rewriting of *News from Nowhere*, Morris is stretched beyond his 19th-century origins to make a polemical intervention into the politics of today.

**If you can make it work: re-enacting utopia in *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts***

At first glance, *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts* might appear to offer something quite distinct to Woods’ *News from Nowhere*. The ‘House’ format of historical reality television, of which *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts* is a recent addition, is hardly known for its utopian qualities. This genre, which centres on the experience of people who are placed in a particular historical setting and encouraged to conform to its norms and values, was initiated by *The 1900 House* in the late 1990s and the format has since spawned countless other programmes focussed on re-enacting the past (De Groot, 2009; McElroy and Williams, 2011). Historical reality television, as the name suggests, ‘combines elements of historical documentary with reality television’s generic tropes’ (McElroy and Williams, 2011: 80). From historical documentary, re-enactment shows draw on the knowledge of academic experts on the period and use original source materials to demonstrate the non-anachronistic nature of the historical environments constructed but, in line with reality television, the shows focus on the experience of the reenactors with the camera capturing the intimate details of the lives of the participants (De Groot, 2009; Kleinecke-Bates, 2014). Importantly, the genre, for the most part, emphasises the hardships undergone. As Robinson (2015) suggests earlier, *The 1900 House* repudiates the Victorian moment. By re-enacting the unequal gender and class roles of the late Victorian period, the present is posited as better than the past. Stephen Gapps (2007), commenting on the Australian series *The Colony* (SBS, 2005), notes that the programme is centred on ‘the drama of “will they survive the hardships of the olden days?”’, and thus is more concerned with ““how to live without toilet paper, TV and electricity” than how to experience early colonial Australia” (p. 70).

The coming together of historical documentary and reality television is evident in *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts*. The show is focussed on the experience of a group of six modern crafters who are encouraged to live according to the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement. Each week the crafters are tasked with creating a particular object and are expected to take original designs from the Arts and Crafts movement as their inspiration. In the first episode of the series, Patch Rogers, who is introduced as an Arts and Crafts expert, informs the crafters that ‘over the next month you are going to make twelve classic Arts and Crafts pieces, some of them taken from this original Morris & Co catalogue’. The show’s authenticity is constructed through a combination of specialist knowledge and original sources from the period, as represented by Rogers holding up Morris’ company’s wallpaper catalogue from 1905 to the crafters. The challenges faced by the crafters in attempting to create Arts and Crafts pieces using only the tools available to the movement in the late Victorian period is then emphasised: the camera lingers on the laborious task of working without design software, modern machinery or power.
tools; the simmering conflicts between the crafters provide dramatic tension; and the crafters’ joy in successfully producing beautiful objects offers narrative closure.

Yet, there is something about *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts* that sets it apart from many programmes in the historical reality television genre. *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts* breaks from the emphasis on hardship in its evocation of the utopian potential of the past: we can return to Victorian hopers to learn something valuable for the present. In an introductory sequence repeated at the beginning of each programme, presenter Anita Rani – speaking over images of Victorian craftspeople at work and classic Arts and Crafts designs – informs the viewer that the Arts and Crafts movement ‘hated the drudgery and ugliness of the industrial age’ and hoped to ‘bring joy to work, share knowledge, and make beauty accessible to all’. The crafters who have entered the house will, Rani suggests, be ‘living the Arts and Crafts dream’ by recreating the ‘high utopian ideals’ of the movement. The viewer, who is assumed to be unfamiliar with the radicalism of the Victorian age, is thus carefully brought into the utopian world of 19th-century crafters (perhaps, partly, to pre-empt the charge of anachronism). Indeed, the Morrisian origin of the ideal community the craftspeople recreate is made clear. In the first episode, potter Keith Brymer Jones quotes Morris’ famous statement that ‘fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death’ (Morris, 1912a: 230), one of the crafters is tasked with creating a Morris-style wallpaper design, and Morris is subject to a short profile by Rani. Morris’ *News from Nowhere* is to *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts* what George Orwell’s (1949) *1984* is to *Big Brother* (Channel 4, Channel 5, 2000–2018): a speculative, literary point of inspiration for the creation of an intentional community.

