

Time Machine Fashion: Neo-Victorian Style in Twenty-First Century Subcultures

Christine Feldman-Barrett

In 1895 H.G. Wells presented readers with a novella that would become the standard bearer for all subsequent narratives concerned with time travel. In her 2005 introduction to *The Time Machine*, literary scholar Marina Warner describes Wells's story as indicative of "an era of unsurpassed scientific discovery [when] many Victorian scientists were developing the technologies that would create the modern world" (xx). While earlier novels such as Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) played with the notion of travelling backwards or forwards in time, *The Time Machine* truly emphasised the relationship between such temporal journeys and a particular object or vessel that would make them possible. While Wells's story focuses on a trip to a distant, dystopian future, the time travel genre in contemporary popular culture texts have, instead, focused on travelling back and experiencing, if not trying to "correct", the past. This is the case whether looking at past or present episodes of *Dr. Who* or now-classic films like *Back to the Future* (1985) or *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986). In these narratives, characters do not passively observe events, but become immersed in them and hope to change them via the supposed clarity of hindsight.

Like H.G. Wells's iconic time machine itself, material objects have the ability to travel through time and become markers of the past (Gosden and Marshall 169). They become vessels for considering both "what has been" and "what could have been". They bear the scars of history, but they also remain open to contemporary reinterpretation. Furthermore, while objects from Wells's own, Victorian era—from furniture to clothing—still circulate today (albeit mostly in the protective environment of museums), the reproduction and use of such items raises further questions about the relationship between material history and identity construction. Specifically, this article examines how three contemporary subcultures utilise neo-Victorian fashions, accessories, and motifs to construct their identity. In exploring this relationship, it is clear that the use of such items function metaphorically as a "time machine", whereby subculturalists reinvent or subvert the Victorian imaginary for their own, contemporary ends.

Subcultural identity in the twenty-first century is best understood when situated within the larger discourse of the postmodern. Certainly, David Muggleton's idea that current allegiances and social groupings should be called "post-subcultures" is important to consider in this context. In his writing on the subject with Rupert Weinzierl, the authors emphasise that "fragmentation, flux, and fluidity... [are] central" to understanding today's youth and subcultural formations (3). Furthermore, and despite this rebranding of subcultures in the postmodern era, distinguishing oneself from mainstream society continues to be attractive to those looking for an alternative youth (or adult) identity. Thus, those searching for a truly "different" identity will look to varied sources for inspiration. According to Iain Chambers, and similar to this notion of "fragmentation", the physical manifestations of identity come from a mix of "what is available in the shops, in the market, and the imprint of our desires", which ultimately "produce the distinctive and the personalized" (11). Importantly, he adds that "Sometimes the result will stand out, disturb and shock the more predictable logic of the everyday" (Chambers 11-12). In this sense, the adoption of Victorian motifs rattles the everyday logic and look of the early twenty-first century. This tinkering with the styles of an

era long past asserts that keeping within the confines of the present day is both “predictable” and boring.

As will be demonstrated in this article, the three subcultures presented here, goths, Lolitas, and steampunks, fragment notions of the “Victorian” in exciting and distinct ways. Each group, by seeking out images and ideas of the nineteenth century, upsets familiar perceptions of this era: goths challenge the stark stratification of social class, Lolitas empower the childlike, and steampunks question the mythology and chronology of “progress”. In doing so—by literally sporting designs, symbols, and motifs of this time period—these subcultures suggest that a revised vision of the Victorian past may be a more interesting and fulfilling way to live in the twenty-first century present.

Fashion Revivals as Time Travel and “Spectacular Subcultures”

Reading through fashion historiography, it becomes clear that the key tension inherent in this area of culture and identity is the one between past and future played out in the present (Simmel 303). Sociologists who study fashion do so because it is linked to “the history and sociology of cultural production in which new interpretation of symbolic values are created and attributed to material culture” (Crane and Bovone 320). In this regard, clothing, as material artefact, creates impressions that suggest the verities of cultural life from past to present. Fashion can also anticipate or look to an ideal future for inspiration.

