

Dickens and Thanatourism¹

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At the Charles Dickens Museum in Bloomsbury, London, visiting schoolchildren aged between eleven and sixteen complete an educational trail, for which they undertake various written activities corresponding with each room in the house. The trail explains the Mary Hogarth bedroom as where Catherine Dickens's "younger sister Mary slept when she came to live here" but that she "fell ill after a family trip to the theatre and died here in Dickens's arms" when "[s]he was only 17 years old". The corresponding activity is to list four of the room's "objects that relate to the theme of death". There are many from which to choose given the bedroom's rationale to reflect "Disease and death in Dickens's life and times", and to convey Dickens's influence on "Victorian mourning".² Some relate to Dickens's death: his will, a bust cast from his death mask by Thomas Woolner, Luke Fildes' pictures of Dickens's "Empty Chair" at Gad's Hill (1870) and "Dickens's grave at Westminster Abbey" (1871), and J. E. Millais's sketch of "Charles Dickens after Death" (1870). Other objects represent Mary Hogarth's death: a photograph of her grave at Kensal Green Cemetery and her white nightdress, laid poignantly on the bed. Further objects point to real and fictional sites characterized by death: photographs of the Staplehurst railway disaster, Dickens's letter to *The Times* "on the late execution" at Horsemonger Lane (1845),

¹ I am very grateful for the feedback of Juliet John and of external reviewers as well as of Marie-Amélie Coste, Christine Huguet and Nathalie Vanfasse at various stage of this article.

² Drawing 5529-DD-039 in the museum's "Great Expectations Project Rationale" from 2011 housed in the museum's Suzannet research library. I am very grateful to the Dickens Museum for providing access to the rationale and for allowing numerous research visits to the Mary Hogarth bedroom.

F. W. Pailthorpe's illustration of "Terrible Stanger in the Churchyard" (1900) from *Great Expectations* and Phiz's of "Tom-All-Along's" (1853) from *Bleak House*.

The Mary Hogarth bedroom thus suggests death as a key part of its remembering of Dickens. Indeed, my focus here is Dickens's practice of visiting sites associated with death for pleasure and interest (a practice later to be termed "thanatourism"), and the relationship between this practice and Dickens's preoccupations with posthumous animacy/inanimacy in relation to his personal and cultural legacy. According to Susan Crane in *Museums and Memory*, the objects and narrative that museums exhibit put "on display" and embody "the discourse of memorial representation that both affirms and informs: informing the viewer of its significance, the object as display also affirms its significance" (2). The Mary Hogarth bedroom's curation means that it aligns itself with the practice of visiting sites associated with death, referencing other such localities that Dickens visited physically and imaginatively, whilst also announcing itself as such a site. The bedroom thus situates this tourist practice prominently in its remembering of Dickens, as well as reaffirming this prominence. Significantly, the bedroom is both a contemporary projection of the remembering of Dickens and the starting point. Although Dickens was fairly representative of his age in his preoccupation with death, he also had an extraordinary, intensified sensibility surrounding it, which was seemingly catalyzed by Mary Hogarth's death, a particularly memorable death that marked his life. Indeed, I contend in this piece that Dickens's practice of visiting places associated with death to view the dead reflected personal concerns about posthumous legacy and, moreover, that it directly influenced his writing, particularly his later work where these preoccupations intensified and evolved into concerns about the degree to which his art would remain culturally animate and how he would be received posthumously, as can be traced in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5). This article suggests that *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens's penultimate, most death-focused work, has had an important influence on the cultural perception of Dickens, particularly through its adaptation for television in 1998. In this remediation, an immersive, cinematic touring of places associated with death and the dead is facilitated, thus contributing to reinventing the nineteenth-century "period" on television, and simultaneously reanimating Dickens's cultural presence more than a hundred years after his death.

1. Dickens the Thanatourist

The Mary Hogarth bedroom's death-related narrative and curation recalls the longstanding tourist practice coined "thanatourism" within Heritage and Tourism Studies. Thanatourism is etymologically rooted in "Thanatos", the Ancient Greek for death and the Greek mythological personification of death. It refers to the practice of travelling for pleasure and interest to sites associated with death. Although defined widely, my understanding is aligned with A. V. Seaton's oft-cited definition: "travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly but not exclusively, violent death, which may, to a varying degree be activated by the person-specific features of those whose death are its focal objects" (236). In a sense, visiting the Dickens Museum is motivated by some desires for symbolic encounters with Dickens's death (both direct and indirect), to which the Mary Hogarth bedroom contributes importantly through exhibiting objects that relate closely to Dickens's death, and as the space of an incredibly meaningful death for Dickens, one which shaped his outlook on the subject and catalyzed his intense preoccupations with it. As is characteristic of many thanatourism sites, the bedroom associates itself with actual "death, suffering and the seemingly macabre" (Stone 146), and small-scale, personal forms of "disaster and destruction". It also evokes self-consciously further thanatourism sites related to Dickens, including "murder sites, battlefields and cemeteries" (Frew and White 21).

