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# Confluence and the Neo-Victorian in *Dickensian*

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Armelle Parey

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- 1 'If Dickens's critical reputation has had its ups and downs over the years and if the tide of his literary fame has turned on several occasions, it seems that his power of attraction among today's novelists may well be at its peak' (Letissier 2012a, 245-6). The attraction mentioned here has led to novelists engaging with Dickens's work by rewriting it in various ways.<sup>1</sup> Dickens has also been a favourite for screen adaptations and, according to Joss March in 2001, 'more films have been made of works by Dickens than any other author's' (204).<sup>2</sup> Dickens's work has also taken precedence in TV adaptations (see Butt 167) undoubtedly both building on and adding to the Victorian novelist's popularity, even though these have rarely encountered approval from academia: 'In discussion of TV drama and in the field of adaptation studies, classic novel adaptations are constantly critiqued as overly theatrical, formulaic, commercially driven commodities that are aesthetically unimaginative, conservative, and nostalgic' (Butt 160). These screen adaptations however focus normally on one particular novel.
- 2 *Dickensian* purports to be different: in the 20-part-drama aired during the winter of 2015-16 on BBC1, TV screenwriter Tony Jordan, credited as the creator of the 30-minute-episode serial,<sup>3</sup> ambitiously takes on a whole universe, the one created by Dickens, with characters from various novels now all featuring and interacting in the same televisual text, illustrating the process of confluence. In the BBC press Pack Jordan explained his project was to take a selection of Dickens' most iconic characters and free them from the narrative of the book: 'The key for me was not to simply do another adaptation of the novels, but to take the characters that we all love from all those novels and mash them up to make something new and original' (5).<sup>4</sup>
- 3 It thus appears that Kathryn Hughes's words (2010) have become literally true: 'Dickens's characters appear to have become untethered from their texts, even from their creator's control' (qtd. in Letissier 2012b, 31). Or have they? Have they really become emancipated

from their source text? How far have they travelled from their original part? The serial is entitled *Dickensian*. The suffix '-ian' signifies likeness: it means 'alike, relating to'... i.e. not identical. The title sequence confirms this when it announces the serial is '*inspired by the works of Charles Dickens*' (italics mine). The very title claims affiliation while allowing for distance. 'Dickensian' is an adjective that suggests certain themes—'relating to or associated with Charles Dickens [...] ; relating to conditions, esp. squalid social or working conditions, like those described in his novels' (*Chambers*). It is interesting to note that 'even those who are unfamiliar with Dickens's works understand what is meant by the adjective derived by its name' (Boyce 3), which suggests that the word has acquired a certain independence from the work it comes from, because some of Dickens's novels have this doubleness indeed: 'the text that Dickens wrote... and the one that we collectively remember' (see Paul Davis qtd. in Louttit 92). Finally, 'Dickensian' is also a noun that refers to, as the *Chambers* dictionary states, 'an admirer or student of Dickens' which indicates homage.<sup>5</sup> The title chosen thus delimits the topic while remaining quite open.

- 4 'All adaptation is interpretation' (205) Joss Marsh concisely says and this paper seeks to address the navigating done in *Dickensian* between closeness and distance, as well as the possible foregrounding of the phenomenon: while *Dickensian* appears postmodern in its blurring of boundaries, in its confluence of novels, how much of a self-conscious re-engagement with Dickens's fiction does the serial offer? Is this representation of Dickens's work 'neo-Victorian' in the definition established by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewelyn which posits that distance must be signalled in form and theme? 'Texts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect *be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*' (4, emphasis in the original), as opposed to mere representations of the Victorian era that 'lack imaginative re-engagement with the period, and instead recycle and deliver a stereotypical and unnuanced reading of the Victorians and their literature and culture' (6). In order to analyse if the process of confluence in *Dickensian* makes the TV serial a neo-Victorian production, we shall first focus on the selection of characters and stories that feature in the serial, then study the workings of confluence, before examining the development of certain themes in the serial and, finally, the distance taken from the generic conventions of the classic serial.