When examining clothing trends, there is a strong connection to the temporal, as particular styles tend to go in and out of fashion over time. Since the rise of couture houses and, much later, the department store, the cyclical and commercial nature of fashion within modernity has created a cultural norm that both anticipates the future and celebrates the past (Corrigan 47-71). In this sense, the metaphor of the “time machine” also works well to explain this aspect of clothing history. To quote Heike Jenss, wearing fashions of the past “opens up an imaginary time travel, technically realized through the interconnection of dress and space” (390-91). There have been several periods in fashion history where designers and other visionaries tried to predict future styles. Interestingly, both the Victorian period and the Mod period of the mid-1960s exhibited such trends. Designers were keen to envision the years to come as de-facto “futuristic” in ways that were influenced by science fiction novels and, later, films (Feldman 29-34).

The fact remains that while some subcultures around the world have taken to wearing forms of neo-Victorian clothing, it is definitely far from a mainstream habit. As previously mentioned, it is, in fact, yet another way to differentiate oneself from the conventionality of mainstream fashion choices. Thus, these styles are revived among the interested few. In thinking about such phenomena, it is helpful to know that there is a precedent for reaching back in time for sartorial inspiration.

The fact that neo-Victorian fashions have been adopted by at least three of today’s subcultures points to the notion that past styles can be integrated into contemporary repertoires of identity construction. Moreover, there is also a history of fashion revivals in general that can be traced to the Victorian period itself. In several cases, young people were at the heart of these movements. During the mid- to late-1800s there were some youths who longed for—or were inspired by—images and ideas from the pre-industrial era, which they perceived as better times. Since the Victorian period was the first modern era to be wedded to urbanisation, industrial might, and, in countries like Britain and Germany, expanding “Empire”, the wearing of “historic” garb was attractive to those who associated the present day with grime, crime, crowded cities, and the cultural shift from handmade to mass-

produced goods. In Wilhelmine Germany, which ran parallel to the Victorian period, boys and girls who belonged to the nature-oriented *Wandervogel* youth movement shunned city life and associated all its ills with the older generation. They romanticised provincial, medieval Germanic culture and, as part of their imaginings, hiked through the countryside and wore what they believed was the dress of the “wandering scholars” of the Middle Ages. Sometimes they would even carry old-fashioned string instruments with them, such as lutes (Savage 101-112). Meanwhile in Britain, a group comprised primarily of young artists and writers, known as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, similarly rejected the trappings of modernity and turned to what they imagined as the softer and more sensual styles of both the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. This often manifested in the artists’ models and wives dressing in loose, flowing gowns that were meant to emulate these earlier times (Wilson 230). This choice was significantly countercultural at the time, as it was “a significant break from the conventional French fashion commonly associated with Victorian culture” (Blanchard 25). As a result, some of these women took to wearing this style of dress every day. This is known today as the Victorian period’s “aesthetic dress movement” (Steele 152-156).

While some Victorian-era youths adopted motifs of a pre-modern society, groups of post-World War II teenagers looked back to both the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for their subcultural fashion choices. In 1950s Britain, young males began wearing long-drape jackets of the Edwardian cut, hence becoming known as “Teddy Boys” (Guffey; Guffey 102). To some extent, this fascination with nineteenth-century style continued during the height of 1960s “Swinging London”. The trendy Carnaby Street boutique I Was Lord Kitchener’s Valet featured recycled colonial uniforms, while another popular shop, Biba, also offered “retro-escapism” through both reconceptualised art nouveau decor and Victorian and Edwardian fashions (Sarah Elsie Baker 623; Phil Baker 55; Hoare 278).