The bedroom also illustrates how Dickens himself was a thanatourist. It provides some insight into how he sought death widely and often, never missing "a human carcass if he could help it", as John Carey notes humorously (81), and exploring it repeatedly in his writing, as sizeable Dickens scholarship contends. Dickens's death-related preoccupations and practices were in some respects characteristic of Victorian death culture. The Victorians were enchanted by "[t]he dead body's materiality", particularly its "charmed ability to originate narrative" as Deborah Lutz states (1), which is an argument similar to Mary Elizabeth Hotz's suggestion that "death, especially, was at the heart of the Victorian novel" (1). Indeed, much contemporary scholarship on thanatourism commonly attributes thanatourism's commercial and populist roots to the nineteenth century, even if travelling to sites associated with death is an age-old practice.³ However, there was also something

³ See Seaton (2002) and (1999).

particularly distinct, even extreme about Dickens's own sensibility related to death, particularly in terms of the frequency and severity of his thanatourism practices, triggered arguably by Mary Hogarth's death. Dickens's thanatourism practices and writing influenced by thanatourism should, then, be seen in line with Lutz's point that he "picked a thread out of a larger culture" but then "wove it into his more personal preoccupations" (78). Dickens's unrivalled popularity in the nineteenth century meant he was able to popularize—and perpetuate—many morbid concerns and practices of the age, yet also shape them as they blended with his own outlook.

Written accounts of Dickens's frequent thanatourism are innumerable. In 1846 he made the first of many visits to the Paris morgue. He was "dragged" there "by invisible force" to view the unidentified corpses on display, a regular occurrence for him and others when visiting the French capital ("Travelling Abroad" 196).⁴ On July 6 1840 he observed Francois Courvoisier's hanging for murdering his employer; on November 13 1849 Dickens witnessed the Mannings' hanging for murder at Horsemonger Lane Gaol, Southwark, along with 30,000 others. Notably on both occasions he hired elevated vantage points for aerial, panoramic perspectives of the gallows, despite openly castigating public execution for its barbaric influence on the spectating masses, as stated in his letter now displayed in the Mary Hogarth bedroom, (Slater 298-9). This suggests Dickens's wish to separate himself—literally, physically, but also morally—from the brutality of capital punishment and the mob. It also encapsulates how his morbid interests and concerns were perhaps above and beyond the norm. Through this elevation Dickens could self-consciously observe the spectacles as set-piece urban scenes for imaginative and artistic inspiration, viewing without obstruction the exact moment of transformation from animacy to inanimacy in the executed subject and the effect of this on the crowd.

Dickens's ambivalence towards public hanging brings to mind the oft-cited Dickensian phrase, "the attraction of repulsion". Dickens employs it only twice: to describe Saint Ghastly Grim churchyard in "The City of the Absent" (263) and in a *Daily News* letter (1846) about "Capital Punishment" (Wood 172). Forster also uses it once to illustrate Dickens's affective relations to the notorious St Giles district of London (19). Yet this affective relationship to death, involving simultaneous, paradoxical feelings of attraction and repulsion has been swept up in Dickens critical

⁴ See Vita (2003).

mythology, with Dickens's use of the phrase exaggerated.⁵ One reason is that Dickens regularly evokes it in his writing; it often underpins his portrayal of both actual and symbolic encounters with death (as well as depictions of Victorian London's harsh realities where death is an important feature). In such descriptions, Dickens is often at his most artistically resonant. In these moments, Dickens strives to evoke something unspeakable that viscerally transcends the sensations of attraction and repulsion. Such an intangible affective relation to death epitomizes the powerful hold death had over both Dickens's imagination and consciousness.

