Troping the Neo-Victorian City:
Strategies of Reconsidering the Metropolis

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Abstract:
The reinvention of nineteenth-century cities in and for the present involves extensive troping within the contexts of writing, reading, sensual apperception, and physical remodelling. The period’s metropolises are variously resurrected as heritage sites to be preserved and financially exploited, as nexusus of Gothic fascination and terror, and as eroticised matrixes of capitalist romance and exchange. Although hardly limited to remediated nineteenth-century cityscapes, tropes of the city as palimpsest, labyrinth, and Whore of Babylon feature particularly prominently in neo-Victorian fictions, films, radio plays, and urban conservation and redevelopment programmes. Nineteenth-century metropolises continue to actively haunt present-day cityscapes and inform our kaleidoscopic engagements with postmodern urbanity in aesthetic, affective, and cognitive as well as physical and sensual terms.

Keywords: capitalism, the city, Gothic, kaleidoscope, labyrinth, metropolis, ‘making over’, palimpsest, romance, troping.

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Writing about cities, or rather writing cities, necessitates a figurative language and, inevitably, the resort to tropological discourse. For as Penelope Lively remarks in her quintessentially urban novel City of the Mind (1991), every city is a “kaleidoscope of time and mood” (Lively 1992: 3) – doubly so in the case of cities of other times re-imagined for present-day consumption. Not least, in the latter case, what Burton Pike terms the city’s “double reference, to the artifact in the outside world and to the spectrum of refractions it calls into being

1 Lively’s novel can be considered neo-Victorian in the broadest sense of the term, as its protagonist specifically engages with London’s Victorian architectural heritage and the novel also includes an interpolated nineteenth-century narrative (see below).
in the minds of author and reader”, is doubled again, combining past and present examples and refractions of “real city” and “word-city” into an ever widening imagistic sweep (Pike 1981: ix, x). Yet Lively’s metaphor also works in reverse, with the kaleidoscopes of past cities reshaping the physical contours of today’s metropolises in globalised world economies, which self-consciously adapt and re-use the earlier period’s material traces for political and practical purposes, as well as cultural and capital gains. Take London’s Victorian underground system, for instance, the first of its kind in the world, twenty-six “ghost stations” of which the Old London Underground Company plans to redevelop into new attractions – “[t]hink of elevator-shafts-turned-climbing-walls and 24/7 karaoke clubs where there were once secret war rooms” during the Blitz – or the underground’s “forerunner”, the Thames Tunnel, built by Marc and Isambard Brunel and “[h]ailed as the ‘Eighth Wonder of the World’” at its opening in 1843, which is now to be repurposed into “a proper amphitheater […] hosting concerts” (Ajudua 2014: n.p.). Past and present, one might say, function as the angled reflective mirrors of the city-as-optical-instrument through which we discern the continuously shifting, (r)evolving, and repeating patterns of human lives and societies through history.

1. **Encounters with the City**

Through innovations such as intensive industrialisation, transport infrastructure, drinking water and sewerage systems, large-scale social housing projects (juxtaposed with inner city slums), the establishment of formal education and law enforcement, and the introduction of mass media and new modes of communication (the telegraph and telephone), nineteenth-century cityscapes – arguably more so than those of earlier or later historical periods – laid the foundations of modern urban living. Hence the nineteenth century continues to actively shape our experience of postmodern city spaces and configurations. Indeed, the act of physically or vicariously inhabiting cities is also a kind of troping, for cities are always encountered imaginatively as much as experientially. As Carl E. Schorske notes, “[n]o one thinks of the city in hermetic isolation. One forms one’s image of it through a perpetual screen, derived from inherited culture and transformed by personal experience” (Schorske 1998: 37, see also Lynch 1975: 4). Comparably, Hana Wirth-Nesher asserts that “the