A newfound appreciation for Victoriana was not just a British phenomenon. Starting in 1965, and on the other side of the Atlantic, a San Francisco-based rock band called the Charlatans played a long-term engagement at Nevada’s historic Red Dog Saloon, where Victorian Americana was being celebrated as well. Because the venue was located in the nineteenth-century mining town of Virginia City, both the Charlatans and saloon employees would wear dandified “Wild West” outfits (Lau). There is some speculation that this choice was a sartorial response by the band to the so-called British Invasion music acts like the Kinks, whose onstage look included nods to Victorian-style attire (Feldman 28). Additionally, in her book *Retro: The Culture of Revival*, Elizabeth Guffey links psychedelic rock posters of the mid-1960s, including those advertising the Charlatans’ Red Dog Saloon tenure, to a revived interest at the time in art nouveau images and fonts. She attributes this, in part, to the Aubrey Beardsley exhibit at London’s Victoria and Albert museum during the summer of 1966 (Guffey 8, 58). By the late-1960s, designer Laura Ashley was creating a mainstream clothing line that presented a less radical form of neo-Victorian fashion. According to one scholar, “Ashley’s style possessed old world charm with individual rustic freshness, reflected in traditional beliefs of bygone days...Victorian nightshirts, Edwardian-style dresses [and] the introduction of the long smock in 1968” (Brown and Rhodes 31). Ashley’s designs were much more subdued than the dandified manifestations of Swinging London or San Francisco’s Summer of Love. The designer’s interpretation was wed to “romanticism, conservation... an alternative to modern living, pop culture, mass produced clothing” and her “convincing beliefs in past values, quality, and the revival of romantic simplicity” (Brown and Rhodes 31).

As seen here, the overwhelming pattern for subsequent generation's engagement with Victoriana is connected to the notion of stepping outside the confines of mainstream, contemporary society. Those in the 1950s and 1960s who tried to incorporate the fashions and motifs of this earlier modern period adopted clothing that would have been nondescript or ordinary in the late nineteenth century and, yet, by pulling it into the present, they made it extraordinary. This is unsurprising in the sense that youth subcultures since the postwar period have often emphasised the "spectacular" as a way for young people to differentiate themselves from what they see as the mundane scope of everyday, adult life (Hebdige 73). In this sense, subculturalists today who don capes, top hats, corsets, or frilly finery are just as confrontational in their sartorial non-conformity as the safety-pin-and-leather-jacket-wearing punks would have been in the late 1970s. Clearly, these "groups actively seek to attribute new symbolic values to clothing by altering them or by combining specific items in new ways" (Crane and Bovone 323). However, today's neo-Victorian subculturalists not only confront the present's supposed uninspiring mediocrity. They also question and subvert our understanding of the Victorian past itself. In their use of nineteenth-century motifs, they also rebel against aspects of the period that are found distasteful in today's world. In this sense, these subculturalists literally embody the project of neo-Victorianism, which "looks into the processes and politics of adaptation [and that] shape our contemporary perspectives of the past" (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2). Furthermore, in their intellectual and sartorial journeys into history, these groups prove that utilising "the past" does not relegate "the Victorian" to something long ago. Instead, as David L. Pike insists, these contemporary reinterpretations belong more so "to the world of the present, even as they propose an entirely different relationship to the present, its spaces and its objects" (266). Given this framework, the next three sections of this article look at how goths, Lolitas, and steampunks each utilise Victorian fashion and motifs differently to "travel back in time" and re-interpret history in order to invigorate their contemporary everyday lives.

Goths: Correcting the "Horror" of Social Hierarchy

Clichéd notions of Victorian Britain are fraught with images of both darkened and damp rooms and equally mysterious, foggy city streets. Less romantic are the "stereotypes about the Victorian period as a dark age dominated by the various injustices of sexism and sexual repression, racism and classism which Western modernity has subsequently sought to overthrow" (Ferguson 71). When examining the goth subculture and its appropriation of Victorian fashions, it is clear that both the period's "dark glamour" (Steele and Park) and its horrors of social inequality are simultaneously on display.

The goth subculture began in the post-punk period of late 1970s Britain. By the mid-1980s, goths were easily recognisable due to their preference for "black hair and clothing and striking styles of makeup for both males and females" (Hodkinson, "Ageing" 266). This visual preference was wedded to a penchant for gloomy, dirge-like music produced by bands like Bauhaus and the Sisters of Mercy *and* a fascination with classic horror literature and media (Hodkinson 2002 36-37; Steele 2008, 41). It is little wonder, then, that Bauhaus's 1979 song, "Bela Lugosi's Dead" is considered by both goths and outsiders to be the subculture's anthem. Bram Stoker's fictional character of Count Dracula, created in 1897, has also become a primary way in which goths have come to connect with the Victorian period and its adherent style. Indeed, goths gather for a bi-annual weekend event in the Yorkshire seaside town of Whitby because Bram Stoker was inspired to pen *Dracula* while visiting there (Carpenter 26, 28; Gagnier 293; Goulding and Saren 29-30).