What repulsed Dickens about hangings, morgues and urban rookeries essentially speaks for itself, but what was the attraction? The main draw to encounters with death and the dead for Dickens was curiosity and trepidation about the effect of the transition from life to death on the animacy of the subject, as well as the possibilities of the corpse remaining animate, despite the natural inanimacy of death. Such preoccupations are explored in Dickens's account of visiting the St. Bernard Convent and morgue in southern Switzerland during an 1846 European tour—a compelling, insightful, though often overlooked, example of thanatourism. Significantly, Dickens travelled to St. Bernard with the morgue and its corpses in mind. He read John Corson who described St. Bernard in his Switzerland travel *Handbook* (256-64), like other nineteenth-century travellers, indicating that it was a common destination on the European “grand tour”.⁶ Dickens describes his experience in a letter to Forster from September 26, 1846, as follows:

Beside the convent, in a little outhouse [...] are the bodies of people found in the snow who have never been claimed and are withering away—not laid down, or stretched out, but standing up, in corners and against walls; some erect and horribly human, with distinct expressions on the faces; some sunk down on their knees; some dropping over on one side; some tumbled down altogether, and presenting a heap of skulls and fibrous dust. [...] [T]here they remain during the short days and the long nights, the only human company out of doors, withering away by grains, and holding ghastly possession of the mountain where they died. (*Letters* 4, 619)

From the thoroughness of Dickens's visual exploration of the morgue and the way in which the encounter seems to hold “ghastly possession” of his whole experience at St. Bernard, the passage evinces that Dickens's thanatourism was as much about his

⁵ See Allen's (1999) discussion about the exaggerated frequency of Dickens's direct use of the phrase.

⁶ See Dickens's *Pictures From Italy* (1846); de Stasio (2000); and Corson (1848). Corson alludes to knowing about the convent before arrival and learning about the morgue during breakfast with the monks who provided “many interesting details” (125).

own relations to the dead and about contemplations of his own death as it is about the corpses being described. It demonstrates Dickens's attraction to "looking at something [the corpse] that could not return a look" ("Some Recollections of Mortality" 106).⁷ Albert Hutter refers to this as part of his argument that Dickens's need to affirm his own existence was an important factor in his preoccupation with death (11-13). Indeed, in the passage above, the more Dickens examines the corpses, and registers their absence of life and detachment from context, the more he seems to reaffirm his own worldly position and animacy. The letter's final lines following the morgue's description contain the first person pronoun, "I" eight times, more than doubling its use throughout the rest of the letter. By remembering the experience of gazing at corpses at the St. Bernard convent, Dickens appears to reestablish his linguistic presence, seemingly a reflection of his reestablishing a kind of existential selfhood at the time.

Furthermore, the changing state of the corpses in the passage evinces Deborah Lutz's assertion that Dickens probes "the porousness of the life/death boundary" in his writing, which reveals that for him, "animation could move smoothly, both ways, along a continuum: from vitality into matter, and from dead matter into a kind of liveliness" (80). In his account of St. Bernard the corpses are initially "standing up" and "horribly human, with distinct expressions on the faces". But as Dickens continues to look they appear less human. After initial uncanny humanness, they drop "over on one side", then tumble "down altogether", before "presenting a heap of skulls and fibrous dust", seeming to exemplify the first part of Lutz's proposed continuum of animacy: from "vitality into matter". Indeed, the passage's key line is that the corpses "have never been claimed and are withering away". Clearly, in many respects this suggests the varying stages of decay, emphasizing just how long they have been unclaimed, for they are decomposing and disintegrating despite the preserving effect of the freezing Alpine temperatures. Yet the line also indicates something less tangible, though especially resonant, for Dickens. Because the corpses are unclaimed, isolated from human networks of family and friends they exist inanimately without history, identity and context; they are reduced just to inanimate matter, without afterlife, enduring spirit, or posthumous animacy, which Dickens finds most disturbing.

⁷ See Vita (2003).

Elsewhere Dickens describes some of the morgue's contents with greater animation: "[t]he mother, storm-belated many winters ago, still standing in the corner with her baby at her breast; the man who had frozen with his arm raised to his mouth in fear or hunger, still pressing it with his dry lips after years and years" (*Little Dorrit*, 457). Dickens thereby injects history, personality, and spirit into the corpses so that they do appear to live on in some sense. Yet the creation of meaning and significance relies solely on Dickens, the beholder, for realization. Without Dickens, and as the corpses remain unclaimed, they "wither away" to heaps of "skulls and fibrous dust", not only biologically, but also imaginatively and culturally. As Lutz discusses similarly in relation to Victorian cultural relics of death such as death masks, locks of hair, and other morbid knick-knacks (many of which are displayed in the Mary Hogarth bedroom), a "central" fear of death is "to become a thing and nothing more, with no spirit, no personality, no afterlife. And then to have no one care that one has died" (13). The better alternative is to continue to "glimmer with meaning", "teem with a past still profoundly relevant", and remain "animated and consequential" (13). Thus most disturbing for Dickens is the way in which these corpses have no meaning and relevance without the reanimation through his prose, which even itself fails to revive some corpses that have been unclaimed for the longest time and so are most disintegrated into non-human matter. These preoccupations are framed by their relationship to Dickens's own thoughts and circumstances, which intensified and evolved to include concerns about the posthumous cultural legacy or afterlife of his art, which shapes the morbid subject matter of his final completed work, *Our Mutual Friend*, to which this article will now turn.

