chapter 5

Sonorous Psychopaths: Neo-Victorian Ventriloquists on Screen

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Abstract

This chapter argues that the depictions of murderous ventriloquists in the twentieth-century films Cavalcanti's *Dead of Night* (1945) and Richard Attenborough's *Magic* (1978) show elements of the Victorian philosophical and cultural milieu and are ‘neo-Victorian’. Firstly, the filmic depictions represent ventriloquism as both a psychological phenomenon and, at the same time, maintain a possible supernatural explanation for the event. This will be traced back to competing worldviews within Victorian culture. Secondly, the association of entertainment with the murderous, of spiritualism with villainy – as well as Gothic elements such as an emphasis upon sensational events, doubling, and self-consciousness about storytelling within the films – owes much to Victorian popular culture. There are formal strategies, such as deliberate misdirection, or extra diegetic moments, that filmmakers use comparable to the strategies of the Victorian entertainer, the ventriloquist, magician or spiritualist.

Keywords


Can the twentieth-century filmic representations of murderous ventriloquists, Cavalcanti's *Dead of Night* (1945) and Richard Attenborough's *Magic* (1978) be productively read as ‘neo-Victorian’, traced through, as they are, with elements of the Victorian philosophical and popular cultural milieu? I hope to prove that such an approach is indeed productive.
The term neo-Victorian, here, is employed in the sense that Heilmann and Llewellyn use it,1 to describe a tendency in contemporary culture, and my specific interest here is film, to critically engage with the nineteenth century, to display a tenacious desire to negotiate the present through a range of (re)interpretations of the nineteenth century (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010:3). Helen Davies uses the metaphor of ventriloquism to examine how neo-Victorian texts ‘talk back’ to the Victorian era and here, following her analysis, I claim that the films under analysis transform rather than passively replicate in dummy-like fashion, nineteenth century themes and meanings. Another appropriate critical term extant in the field that accurately describes my positive, transformative understanding of the relationship between neo-Victorian texts (the films) and the Victorian past, is the visual term “refraction”, where a ray of light changes direction on entering glass at an angle.2

Victorian popular culture was pivotal in shaping a perception of ventriloquism as mysterious and dark in the face of a growing Enlightenment tendency to demystify it. In this sense, we still view ventriloquism today through the Victorian Gothic lens. The legacy of ‘the double’ as murderous and uncanny is familiar to us from such late Victorian fictions as Jekyll and Hyde and The Picture of Dorian Gray. A number of Victorian texts elaborate key ventriloquial themes including: “anxiety over the ‘origin’ of voice; the figure of the sinister ventriloquist; currencies of influence and possession” (Davies 2012: 8). These themes feature in both movies.

It was at this historical moment, in the nineteenth century, that ventriloquial performance was established as an indoor stage act, it emerged as part of a theatre’s bill of fare, consisting of the ventriloquist and the figure of the dummy.3 Victorian concerns with the nature of the ‘self’, sensational murder and its links to entertainment haunt both films, amounting to the cinematic afterlife of a very Victorian phenomenon.

Dead of Night and Magic were selected for analysis because they are serious treatments of ventriloquism and the psychology of performance, and feature

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1 See Helen Davies’ Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction, particularly the introduction, where Davies sketches the ‘plurality of voices’, and competing terms to describe Neo-Victorianism, terms such as “retro-Victorian” or “post-Victorian novel” (Davies 2012: 2).
3 Ventriloquism was established as the act we know today, with the ventriloquist and the figure of the dummy, in the nineteenth century. Fred Russell with Coster Joe consolidated this model in the 1880s. A number of performers used the dummy even earlier, see Steven Connor’s book Dumstruck (Connor 2000: 249).