While goths continue to opt for wardrobes dominated by the colour black, Victorian styles also have a pronounced presence within the subculture. It is unsurprising that the tradition of “mourning wear” has gained a lot of traction with those who celebrate the macabre and funereal (Benesh-Liu 40). As fashion historian Valerie Steele suggests, “elements of Victorian fashion, such as mourning dress and corsets, became incorporated into goth style, precisely because (from a modern perspective) they seemed desirably ‘dark,’ ‘romantic,’ ‘mysterious,’ and ‘macabre’” (Steele and Park 105). For some within the goth subculture, these Victorian motifs play an important role in self-presentation. Goth women with an interest in nineteenth-century style will wear corsets and ankle-length dresses or skirts, while the men might wear top hats and waistcoats. This is often mixed with more contemporary elements such as piercings or tattoos (Hodkinson, “Ageing” 41-46). The goth interpretation of the Victorian age might be akin to Dickens’s description of Miss Havisham in her lonely cobweb-ridden chambers. The character’s world is dark and ghostly, illuminated only by candlelight. While a fiction, this literary image of the nineteenth century—with an eeriness similar to that of Stoker’s *Dracula*—is one that goths might find alluring and attractive. In reappropriating the Victorian age, goths connect with what Steele describes as both the “romantic... and the dangerous” connotations of the period (qtd. in Burstein 264).

This engagement with dark romanticism notwithstanding, the symbolic work that goths do through choosing neo-Victorian garb, especially considering the time machine trope, is the subversion of norms of Victorian social hierarchy. Of particular importance is the fact that there were vast inequalities between the highest and lowest classes. The industrialised world of the Victorian era hardened social stratification so that the notion of “class” became a stereotypically British problem, and, even, a “national obsession” (Bradley 7). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels lived in British exile starting in 1849 and their observations of inhospitable housing, people in ragged clothing, and inhumane working conditions among the English working class makes it easier to understand why the founders of Communism based their theories on much of what they witnessed there (Cowdon 34-52). The quality of life for working-class Britons did not seem to fit with most connotations of the word “progress”, and even elites—living under much better conditions—longed for a pre-industrial “green and pleasant land” (Burchardt 8, 16-17, 19, 21, 26; Thompson 15, 33-34; Blake 841).

During this first modern period, there was a lot of anxiety among the wealthy surrounding potential class upheaval. Being able to identify people’s social position based on clothing helped ease upper-class paranoia (Dorré 159). According to fashion scholar Alison Lurie, this was a time when dressing “above one’s station was considered... deliberately deceptive” (116). The fact that goths today may choose to dress like a nineteenth-century “vampiric” aristocrat, does not just echo the subculture’s desire to embrace gothic horror, but presents “an inversion of social order... what once was a symbol that demonstrated one’s artificial elevation over another human being is now the potential adornment of a commoner” (Benesh-Liu 40). A current goth website called *Gothiclandia* features a section on “Victorian Goths”, which underscores how specifically upper-class pastimes of the era are incorporated into these goths’ leisure activities. Such pursuits include “theatre, masquerades, tea parties... and, naturally, any kind of Dickensian or other Victorian festival” (“The Victorian Goth”). In this assessment, it is evident that those activities associated with the highest echelons of Victorian society are preferred and adopted by this contingent of goths.

In this twenty-first century, postmodern reconfiguration of Victoriana, goths experiment with images and activities from a past that marginalised and limited most people in terms of both sartorial expression and, also, leisure time. However, in the current century, links between the

working-classes and subcultural affiliation and hence, dress, are weakened (Muggleton 211-212). Interestingly, today's goths tend to come from the middle class (Hodkinson "Ageing" 267). In this regard, the consumption and donning of elegant, neo-Victorian dress exemplifies both the supposedly democratic ethos of the middle classes and, also, any further ambitions of upward mobility to which this specialised sub-group of goths aspire.