2. Fictional Thanatourism in *Our Mutual Friend*

A consideration of *Our Mutual Friend* is important for examining Dickens's fascination with death and thanatourist practices: it contains his most sustained and illuminating musings on death. In it Dickens draws frequently on his own thanatourism; he situates the reader as a thanatourist, guiding them through the deathly urban space and narrative. Through these experiments in fictional thanatourism, he explores questions of posthumous animacy/inanimacy, illustrating concerns about his own cultural afterlife, namely the extent to which he would remain animate amongst his inner circle, readers, and in wider culture, after death. Dickens's

broodings seem to have arisen from more pressing thoughts of his own mortality as death became more widespread in his life in his fifties.⁸ Elizabeth Dickens, his mother, Walter Dickens, his fourth child and second son, John Leech, his former illustrator, and William Thackeray, his literary rival, all died during *Our Mutual Friend* (or at least in the immediate years before writing). Dickens's morbid pessimism was not helped by his burdensome domestic life through continued alienation from Catherine and ongoing relations with Ellen Ternan. His spiritual home and creative muse, London, was also becoming unrecognizable and suffocating, resulting in him seeking escape through the purchase of Gad's Hill in Kent.

In many respects, Dickens's preoccupations were related to Victorian Britain's extensive death culture, a response to the age's high mortality rates caused by high birth rates combined with poor health and environmental standards,⁹ as well as the age's increasing secularization. Whether or not Dickens experienced more deaths than other Victorians is both difficult to determine and doing so seems a fairly futile activity here. What is most important is that Dickens's writing of *Our Mutual Friend* was shaped by the particularly widespread presence of death at this late stage of his life and his resulting contemplations of his own death; these intensified a personal sensibility already fascinated by questions surrounding death, resulting in him revisiting certain previous experiences of death in the novel, making death one of its central concerns.

An experience of death that was exclusive to Dickens—among a few others—, however, was his involvement in the Staplehurst rail crash on 9 June 1865, in which ten people were killed. Surprisingly, the Mary Hogarth bedroom makes no direct reference to *Our Mutual Friend* (even though numerous parts of the novel, including many of Marcus Stone's evocative illustrations, are well placed for exhibition there). However, the bedroom does reference the novel indirectly by displaying photographs of the aftermath of Staplehurst, which occurred in the middle of writing and serializing *Our Mutual Friend*, as Dickens reveals in the "Postscript":

On Friday the Ninth of June in the present year, Mr and Mrs Boffin (in their manuscript dress of receiving Mr and Mrs Lamble at breakfast) were on the South Eastern Railway with me, in a terribly destructive accident. When I had done what I could do to help others, I climbed back into my

⁸ This is strongly suggested by Michael Slater in his chapter on "Back to the 'big brushes': writing *Our Mutual Friend*, 1864-5" in his seminal biography of Dickens.

⁹ See Jalland (1999 6) who gives the following death rates: 21.8 per 1000 per year in 1868, 18.1 in 1888, 14.8 in 1908 and 11.7 in 1928; and Szreter (1988 8): 21,856 per million in 1848/54; 16,958 in 1901; 5384 in 1971.

carriage—nearly turned over a viaduct, and caught aslant upon the turn—to extricate the worthy couple. [...] I remember with devout thankfulness that I can never be much nearer parting company with my readers for ever, than I was then, until there shall be written against my life, the two words with which I have this day close this book: - THE END (822)

Although Dickens reveals that the accident occurred between writing the XVI and XVII numbers (in book four), the “Postscript” nevertheless puts a strange slant on the entirety of *Our Mutual Friend*, introducing the uncanny repetition of the death and near-death that floods the novel into the real realm of the author, thus inviting a re-reading of the text in relation to Dickens’s contemplations of his own death following the events detailed on the concluding pages.