The focus on the Morrisian origins of the Arts and Crafts house has an important effect. The programme puts great emphasis on the politically radical nature of the Arts and Crafts movement. Rani – shortly after the viewer is shown an image of Morris with the Hammersmith Socialist League standard – states that the movement was not just about ‘pretty wallpaper and embroidered cushions’ but also the idea that ‘art could help to end social inequality’. In the third episode Rani, after describing the socialistic commitments of illustrator and designer Walter Crane, encourages one of the crafters, Niamh, to ‘get into the mind of a socialist designer’, prompting her later in the episode to incorporate James Oppenheim’s (1911) socialist poem ‘Bread and Roses’ into her design. *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts* thus departs from other crafting programmes, such as *Kirstie’s Handmade Britain* (Channel 4, 2011) and *The Great British Sewing Bee* (BBC, 2013–present). Whereas the latter cultivate a conservative disposition predicated on ‘austerity chic’ and the retrosexual appeal of the 1950s housewife, *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts* returns to crafting traditions to draw out their oppositional qualities (Hatherley, 2016; McElroy, 2017). The use of terms such as ‘dream’, ‘ideal’ and ‘utopia’ by Rani, as well as the intertextual references to the socialism of Morris and his fellow Arts and Crafts pioneers, suggests that the practices recreated by the crafters continue to resonate in the present. That is to say, the future hoped for by the original participants in the Arts and Crafts movement, though unrealised in its own time, works to reform horizons of expectation in the present. The show locates the practices of the crafters in the temporal realm of the not-yet; insofar that the old dreams of crafting were not realised, they retain something for the contemporary moment.
Yet, the resonant articulation of neo-Victorian utopianism in *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts*, in contrast to Woods’ *News from Nowhere*, is overshadowed by the repudiatory and nostalgic articulations. These latter tendencies manifest themselves in a number of ways. For example, in line with the repudiatory disposition to yesterday’s tomorrows, the socialist ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement are framed in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Rani, in the opening sequence, states that the Arts and Crafts movement’s commitment to end social inequality through art ‘is a great idea, if you can make it work’. When delivering this remark, Rani raises her eyebrows and puts one finger in the air, subtly suggesting to the viewer that the workability of utopia is somewhat questionable. Furthermore, in the final episode of the series, the crafters reflect on what they have learnt from their time in the Arts and Crafts house. The emphasis here is on the individual, rather than collective, possibility for transformation, with the crafters suggesting that the experience has increased their sense of joy in work, taught them the value of collaboration and demonstrated the need to return to older methods of craft. In Peter Thompson’s (2013) terms, a privatisation of hope has occurred. The grand utopian demands for the remaking of society that were introduced at the beginning of the series are reduced to lessons for individual crafters that can be instituted without structural change in society. In other words, the dominant neoliberal tendency of reality television predominates: change can only happen at the individual level (Redden, 2018).

The resonant sense of not-yetness is also undercut by the visual spectacle of crafting offered in *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts*. The programme transposes, in a nostalgic fashion, the vision of Morris-inspired socialist utopianists into the present. As such, period tools are used, 19th-century style clothes worn, and meals are cooked from recipes contained in Mrs Beeton’s famous Victorian cookbook. This attempt to faithfully reconstruct the visions of Victorian socialists, however, reproduces familiar images of an idealised Victorian past. The way in which the show, like many other neo-Victorian film and television productions, relies on previous visual images of the Victorian era is crucial here (Primorac, 2018; Whelehan, 2012). Footage of the country house selected as the location for the series and its carefully sculpted garden, combined with images of the luscious, verdant countryside that surrounds the house, strongly recalls the *mise en scène* that predominates in period dramas focussed on the exploits of the rural upper classes of the 19th century (Higson, 1993; Kleinecke-Bates, 2014). As such, for all the sense of the utopian possibilities that still reside in the Arts and Crafts movement at the level of dialogue, the visual depiction of utopia suggests a pre-industrial pastoral idyll connoting the world of the Victorian rural gentry.

*The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts* can be instructively compared to Woods’ *News from Nowhere* here. The latter, relying on the dream-like, poetic quality of the medium of radio, or the fact that it ‘liberates and evokes’ rather than demonstrates and shows (which may, incidentally, be why the form has proved so suited to the dramatisation of utopian texts), gives the listener freedom in imagining utopia (McWhinnie, 1959: 37). Part of the reason the drama succeeds in resonating in the present is that its non-visual form allows, even stimulates, the listener to rework Morris’ vision of a new world. In contrast, the fact that *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts* elides its Victorian vision of the future with recognisable images of the Victorian moment blunts its resonant quality. The Morrisian vision of utopia, it appears, is caught in the Victorian moment and
unable to escape from the confines of its origins. The identification of utopia with a particular moment in the 19th century results in the programme having a closed quality; the viewer is given less licence to reform past futures for the present.