Lolitas: Empowering Victorian Girlhood

As many a Dickens novel illuminates, young people often were depicted as powerless within the cultural constructs of the Victorian age. Moreover, this was not just a literary invention, but a social reality that existed—often regardless of class position (Cunningham 95; Gillis 56). Minors were beholden to a society that looked upon them either as "little adults" or those who saw them as easily manipulated creatures (William Chambers 13-15). While some scholars have pointed out that the era's boys' and girls' "adventure magazines", show a broader reality to the era's childhood experiences, stereotypes of helplessness or lack of agency continue to dominate this particular discourse about the Victorian period (Fulton 4-5; Smith 2). It is tightly within the stereotype of girl children during this time that the Lolita subculture has formulated its images and perceptions of this era.

"Lolita" (usually written in plural) is an originally Japanese and primarily female subculture that has now become a transnational phenomenon. Though their moniker suggests the titular character of the infamous Nabokov novel, there is much more emphasis on "innocence" than "experience" among those within the subculture. Wordplay aside, Lolitas generally refute any direct connection to Nabokov's character (Winge 47-48).

Steele states that the Lolita look "might feature a black Victorian-style dress, usually knee-length, ruffled and worn with a crinoline, together with myriad accessories, such as a parasol, bonnet, and Mary-Jane-style platform shoes" (Steele and Park 54). There are several cohorts of Lolitas and "gothic Lolitas" are just one variety. These Lolitas tend to favour black as much as their goth counterparts. However, regular Lolitas or specifically named "Victorian" or "Sweet" Lolitas dress instead in bright pastels or all-white to underscore the childlike ethos promoted by this subculture. This style emphasises the frills of nineteenth century dolls' clothes and is an overt homage to Victorian girlhood, which is perceived as the prime embodiment of innocence.

Unlike goths, there is no universal fascination with the morbid aspects of Victorian culture or with dark, brooding rock songs, unless, perhaps, a girl specifically identifies as a "gothic Lolita". Many Lolitas listen to a music style called "Visual Kei" that, while still very theatrical, is more influenced by buoyant pop and rhythmic heavy metal than it is by gothic or alternative rock (Ishikawa). Within this subculture, too, less palatable aspects of the period's childhood experiences are subsumed within a narrative that highlights the whimsical and delightful aspects of a long faded past. Winge believes that the "fashions, poses, and mannerism [that create] this neo-Victorian perspective helps the Lolita achieve a type of escape from dominant Japanese ideology, culture, and society" (60). Intriguingly, Lolitas' neo-Victorian dress is complemented by their use of "schoolgirl speech", which is a form of Japanese developed during the Meiji Restoration: a period that also spanned the mid-nineteenth century. By adopting this patois, the Lolita subculture asserts its Victorian allegiances both visually and aurally (Gagné 132).

The significance of the Lolita subculture as an initially Japanese one calls into question the role of women in Japanese society, whether past or present. In my study of Mod culture in Japan, it was clear that the adoption of *kawaii* (or, "cute") culture was integrated within

female Mods' reinterpretation of this mid-1960s style. The Mod era's premiere supermodel Twiggy, for instance, experienced a resurgence of popularity in the Japanese marketplace during the early 2000s. Her sixties-era, teenage visage was attached to the promotion of various products, while newly minted Twiggy dolls were also available (Feldman 180-182). In now examining the Lolitas, and their adoption of motifs indicative of Victorian childhood, it is clear yet again that among contemporary Japanese women "cuteness is considered... to be a virtue" (Richie 54). While the addition of *kawaii* may suggest a culture-specific idiosyncratic worship of the childlike or "cute", Alison Lurie also attaches this perspective to Western culture during the nineteenth century. She writes that the early Victorian period, in particular, valorised a girlish and/or childish look for women that emphasised frailty and innocence. In her words, "Rather than looking as if she were about to bounce away like a hot-air balloon, [the Victorian woman] seemed hardly strong enough to stand upright without the support of her clothes" (Lurie 64).