The novel’s coda clearly reveals Dickens considering his own death, namely his resulting parting from readers and his posthumous cultural legacy. Along similar lines, Claire Wood writes that these closing sentences, which are particularly poignant as Dickens’s unconscious conclusion of the last novel he would ever complete, are not only Dickens anticipating “his final parting from his readers and from life” (134), but also him contemplating “what is left on either side of the departure: a corpse and a prospect of immortality” (133). Generally, Wood’s argument is exemplified in the “Postscript”, which illustrates that Dickens’s contemplations about his posthumous afterlife among family, friends, and readers had intensified since St. Bernard, but also that they had evolved to incorporate more specific considerations of posthumous *artistic* legacy and *cultural* immortality. The opening paragraph of the “Postscript”, which defends the John Harmon/Rokesmith plot strand, refers to “the interests of art” and how “an artist [...] may perhaps be trusted to know what he is about in his vocation” (821), hinting that a brush with death causes him to have in mind trepidations about the reception and legacy of himself and his art that are detectable earlier in his career.¹⁰ In 1843, for instance, Dickens expressed to Forster his wish to sustain his “place in the minds of thinking men” (*Letters* 3 590-1); in 1853 he revealed to William Macready his intentions to “lay the foundations of an enduring retrospect” (*Letters* 7:10). Furthermore, in the 1841 “Preface” to *Oliver Twist*, Dickens reveals a hankering to be remembered alongside “the noblest range of English literature”, never ceasing to reflect “of every time”,

¹⁰ I am extremely grateful to Juliet John for directing me to many of the following references in this paragraph; she refers to them in her forthcoming essay, “Dickens’s Global Art: Cultural and Ecological Legacy in *Pictures from Italy*”.

unlike writers “of the hour, who raised their little hum, and died, and were forgotten”. The “Postscript” thus seems not so much a contemplation of the corpse *and* the prospect of immortality after death, as Wood suggests, but rather a contemplation of the corpse *or* the prospect of immortality. What I mean to say is that Dickens considers the *alternative* possibilities of posthumous cultural existence as he sees it: either as just an inanimate corpse; or through animate, cultural immortality generated by successful artistic longevity.

Ideas along these lines play out in *Our Mutual Friend*, examined by Dickens through a series of fictional experiments with thanatourism through the novel’s death-permeated world. Death, particularly by drowning, is announced as its foremost concern from the first pages by presenting Gaffer Hexam and Rogue Riderhood dredging the polluted River Thames for corpses. Two chapters later, the novel’s first thanatour is illustrated. It begins in the space of high society in the West End, at the home of the Veneerings, where a picture of “bran-new pilgrims [...] going to Canterbury” seems to invoke a self-consciously age-old practice of travel related to death on which Dickens’s text is about to embark. From here, Charley Hexam guides Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood East into the depths of Limehouse, the locality most closely aligned with death in the novel. The cab wheels roll repeatedly and inevitably “on and [...] down” by Monument, Docks, Ratcliffe, Rotherhithe, invoking the inescapable fatal attraction of the river (and the death it signifies), as well as the inability to map and grasp the city sufficiently in this urban world.

The thanatourism here frames the remainder of the novel, so that it becomes a series of further fictional thanatours where the reader is placed in the position of Wrayburn and Lightwood and led into the nooks and crannies of London that would otherwise be off limits to readers. The opening destination is Limehouse morgue, via Riderhood’s unhomely dwelling. Here, Wrayburn, Lightwood, and a mysterious, unnamed man (later identified as John Harmon/ Rokesmith), view a recently drowned corpse. Although a detailed illustration of it is eluded, the significance here comes from Dickens’s subtle allusions to St. Bernard—a connection that seems not to have been identified in previous criticism. The “Night-Inspector” overseeing the Police station morgue behaves like “a monastery on top of a mountain” (23). He is referred to as “the quiet Abbot of that Monastery” three times and Wrayburn and Lightwood’s “imperturbable friend” (155), a deliberate allusion to the monastic theme of Sir Walter

Scott's, *The Monastery* (1820).¹¹ These references, whilst partly parodying the nineteenth-century gothic, announce death-related concerns in the novel that are comparable to those expressed in Dickens's account of St. Bernard, though intensified and made more immediate by transportation to London in "these times of ours" (1).