## Characters and stories

- 5 Supported by a cast of well-known British actors, the BBC production appropriates the world of Dickens via a selection of the novelist's best-known stories and characters. For instance, it begins on Christmas eve and Scrooge's office features prominently so that the viewer is immediately reminded of *A Christmas Carol*. This story, according to Chris Louttit, is, along with *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* among 'Dickens's most frequently-adapted texts' because 'all contain quasi-mythic, iconic characters like Fagin, Sikes, Scrooge, Magwitch and Miss Havisham [...] an obvious attraction to film-makers and actors involved in bringing them to the screen' (92) and indeed, all these characters feature in *Dickensian*.
- 6 Yet, the BBC production does not depict Scrooge's revelation brought about by Marley's ghost. Scrooge remains an obnoxious miser throughout the serial and the focus is on his employee, Bob Cratchit, and his family. Similarly, *Great Expectations* is evoked but rather

than Pip's story, we follow Miss Havisham's. Miss Havisham, Georges Letissier rightly observes, is 'the one who is the most easily remembered and the most often mentioned' (Letissier 2012b, 33). But in fact, in every Dickens novel used as intertext, *Dickensian* picks characters and stories that are incidental and could range as Barthes's 'catalysers,' supplementary events, in the original novel (see Porter Abbott 23-24): not Scrooge but the Cratchits, not Esther Summerson but Lady Dedlock (*Bleak House*), not the story of *Oliver Twist* but that of Mr Bumble and his wife's efforts to rise in the world, and that of Nancy's relationship with Fagin and Bill Sikes.

- 7 In theory, the secondariness of these characters in the Dickens novels allows for their development in the serial. In fact, the characters that migrate from text to screen do so with their identifiable characteristics and their stories mostly run their course. Yet, developing these characters allows for the addition of ambivalence. Thus, there is the suggestion that Compeyson, the villain who colludes with Arthur Havisham to deceive his sister in *Great Expectations*, eventually falls in love with his victim. Characters in *Dickensian*, however, never act out of character and are never deliberately made to go against verisimilitude<sup>6</sup> or 'act [...] contrary to their costumes', which is one way for neo-Victorian adaptations to signal distance from the nineteenth century and the fact that we are dealing with a reconstruction of Victorian times (Whelehan 273). The purpose of the serial is indeed to offer the viewer the possibility to discover or rediscover Dickens's actual characters<sup>7</sup> and some key-scenes are therefore included. Here, as in a number of post-Dickens representations, Miss Havisham is eventually 'easily identifiable through a set of formulaic features' (Letissier 2012b, 31): the wedding cake covered in cobwebs, the faded wedding-dress and the non-ticking clock all feature in the final episode of *Dickensian*. Similarly, *Oliver Twist*, found on the docks and committed to the poorhouse by a thoughtful inspector Bucket (Stephen Rea) who leaves him with the advice 'you must speak up for yourself' (episode 12), remains an unnamed presence in the margins until the last episode where the famous 'Please, Sir, I want some more' scene is enacted.

## Mashing-up the Detective Story, the Prequel, the Serial and the Soap Opera

- 8 These characters and the stories they originally belong to are some of the threads that the BBC serial takes up, in order to knit together a new story. The process by which characters from different novels now evolve in one sole universe can be referred to as a mash-up ('a mixture or fusion of disparate elements' *OED*).<sup>8</sup> In the case under study, it involves a mix of (sub)genres and formats as *Dickensian* partakes of the detective story, the prequel, the serial and the soap opera. The blurring of boundaries between (sub)genres draws attention to the mode of representation and conveys a neo-Victorian dimension to the production as it 'self-consciously engage(s) with the act of (re)interpretation' (Heilmann and Llewelyn 4, emphasis added).
- 9 When *A Christmas Carol* begins, Scrooge's partner is dead and the story is about Scrooge's transformation. Jacob Marley (Peter Firth) is alive at the beginning of *Dickensian* and his murder on Christmas eve—which sounds like an echo of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*—at the end of the first episode triggers an investigation by Mr Bucket, the detective officer from *Bleak House*. *Dickensian* thus purports to be a detective story. Yet, the question 'who killed Marley?' runs only as a thin thread through the serial with episodes hardly mentioning or

advancing the inquest in any way. The identity of the murderer is surprisingly solved in episode 18, that is two episodes before the end, thus breaking one of the basic rules of detective narratives. Moreover, after much debating, Inspector Bucket chooses not to reveal the identity of Marley's murderer and to let her go unpunished, a decision that paradoxically satisfies the reader's sense of justice but conveys an overall image of a chaotic and unfair system. Finally, one may note that the function of the detective is ironically (for the twenty-first century viewer) emphasised as a novelty in the following dialogue between Inspector Bucket and Mr Venus (a character out of *Our Mutual Friend* played by Omid Djalili) whose personal story is not developed but who appears throughout the serial as Bucket's friend and confidant:

MR VENUS So if I might ask, what's this new detecting thing I've been hearing so much about?