The identity work performed by Lolitas indicates scepticism of the adult world and, thus, acts as both a form of fantasy and, surprisingly, empowerment, too: "By wearing a childlike Lolita style in a fantasy setting, the wearer may enter into an imaginary world and momentarily remove her/himself from everyday reality. It is a form of escapism—a way of escaping from adolescence or adulthood and returning to childhood" (Rahman et al. 10). In this form of "time travel", the neo-Victorian imaginings of Lolitas, as expressed through frills and lace, reconfigure nineteenth-century childhood as a utopian Never-Never land filled with plush toys, flowers, and parasols. One Japanese observer takes the "Lolita look as a sign of anxieties resulting from growing up in a nation beset by economic insecurities since the early 1990s" (Parker A1). Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, today's Lolitas seek "alternatives to the adult society of arbitrary laws, tyrannical rulers, and double talk" (Warner xvii). In this respect, rather than symbolising the stifling or repressive experiences associated with growing up in the nineteenth century, perceptions of a Victorian childhood paradoxically become an empowering space for young women to inhabit. Like goths, Lolitas have found yet another way to use nineteenth-century motifs to exist "differently" in today's world.

Steampunks: Re-imaging Progress, Technology, and Chronology

While goths sartorially question past notions of class and Lolitas toy with concepts of a Victorian childhood, it is the steampunk subculturalists who tinker with notions of "time" itself. This is unsurprising given the more recent literary roots of the subculture. Starting in the 1980s, authors such as William Gibson, James P. Blaylock, and Bruce Sterling wrote "speculative fiction", that, among other things, imagined what it would have been like if the computer had been invented in the Victorian period (La Ferla; Onion 140). In end effect, steampunks imagine the world of yesterday as if was more technologically advanced than it was in reality.

Historians posit that modernity or the "modern age" resulted from cultural transformations linked to industrialisation, technology, and capitalism (Misa 5). These changes became pronounced by the mid-nineteenth century with the rise of factories and the growth of cities. In sum, this was a time when the notion of forward-thinking and "progress" was culturally lauded in many parts of the Western world. Given the plethora of digital and mostly "invisible" technologies that abound today, it would be easy to assume that our culture has, indeed, continued to progress. However, steampunk subculturalists actively interrogate today's technological world via fashion and lifestyle aesthetics linked to art and technology. In doing so, they ask: Is the digital world a better world? Could technology have evolved differently? It is little wonder that this subculture has its roots in a subgenre of science fiction

and that a popular steampunk shop in London proudly displays “a wood and brass ‘time machine’ straight out of H.G. Wells” as the store’s centrepiece (Hantke 247; Sullivan 5).

Steampunk fashion itself might best be summed up as the style attributed to that of Victorian adventurers or “mad” inventors. Members of this subculture can be identified by their “Kevlar corsets, dreadlocks and fascinators, parasols and body piercings, heavily-embellished waistcoats—and accessories such as aviator goggles, button-up boots and studded gloves” (Tyler 22). Ostensibly, even just the wearing of brass goggles atop one’s head would have been seen as quite specialised or eccentric gear even during the Victorian period itself. Just as Lolitas dress more like Victorian dolls than the children of the era, steampunks seem to manifest the style of characters found within the pages of fantastical novels written at this time. In this sense, steampunks want to channel and make manifest the Victorian “world of tomorrow” envisioned, at least in part, by writers like H.G. Wells and Jules Verne (Barratt 175).

This subculture articulates Victorian visions of the future made of steam and mechanical gadgetry, which in turn informs its fashion sense. As one American journalist describes it: “Steampunk encompasses music, art, and fiction, and combines brass-and-iron aesthetics of the Industrial Age with punk style... [it is] part Jules Verne, part Joey Ramone” (“Of Gears”, 2011). Or, as Ruth La Ferla so vividly describes, the fashion of steampunk is “corseted, built on a scaffolding of bustles, crinolines, and parasols”. In creating this neo-Victorian aesthetic, these particular subculturalists embrace a future-that-never-was in the age of digitalisation and miniaturisation. By fetishising the mechanical and steam-powered, steampunks bring tangible, tactile aesthetics back to technological objects. Instead of the mostly invisible pattern of zeros and ones that powers the digital age, steampunks retrofit or create artefacts that explicitly and physically show users how they work: all mechanisms are on display (Miller and van Riper 87; Barratt 170). This perspective might best be summed up in the words of musician Robert Brown, who is a member of Seattle steampunk band, Abney Park. In his view, “We’re living in a world where everything is a beige plastic box, so going back to a world that was elegant and beautiful has an appeal” (Sullivan 5).