Dickens's morbid thinking on the subject of the animacy or inanimacy of the dead at St. Bernard has evolved and intensified in the intervening years, encompassing his whole artistic outlook, and increasing in complexity. As the establishing thanatourism episode illustrates, death has permeated all aspects of exterior and interior urban space, as encapsulated by the image of Hexam's walls, plastered with bills detailing drowned bodies from the Thames. Such all-pervading deadness is reflected in the novel's persistent, all-encompassing darkness, fog, mud, muck, rain, sleet, and even heavy snow that make perception and comprehension impossible. A particularly illustrative example is when the reader is guided to "the high ridge of land northward" of London like a rambling tourist, and presented with an aerial perspective of the city reminiscent of a cinematic reestablishing shot:

in the surrounding country it was a foggy day, but there the fog was grey, whereas in London it was, at about the boundary line, dark yellow, and a little within it brown, and then browner, and then browner, until at the heart of the City [...] it was rusty-black. [...] [T]he loftiest buildings made an occasional struggle to get their heads above the foggy sea, and especially that the great dome of Saint Paul's seemed to die hard; but this was not perceivable in the streets at their feet (420)

Extreme and exaggerated almost to unreality, the fog makes the city disappear, erasing all contours and topography, so that mapping London is possible only through the severity of the fog's darkness and opaqueness. The situation is even worse inside the city, which Lightwood and Wrayburn's need for a guide between Saint James's and Limehouse suggests. Within London it is impossible to perceive above and beyond the "foggy sea" blanketing the city, including up to Saint Paul's iconic "great dome". Whilst the "heavy and dark" fog (representative here of the other elements that create the novel's opaqueness) heightens the uncanny, near-dystopian atmosphere, suggesting the sense of being buried alive, or permanent existence inside a coffin, which is how monomaniacal, aptly-named Bradley Headstone lives his life, it also more importantly points to the complexity, incomprehensibility and

¹¹ The OED online cites Scott's similar adjectival use to describe Sir Piercie Shafton's attitude to the monastery canopy roof in the novel.

unknowability of the death-related issues with which Dickens is tussling in the novel. It signifies, as Garrett Stewart states, “the referential blank of the impervious noun death”, which he calls “the most rigid, ungiving, and empty of terms (4), as well as the sense of “loss” from “the unease of not knowing how to respond” to death, which according to Emma Willis is a common response to thanatourism (6).

London’s impenetrability also establishes a narrative space that is suitably uncanny and nebulous to explore difficult, death-related ideas related to posthumous animacy/in-animacy and terrestrial afterlife, which Dickens carries out through a series of narrative thanatours, one of the most significant of which involves Mr. Venus, “Preserver of Animals and Birds” and “Articulator of human bones”. Venus’s shop remains mostly in darkness. It seems an extension of the opaque city, for “nothing can be made out in it”; its contents exist as “a muddle of objects”, inanimate and unresolvable “into anything distinct” (77). But things change with Venus’s curation and exhibition of these objects in his “museum” (as Dickens calls it); he uncannily reanimates them to evoke “surprise and charm” for himself, customers, and readers alike. For instance, Venus curates the hydrocephalic “Hindoo baby in a bottle”, arranging it so it is “curved up with his big head tucked under him” and so appearing as if “he would instantly throw a summersault if the bottle were large enough”; Venus’s stuffed canary conveys the impression that it is perched “[o]n a twig, making up his mind to hop!”; and the gradual reassembly of the French gentleman cause it to increase in animacy with each visit to the shop. Moreover, Venus frequently exhibits these objects, illuminatingly showing them “a light” to give visitors “the general panoramic view” of them, thus giving them even more posthumous life. On one occasion Venus almost enchantingly rakes “together the yet warm cinders in the rusty grate”, so that their “flickering gleams” make his “collection” come “starting to their various stations as if they had all been out, like their master and were punctual in a general rendez-vous to assist at the secret” (495). Another time Venus waves a candle around making all “heterogeneous objects” seem to “come forward obediently when they were named, and then retire again” (81-2).