BUCKET We have a new department. To be called 'The Detective', more than just keeping the peace, we are to be sent out to investigate crimes.

MR VENUS 'Investigate'?

BUCKET To gather evidence and to track down the perpetrator of the crime. (beat) We are to be called 'detectives'.

MR VENUS Well I've never heard of such a thing. (beat) You think it'll catch on? (Shooting script, episode 2)

- 10 The effect of this dialogue is comic but also reflexive as it may remind the twenty-first century viewer that Bucket is considered as one of the first detectives in fiction: 'Dickens [...] introduced the first police detective into fiction with Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House* (1852-53)' (Sutherland 181).
- 11 The characters are Dickens's and they are not: very few shots actually represent episodes written by Dickens because, as suggested above, the serial also works as a prequel to the novels. For instance, *Dickensian* focuses on the story of Lady Dedlock, the character who is revealed to be Esther Summerson's mother in *Bleak House*, before her marriage to Sir Leicester. The serial develops the circumstances of the birth of Esther. It depicts how a youthful, lively and carefree Miss Honoria Barbery (Sophie Rundle) engaged to Captain Howden (Ben Starr) becomes the cold hostess of Chesney Wold. In the same way, we are shown how a young and spirited Amelia Havisham (Tuppence Middleton) transforms into Dickens's Miss Havisham. Basically, as illustrated with Marley's ghost appearing to Scrooge at the end of the final episode, *Dickensian* ends where the novels start. This echoes Jean Rhys's famous prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Yet in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Rhys actually gives a voice to the first Mrs Rochester whereas *Dickensian* essentially fleshes out what Dickens delineated in analepses.
- 12 *Dickensian* has the ampleness of the TV serial format that narrates the stories of a fairly large number of characters. This very form and its structure 'as a series of narrative parts that end temporarily before being resumed in the following episode, a structure of anticipation and suspense' (Butt 169) echoes the Victorian multi-plot novel as well as serialization principles used by Dickens himself whose novels were published in instalments and conceived as cliff-hangers. Thus, at the end of each episode of *Dickensian*, a small discovery or event brings the action to a head and/or raises new questions. For instance, episode 12 ends on Miss Havisham accepting Compeyson and episode 13 on the revelation of Honoria Barbery's pregnancy. In terms of editing, *Dickensian* is remarkable for its quick succession of short shots that keep the viewer alert to the different threads. Indeed, like an omniscient narrator, the camera moves from one cluster of characters to another. Sometimes these shots include no dialogue, just the soundtrack,<sup>9</sup> and, especially

when placed towards the beginning or the end of each episode, have the function of reminding the viewer where the situation stands for each storyline. With this visual 'retelling, reminding and catching up viewers about every element in the scene' (Mittell 237) and its 30-minute format, *Dickensian* veers away from the classic serial towards the traditional soap opera and its 'poetics of slow-paced redundancy' (Mittell 237).