Important, also, is the fact that steampunk is determinedly cross-cultural in its reading of Victoriana—combining references to Wild West Americana with British and European imaginings. While this is not always evident in steampunk fashion itself, it is clearly visible in media texts celebrating the aesthetic, such as the 1995 film *Wild, Wild West* (Miller and Van Riper). Notably, the original, 1960s TV series upon which the film is based, was “steampunk” in style decades before the term or subculture actually came into being. It does this while, as previously mentioned, adopting punk attitude and conventions, hence one half of the subculture’s moniker. In Steele’s view, “Steampunk is not a nostalgic evocation of upper-class neo-Victoriana, but rather an aesthetic technological movement with anarchist undertones, linking punk’s aggressive do-it-yourself ethic with an ancestral gallery of absinth addicts, dandies, and mad inventors” (Steele and Park 108).

There is an overt questioning of progress and technology within the steampunk aesthetic. Linear time itself is being questioned, especially in relation to industrial time. Alongside the reference to steam technology, clockwork gadgetry features prominently within the subculture (Barratt 175). While this interest in the mechanisms of clockwork may again have to do with an aesthetic preference for overtly visible or tactile technology, it also evokes more philosophical meanderings linked to the concept of time itself. Writing about the relationship between time and fashion, Peter Corrigan writes, “Our present clock-sense of time is a result of a long drawn-out process of civilization... it results from the demands of

increasingly larger and more urbanized and mechanized human settlements” (47). In the Victorian period, inventions like the telegraph and “standardised time” also made people think about time differently. It literally organised people’s experiences in a more regulated manner (Carey 201-230). It is no wonder that writers like H.G. Wells began to think more whimsically about the “what ifs” behind time, its “flexibility”, and one’s movement through space. Thus, the steampunks’ own neo-Victorianism is embedded in a search for an alternative past that can inform an alternative present. In David L. Pike’s astute understanding of steampunk, this subculture’s practices equate with a “shredding of conventional temporality” (265). Here, a rethinking of Victorian style provides a fantastically non-mainstream way to experience contemporary life, because staying within one’s own time (or, even, historical fact) will always be much too conventional.

Conclusion

Theorists like Frederic Jameson might read neo-Victorian subcultural styles as part of postmodernity’s endless repetition of past images and styles. However, one might instead view this phenomenon as one that “compresses time to meld both old and new in a pastiche, an endeavour that seeks to redeem the past” (Barratt 175). Inevitably, subculturalists who choose to don “spectacular” nineteenth-century motifs in fashions are evoking the “Victorian Other”, which positions them as “more liberal and liberated, open-minded and knowing” (Primorac 42). In this way, the adoption of neo-Victorian fashion in particular “de-realises a verifiable Victorian past. The objective, empirically-verifiable forms of domination associated with the nineteenth century are to be recognised, then dismantled through acts of fancy and imagination” (Ferguson 72). Whether identifying as a goth, Lolita, or steampunk, those who inhabit such sartorial sensibilities are metaphorically travelling back in time to “correct” aspects of Victorian life that could have been more enjoyable for more people—or could have evolved in a different manner. Moreover, it is crucial to recognise that this “post-subcultural” project also demonstrates that current interpretations of the Victorian help produce a decidedly alternative lifestyle choice for those living in the twenty-first century.

Lastly, it is important to remember that neo-Victorianism is not and never can be truly “Victorian”. As Paul J. Nahin writes in his book *Time Machines: Time Travel in Physics, Metaphysics, and Science Fiction*, “The Victorian Age appeals... but before you go back, you’d better have your eyes and teeth checked and make sure you’re not poor” (31). Clearly, neo-Victorianism of the subcultural kind uses the materiality of fashion to reinvent historic realities. Through the use of clothing, engagement with a period that was as painful as it was productive and energetic, allows for a potentially more multivalent discourse regarding this past. In the end, because subcultural fashions can be found “on the street”, such nods to the nineteenth century assure a recurrent presence of Victorian fashions that is almost vampiric in nature. As Steele has it, “Although fashion is the modern measure of time, it also exists outside the organic cycle of birth, death, and decay. The human body may age and die, but by celebrating novelty and artificiality, fashion promises seasonal renewal and eternal youth” (65). Thanks to goths, Lolitas, and steampunks, re-imagined aspects of the Victorian era live on in the twenty-first century—as if sent by H.G. Wells’s time traveller himself.

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