Despite Venus’s belated introduction to the novel after Dickens visited a taxidermist with Marcus Stone in Seven Dials when he needed an extra narrative strand for the third monthly installment, the loose parallels between Venus and Dickens are difficult to overlook: their shared concerns with death, the status of their art, as well as the importance of re-animation. A particularly telling reference in this

respect are the only perceivable objects in Venus's "dark shop-window", the "two preserved frogs fighting a small-sword duel" (77-8), which surely nods to the bronze frogs kept on Dickens's writing desk—his own space of artistic creation. Venus's preoccupations are further aligned with Dickens's through his modest celebrations of the "trophies" of his art ("I like my art, and I know how to exercise my art," he reveals), and the way in which the measurement of his artistic accomplishments hinges on how successfully he reanimates what is inanimate. Like Venus, Dickens hopes his art will remain "paralytically animated" (85), enduring and immortal, perhaps like the preserved Hindoo baby, permanently suspended in its summersaulting position, which is highly suggestive of animation (though of course appreciated more widely). The alternative is to slip away to simply an inconsequential part of a homogenous "muddle of objects [...] among which nothing is resolvable into anything distinct" (77).

Dickens explores his preoccupations with posthumous legacy further when Riderhood is revived after nearly drowning, through which Dickens examines questions of posthumous reception. As Riderhood lies recovering in the "Jolly Porters" tavern, neither dead nor alive, Dickens separates the physicality of the individual ("the outer husk and shell") from the "spark of life" (443). Consequently, he opens up a liminal space where, as Luke Thurston asserts, "the consensual signifying laws of 'reality' are suspended" so that "reality itself" becomes "hypothetical, experimental, speculation" and "what language cannot name: the absolute 'thing', the limit or precise location of consciousness, identity, or life" might be revealed (13)—or at least the witnesses hope so. Like Dickens and other thanatourists, the witnesses are compelled by the life-death threshold on which Riderhood exists, for it is a part of life and so something they will one day encounter: "it *is* life, and they are living and must die", Dickens writes philosophically, seemingly suggesting one motive for his thanatourism (443).

During this "abeyance" time is elongated as the narrative shifts to the dramatic present and the implied author's interventional musings are included, creating a space to demonstrate how onlookers' attitudes towards Riderhood improve. In this liminal state Riderhood becomes, unimaginably, "an object of sympathy and interest" to the extent that witnesses are "very willing to tolerate his society in this world, not to say pressingly and soothingly entreating him to belong to it"; even his daughter, Pleasant, daydreams that "affairs could remain thus" (445). In examining whether

essence derives from “the outer husk and shell” or the “spark as life”, and how the deceased are perceived and comprehended when their power to influence has dissipated, the narrative suggests, somewhat optimistically, that “the touch of death is refining, paring away the spots and defects of life” (156), as George Levine has pointed out about death more generally.

Of course it was impossible to know whether or not “the touch of death” would refine Dickens, or pare away any “spots and defects”, though Dickens wished it was not. It would require the impossible thanatourism experience of being able to behold his own death and its aftermath. Remarkably, however, such an audacious idea is introduced in the novel via the John Harmon/ Julius Handford/ John Rokesmith narrative strand, which is acknowledged through its evocation in the novel’s title, and of course defended in the “Postscript”, indicating its centrality in Dickens’s imagination. In the key chapter, “A Sole and a Duett”, John Harmon (presumed dead yet living on under the guise of John Rokesmith via the mysterious Julius Handford), recounts from his slippery, “living-dead” situation the moments following his own death. Whilst Harmon laments his situation’s strangeness and loneliness as he goes “unrecognized among the living”, holding “no more” of “a place among the living than [the] dead do” (366), it also appears to provide remarkable insight into people’s posthumous attitudes towards him and his own life, as well as the form (if any) of his terrestrial afterlife, about which Dickens is so curious. Contemplating the consequences of returning to life, Harmon ponders:

‘What would I have? Dead, I have found the true friends of my lifetime still as true, as tender, and as faithful as when I was alive, and making my memory an incentive to good actions done in my name. Dead, I have found them, when they might have slighted my name and passed greedily over my grave to ease and wealth, lingering by the way, like single-hearted children, to recall their love for me when I was a poor frightened child. Dead, I have heard from the woman who would have been my wife if I had lived, the revolting truth that I should have purchased her, caring nothing for me, as a Sultan buys a slave.

‘What would I have? If the dead could know, or do know, how the living use them, who among the hosts of dead has found a more disinterested fidelity on earth than I? Is not that enough for me? (372-3)

Harmon’s in-between existence allows an almost extra-terrestrial perspective on his posthumous reception, enabling him to realize explicitly the inclination towards him of those to whom he was closest (an enlightenment of which Dickens can only dream). Dickens can only hope that “the true friends” of his “lifetime” (his family, friends, and,

crucially, readers) demonstrate “disinterested fidelity” similar to Harmon’s; and that they do not care nothing for him “as a Sultan buys a slave”, in order for him to achieve the “endurable retrospect” that he wanted. Dickens certainly achieved this enduring popularity and cultural legacy, unrivalled by any other Victorian writer, as we know. But one crucial factor that has kept Dickens animate culturally, sustaining the artistic resonance of his own writing, has been the Venus-esque re-animators of his work through film and television adaptations, to one of which this article now turns.