- 13 Announcing the variety of characters, the title sequence of the serial shows the outlines of the various actors on a blank background while the credits roll: the emphasis is placed on the silhouettes of the characters who are shown ambling along, crossing each other's path to the sound of music. Indeed, Mr Gradgrind (from *Hard Times*) has the means to promote Mr Bumble (Richard Ridings) from *Oliver Twist* to a higher position. One of Bob Cratchit's sons (from *A Christmas Carol*) is in love with Little Nell (from the *Old Curiosity Shop*). Jaggers, a criminal lawyer in *Great Expectations*, now acts as lawyer for all. Yet, despite the confluence announced and illustrated in the examples above, interaction remains mostly spatial and visual, for the viewer's benefit only, notably via one-shot sequences that visually criss-cross characters and stories: for instance, early in episode 17, a one-shot sequence starts with soundtrack music as the camera first focuses on Inspector Bucket leaving Mr Venus's shop, then as Bucket crosses and leaves the shot Compeyson previously in the background comes to the foreground and leaves the shot too at another angle while a voice belonging to the Cratchits's son is heard before the camera eventually focuses on the group. Actual diegetical interaction, however, remains limited or marginal. Honoria Barbery and Miss Havisham are friends but no story develops out of the interaction between these characters from different novels. Their paths cross but they go on along their set courses, Amelia Havisham to be deceived by Compeyson and Honoria Barbery to take up the role of Lady Dedlock.
- 14 While their tragedies inexorably unfold, lighter episodes also take place. As in Dickens's novels, moments of drama alternate with comedy.<sup>10</sup> Here, comic relief is provided, for example, by the relationship between the Bumbles, with Mrs Bumble (Caroline Quentin) titillating her husband, playing on his lust and never satisfying it, and in some episodes, by the misunderstanding between Mrs Gamp (played by Pauline Collins and originating from *Martin Chuzzlewit*), always looking for a gin, and Silas Wegg (out of *Our Mutual friend* and played by Christopher Fairbanks), here landlord of the pub 'The Three Cripples' (out of *Oliver Twist*) who mistakes her offer to look after him and his wooden leg: Mrs Gamp offers her services as a nurse in exchange for a few glasses of gin, while Silas thinks she is offering sexual favours.
- 15 Unity between the various threads and the diverse genres is provided by other elements, such as the setting and the regular insertion of shots of the same streets in which all characters evolve. A number visit or pass The Old Curiosity Shop tended by Little Nell (Imogen Faires) and go to the same pub (The Three Cripples), the place for the finale when listening to Nancy from *Oliver Twist* singing 'I dreamed I lived in marble halls'. Finally, unity is also provided by the camera movements that, like an omniscient narrator, glide from one set of characters to another.

## Neo-Victorian themes?

- 16 The world of Dickens is suggestive of certain themes such as poverty, as a threat or as a reality, acting as fear or motivation. To name a few examples: Little Dorrit's father is in prison for debt, Oliver Twist along with Jo in *Bleak House* struggle against poverty, there

are also greedy characters such as Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* or Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield*. One may wonder if the re-presentation of Dickens's characters in *Dickensian* is the opportunity for a form of rewriting (as in 'writing back' or challenging) that would be visible in the choice of themes that particularly resonate at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For its part, neo-Victorian fiction tends to expose the hidden or ignored aspects of Victorian times, to give a voice to the silenced voices, such as ethnic minorities, women, the low-class (as Michael Faber did for instance with the prostitute Sugar as a heroine in *The Crimson Petal and the White*) and the homosexuals (as in Sarah Waters's novels).

- 17 *Dickensian* retains money as a pervading force: Marley is a moneylender; Barbery is on the brink of ruin; the Cratchits are struggling to make ends meet; Arthur Havisham hates his sister and brings about her downfall because she, not him, inherited their father's brewery; streetwise Nancy says of Marley: 'I know what killed him: money...' and she elaborates cynically with 'love doesn't feed you [...] I'll take money against love any time. Only a fool would say otherwise' (episode 9). The theme of money is in keeping with Dickens's world but it also has a special ring in the Great-Britain of 2016, still struggling, as appears in the 'one nation concept' taken up by major contemporary politicians like David Cameron,<sup>11</sup> with the inequalities between the two nations originally depicted by Benjamin Disraeli, a contemporary of Dickens, in *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845).
- 18 Next, *Dickensian* certainly displays the neo-Victorian concern for the suppressed voices of history in its overall emphasis on women. The story of Miss Havisham's betrayal merely appears in an analepsis in *Great Expectations* and in other characters' narratives: Herbert's in Part II is complemented by Magwitch's in Part III. In *Dickensian*, the limelight falls on her: she becomes the heroine of her own story, to which we have access directly, unmediated by other characters' narratives. '(A) spoilt child' and an heiress (178) in *Great Expectations* (Part 2, chapter 3), Miss Havisham is a strong-willed level-headed young woman who is faced with her brother's hatred. As in the novel which states 'she was too haughty and too much in love, to be advised by anyone' (172), she is the architect of her own ruin as she refuses to heed her friends' warnings and cautionary advice regarding Compeyson. In addition, she is, in *Dickensian*, a victim of gender prejudice: will she be judged competent and will she be trusted at the head of her late father's brewery? Adversity due to her sex makes her more fragile and Arthur and Compeyson are shown to take advantage of this. Dickens's rendering of women in his novels often adopts the stereotype of the virtuous wife and mother (Sanders 72), the sacrificial angel of the house like Dora in *David Copperfield* or Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*. *Dickensian* however complexifies matters by making the warm and loving mother, Emily Cratchit, a murderer.
- 19 Money and feminist representation of women merge in the BBC production where Amelia Havisham cries in vain 'I will not be bought' (episode 20) while Compeyson is convinced to leave by a present of 10,000 pounds; it is a world where Nancy is bought by Sikes from Fagin and where Honoria Barbery is shown to consciously sell herself to Sir Leicester to free Mr Barbery of his debtors and save the honour of the family. In *Dickensian*, Nancy speaks for the downtrodden, here the women, pointing to the unfairness of society: 'Marley dies and there's you with your questions but girls like me die every day and nobody cares. I've got no cause to believe or trust the law' (episode 4). All social classes are represented, from the wealth of Satis House to the slums on the docks. *Dickensian* does not outdo Dickens in terms of images of poverty and squalor as Dickens' own descriptions of low life are already squalid enough (see, for instance, Jo in *Bleak House*). *Dickensian* has