**Conclusion**

As this final comment on *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts* suggests, and the article as a whole has implied, the three forms of neo-Victorian utopianism identified are not of equal significance, with the political potentialities of the resonant articulation outstripping the repudiatory and nostalgic articulations. To bring the article to a close, it is worth considering why the resonant disposition is of particular value. Baldly put, the resonant approach rejuvenates the utopian impulse in the contemporary world in a way that the repudiatory and nostalgic approaches do not. Clearly, the repudiatory articulation, in declaring the obsolescence of utopia, does little to spark a renewed sense of hope. For example, the Boaty McBoatface scene in Woods’ *News from Nowhere* and Rani’s jokey framing of Victorian dreams result in a sense that there is something indelibly and inevitably outdated about the hope for the utopian transformation of society. The privatisation of hope in *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts* provides one way in which the utopian impulse is neutralised; society is immunised from its effects and its power is confined to personal transformation.

Something similar occurs, perhaps paradoxically, with the nostalgic approach to 19th-century utopias. Without the critical work of bridging the gap between the Victorian utopias and the topos of today, neo-Victorian utopianism slips into the conservative idealisation of the 19th century. In *The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts*, the sense of the radical new at the heart of Morris’ utopian impulse is blunted by the attempt to transpose the hopes of the Arts and Crafts movement into the present. The utopias of the past become a curious historical artefact; a vision of costumed figures acting out an anachronistic fantasy that has no power beyond the moment in which it was elaborated. As with the repudiatory articulation, the potency of utopia is dulled by the nostalgic disposition, the latter producing a ‘unifying spectacle’ of history that is ‘purged of political tension’ (Wright, 2009: 65). In contrast, Woods’ dramatisation of Morris’ *News from Nowhere*, while remaining faithful to the original text, ultimately avoids approaching it nostalgically. By interweaving between politics in the 2010s and Morris’ utopia, new potentialities in the latter are brought to the fore. To borrow Dudley Andrew’s (2011) terms, the vertical connection to the original source text is mediated by the horizontal connection to the world of the present.

As Woods’ *News from Nowhere* exemplifies, returning to Morris’ utopia can help to foster a sense of affinity between yesterday’s tomorrows and today. The resonant approach to 19th-century visions has the potential to bring together utopians of the past and present, taking old dreams as a springboard to draw forth the possibilities for radical change in the contemporary moment. If utopia is understood as a ‘desire’, an ever-mutable yearning ‘towards a better way of living’, rather than a ‘blueprint’ outlining the exact contours of the future world, then Woods’ resonant approach can be understood to act on the repressed utopian desire – the denied dreams and disappointed hopes – that lie just under the surface of contemporary culture (Levitas, 2013: xii–xiii). In brushing futures past against the
distinctive tensions of the contemporary world, each is changed by the other. On the one hand, ‘the end of history’ is disrupted by the positioning of Morris’ vision of a new world as something that emerges out of the quotidian cycles of British politics; the 19th-century utopian horizon casts a new light on the characteristic debates of the present. On the other hand, Morris ceases to be a figure solely concerned with the toposia of late Victorian England and, instead, his utopia is made to speak to the austerity politics of 2010s Britain. By drawing out the untimely qualities of Morris’ original vision, the utopian impulse in the contemporary moment is stimulated and strengthened.

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Notes

1. While there are many different types of nostalgia, in this article the term is used to refer to the unreflective longing to reconstruct a lost moment in the past, or what Svetlana Boym (2001) calls ‘restorative nostalgia’.

2. Babbage’s unrealised computer provides the point of inspiration for William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s (1991) classic steampunk novel The Difference Engine. This text, an alternative history that charts the consequences of the machine being successfully built in the 19th century, has similar defamiliarising effects to the Science Museum model (see Sussman, 1994).

3. Another contemporary response to Morris’ utopianism, Robert Llewellyn’s (2011) tellingly titled literary utopia News from Gardenia, employs a similar strategy. News from Gardenia’s paratexts – the sections of the text that frame the main body of the text – are of particular significance. The novel is dedicated to Llewellyn’s children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren ‘just so they can have a laugh’ (p. ii), while the preface notes that the ‘list of leaders who tried to impose Utopia on their long-suffering subjects is all too easy to recall’ (p. x). In this way, Llewellyn’s Morris-inspired utopian vision is positioned as an object for debate rather than a vision to be wholly affirmed, a stimulant to the imagination not a blueprint to be implemented.

4. The coming together of craft programming and historical reality television in The Victorian House of Arts and Crafts indicates the hybridity and porosity of the latter form; it takes up the resonant concerns of television more generally and displaces them into history. For example, Jerome De Groot (2010) has explored how the Channel 4 historical reality show The Diets That Time Forgot (2008) intersects with a broader trend in lifestyle television focused on issues of obesity, health and body image.

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