no directly corrective aim as it never goes against what Dickens wrote but one may note a wish to complement the source text by including social evils, unspoken of at the time. One notes the presence of actors from ethnic minorities in the cast, notably to impersonate Little Nell and The Artful Dodger.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, an episode reveals the existence of child trafficking organised by Fagin and Marley between London and the US, much in the same way as Clare Boylan denounced child prostitution in *Emma Brown*, her continuation to Charlotte Brontë's unfinished *Emma*.

- 20 *Dickensian* offers little 'sexing up of the past' to use Whelehan's words about neo-Victorian fiction.<sup>13</sup> Homosexuality is alluded to with Arthur Havisham. The way he looks at Compeyson's body suggests longing and this is confirmed by Compeyson's taunting: 'Why did your father love you less?' and 'I know your secret' (episode 5). No queering of our perspective on sexuality is at work in the serial. Contrary to Sarah Waters who revisits the Victorian era in her novels with the addition of homosexual characters thus rewriting our traditional view of the era, *Dickensian* is more Victorian than neo-Victorian and Arthur's sexual tendency is suggested as a source of shame and remains unnamed. There is no visual emphasis on sex, no shot that depicts Nancy's trade. Honoria Barbery and Captain Hawdon may kiss in the street but, in order to indicate sexual congress, the camera demurely rests on their discarded clothes. Where sex is concerned, *Dickensian* remains more Victorian than neo-Victorian insofar as it is marked by no excess and does not aim at shocking its audience. The aim of the show was to be popular, as Dickens was, not challenging.

## Revisiting the classic serial

- 21 As indicated earlier, the neo-Victorian novel normally signals its self-conscious reconstruction of the past. The presence of the twentieth or twenty-first century filters through a narrative voice (in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as in Michael Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*), the co-existence of two time periods (as in A. S. Byatt's *Possession, a Romance*) or the use of pastiche (in Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*) or parody (in D. M. Thomas's *Charlotte*). The notion of self-reflexivity on television fiction is fairly new. For Linda Hutcheon in 2002, 'Most television, in its unproblematic reliance on realist narrative and transparent representational conventions, is pure commodified complicity, without the critique needed to define the postmodern paradox' (10). More recently, it has been observed in American series that 'This same transposition of narrative innovation from literature to screens small and large can be found in the increasing popularity of the reflexivity that has become characteristic of postmodern fiction.' (Guilbert et Wells-Lassagne 2). Indeed, Jason Mittell published in 2015 a book-length study entitled *Complex TV* that examines how a number of contemporary American series mix characteristics of series and serials and challenge the storytelling conventions of the genre to which they belong (17-54). Interestingly, *Dickensian* does display this distance when revisiting the classic serial, not only in its choice of content (a mash-up instead of one single novel) but in drawing attention to its representation.
- 22 The quick succession of short shots especially at the beginning or end of each instalment whose aim is to secure the viewer's involvement with each set of characters may also paradoxically feel intrusive and set up a distance between the spectator and the show. There are also many point-of-view shots when one sees a character in the act of watching and then what he is watching. Together with the repeated use of mirrors which evoke the

principle of replication that is distinct from the real, these shots point to the act of watching and create a *mise-en-abyme* for the TV viewer.

- 23 If we consider the generic conventions of the classic serial listed by Sarah Cardwell, it appears that none applies to *Dickensian*: ‘conventions of content (the display of ‘heritage’ as representative of ‘the past’), style (a languorous pace and filmic use of camera) and mood (nostalgia)’ (qtd. in Butt 163). *Dickensian* does aim at authenticity and the team accordingly employed a specialist of the Victorian era on the set (see Douglas-Fairhurst). However, the many street scenes are not shot on location nor display heritage but are obviously shot in a studio set, going as far as using a painted landscape, such as that of a harbour with boats at the end of the alley where Marley was murdered in episode 2. This conveys an unrealistic or anti-realist feel and may remind the viewer of earlier serials shot in studio sets, forcing him or her to acknowledge and bear in mind that they are watching a re-presentation. The chromatic range is not the usual brown one often seen in Victorian TV adaptations for outdoor city scenes but an ethereal cold blue that conveys an eerie atmosphere to the shots and certainly makes them distinct from others. Dickens’s characters are convincingly and faithfully rendered by the cast with no aim at distancing parody but distance and reflexivity are conveyed by the outdoors studio set.
- 24 *Dickensian* uses some common signs of ‘pastness’ such as the street tea-seller and oyster-sellers.<sup>14</sup> Weatherwise, the use of snow in the first episodes suited the time at which the production was aired since it started on Boxing day (last episode on February 21st). Also, it suits the plot that starts on Christmas eve and plays on the nostalgic phantasm of Christmas. The snow also evokes *A Christmas Carol*, one of Dickens’s best-known and more positive stories and, as such, has a nostalgic feel. There is little nostalgia however in *Dickensian* as, apart from the finale that temporarily unites most characters in a song, the world depicted in the serial is a harsh, ruthless world, ruled by money and motivated by jealousy or greed.
- 25 Tony Jordan in *Dickensian* partly takes up traditional televisual formats, that of the serial and soap opera that engage their viewers’ emotions over the broadcasting period, along with classic adaptation but puts these to an unusual use for TV in the form of a mash-up. With the neo-Victorian confluence of several source-texts, *Dickensian* partly avoids the criticisms usually levelled at classic novel adaptations of being ‘aesthetically unimaginative, conservative, and nostalgic’ (Butt 160). The mash-up supposes neo-Victorian imaginative reinvestment of the characters and their stories but there is in fact little significant interaction between the characters and little confluence of their stories. Bringing them all in the same text in this case paradoxically sharpens the contours of the characters who hardly leave the path planned for them by Dickens, even if *Dickensian* adds a certain contemporary slant to their stories. The confluence at work in *Dickensian* remains more visual and spatial than diegetic. In fact, what mostly makes *Dickensian* a neo-Victorian televisual text that can be seen as part of a challenging process to the literary canon is its embracing of various genres and its distance from the classic serial. This TV serial that is more homage than criticism nevertheless suggests that the canonical text is no longer untouchable but can be played with. In fact, *Dickensian* offers two levels of viewing: it is intended for those who have read their Dickens and for those who have not. It thus echoes what Whelehan calls the ‘double register’ of neo-Victorian fiction that appeals to those with knowledge of the Victorian source texts as well as those with only knowledge of Victorian hypertexts (274). In its confluence of well-known

images, representations and characters, *Dickensian* fulfills BBC's mission 'to enrich people's lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain'.

- 26 Yet, Tony Jordan's *Dickensian* did not rise to its great expectations but saw a drop in audience rates as weeks went by. Even though the profusion of characters created by the Victorian novelist offers opportunity for at least another season of *Dickensian* as was originally planned and despite the millions spent on the purpose-built set, it was announced in the spring that there would be no follow-up (Martinson). The irregular hours at which the programme was shown was blamed by some,<sup>15</sup> but it may also be suggested that *Dickensian*'s mash-up may have alienated fans of each genre involved or that it actually failed to fulfil its bold agenda of mashing up the characters created by Dickens and was hampered by the repetitive slow pace of the soap opera genre.

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## NOTES

1. On this point, see Letissier (2012a).
2. Recent examples include a BBC two-part adaptation of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (2012), Mike Newell's film adaptation of *Great Expectations* (2012) with Helena Bonham-Carter and Ralph Fiennes, following a BBC adaptation the same novel in 2011 with Gillian Anderson.
3. Tony Jordan is the producer and he is also at the origin of the project but altogether six scriptwriters and four directors were involved (see Douglas-Fairhurst).
4. A similar approach, if on a smaller scale, can be found in one the fictional interludes of Peter Ackroyd's biography of the Victorian novelist: within a four-page-long chapter, Ackroyd convenes dozens of Dickens's characters to Greenwich Fair where they cross each other's path. For instance, 'Krook and Magwitch were devouring vast quantities of whelks and pickled salmon, while Pip and David Copperfield indulged in a bout of arm-wrestling for which there seemed to be no certain winner' (648).
5. It is also the name of a journal devoted to studies of Dickens's work.
6. Barbery's initial reaction to his daughter's pregnancy (episode 14) is surprisingly understanding but this is not developed as he goes away on business in the next episode.
7. In Tony Jordan's words, 'You can watch it whether you have read every Dickens book and have a degree in Dickens, or you'll enjoy it if you've never read a Dickens book in your entire life and your movie was the Muppets Christmas carol' (*Dickensian*, Media Pack 6).
8. Originally used for music, the term is now applied to novels that mix literary genres, such as Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) that first illustrated the new (sub)genre.

9. Created by Debbie Wiseman, the soundtrack has a different theme for each set of character and accompanies the otherwise silent shots that act as reminders of the plot line.
10. The producers of *Dickensian* practice the 'streaky bacon' effect described by the narrator in *Oliver Twist* (see (Douglas-Fairhurst): 'it is the custom of the stage, in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes, in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon' (chapter 17, 146-147).
11. See for instance a speech from 22 June 2015 by David Cameron which makes reference to his first speech as Prime Minister returned to office on May 8<sup>th</sup> 2015. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-opportunity>. The concept has since been taken up again by the next conservative Prime Minister, Theresa May. See <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36788782>.
12. A precedent is Andrea Arnold's 2011 *Wuthering Heights* with a black Heathcliff played by Solomon Glave and James Howson.
13. Whelehan observes that 'adapting the Victorian in the past two decades has been all about sexing up the past, so that *risqué* content is almost routine and rarely shocking' (277)
14. Screen adaptors usually use signs of 'pastness' identifiable in the 'choices of location, props, and costumes, as well as, depending on the author, weather systems, quantity of dirt and non-diegetic sounds such as carriages hurtling past and barrow boys selling wares' (Whelehan 276)
15. In Michael Hogan's words, 'Since its Boxing Day debut, the Victorian soap opera has been passed around the schedules like an unwanted orphan'.

## ABSTRACTS

Charles Dickens's work is a favourite for screen and TV adaptations even though the latter tend to be deemed conservative. These adaptations however focus normally on one particular novel. BBC1's *Dickensian* (2016) purports to be different as the 20-part serial ambitiously takes on a whole universe, the one created by Dickens, with characters from various novels now all featuring in the same televisual text, illustrating the process of confluence (or mash-up). This paper seeks to examine *Dickensian* as neo-victorian televisual text in light of its mash-up structure.

L'œuvre de Charles Dickens a souvent été adaptée à l'écran, petit et grand, en sachant que les premières sont fréquemment critiquées pour leur dimension conservatrice. Tandis que ces productions télévisuelles adaptent un seul texte, *Dickensian* (BBC, 2016) embrasse plus globalement l'univers de Dickens : les personnages de différents romans confluent maintenant vers un seul et même texte télévisuel. Cet article examine *Dickensian* comme texte télévisuel néo-victorien à la lumière de ce phénomène de confluence.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** BBC, confluence, detective story, Charles Dickens, *Dickensian*, mash-up, neo-Victorian, prequel, TV serial

**Mots-clés:** BBC, confluence, Charles Dickens, *Dickensian*, mash-up, neo-Victorien, prequel, série TV

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