3. *Our Mutual Friend's* (1998) Cinematic Thanatourism

A particularly important re-animation came via the BBC television adaptation of *Our Mutual Friend* in 1998, prior to which Dickens had a period of inanimacy on British television. *Our Mutual Friend* is not a particularly well-known Dickens novel outside of academia. Unlike better-known texts like *A Christmas Carol* and *Oliver Twist* it is not a novel that has repeatedly sustained Dickens through frequent remediation on screen.¹² Yet this novel’s adaptation in 1998 contributed to reigniting Dickens on television, when, in the 1990s, he had fallen out of favour. Unlike writers deemed more “serious” like Jane Austen, Henry James, Wilkie Collins, and the Brontës, Dickens’s novels were not deemed suitable for “heritage” period drama’s aesthetic, thematic and formal conventions that were in vogue at the time. Ironically, though, it was Dickens’s novel most about a lack of life that gave life to his cultural afterlife, so to speak.

Before examining *Our Mutual Friend's* (1998) reanimation of Dickens, what exactly is meant by “heritage” period drama (the definition of which will importantly establish the conventions that were familiar and successful at the time)? The term refers precisely to historical film and literary screen adaptation made between roughly the early 1980s and 1990s.¹³ Often set between the early nineteenth century and first three decades of the twentieth century, it focuses solely on upper-middle and upper class relationships, manners and decorum, playing out in generally pastoralized, partly rural southern England. The genre’s distinguishing feature from earlier

¹² Other screen adaptations of the novel are as follows: *How Bella Was Won*. USA. 1911. Film; *Eugene Wrayburn*. USA. 1911. Film; *Vor Faelles Ven*. Dir. A. W. Sandberg and Peter Malberg. 1919. Denmark. Film. *Our Mutual Friend*. Dir. Eric Taylor. BBC. 1958. TV, UK; *Our Mutual Friend*. Dir. Peter Hammond. BBC. 1976. TV, UK (Watt and Lonsdale 215).

¹³ For a more sustained examination of what follows see Higson (2003), Monk (2012), and Monk and Sargeant (2002).

costume film and television is its emphasis on high production values to represent a conservative version of a fairly narrow strata of high society from the past: it both displays and essentially commodifies expensive, pictorialized mise-en-scène and shooting locations (typically country houses and picturesque southern English landscapes, owned by the National Trust). The casting and acting also favours the “qualities and connotations of the British theatre tradition”: its understatement, restraint, reserve, repression, and self-confidence (Higson 32). Moreover, the genre marketed itself at an older, educated audience, playing on its source material’s literariness and culture.

Contrarily, in the 1990s, Dickens was associated with BBC television’s Sunday teatime “Classic Serial” slot: since the 1950s, this is where Dickens in particular had been remediated in a fashion that was family-oriented, light-hearted, and fairly conventional, produced in the studio rather than on location. Combined with traditional academic reluctance to, as Paul Schlicke states, “accept Dickens into the pantheon of great authors, despite—or perhaps because of—his huge popularity with the general reader” (134),¹⁴ Dickens was viewed unfavourably as unsuitable for the “serious”, cultured and conservative heritage period drama trends of the time. Unsurprisingly, between 1990 and 1998 just two Dickens novels were adapted for British television,¹⁵ compared with six in the preceding eight years (1983-1990) (Pointer 183-191).¹⁶

Dickens was, however, revived and reanimated by the turn of the twenty-first century and an important contributor to this shift was 1998’s *Our Mutual Friend*. Through the choice of Dickens’s most deathly novel, and through foregrounding and intensifying of the text’s stygian features, the adaptation set itself apart from heritage period drama as a modern, complex representation of both Dickens and the nineteenth-century “period”.¹⁷ The adaptation sets out its intentions immediately,

¹⁴ See also John (2013), 18-20 and 24-5.

¹⁵ *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Dir. Pedr James. 1994. TV, UK; *Hard Times*. Dir. Peter Barnes. 1994. TV, UK.

¹⁶ One of the few “heritage” Dickens adaptations was the 1998 film of *Little Dorrit* directed by Christine Edzard. In *Theatres of Memory*, Raphael Samuel claims it presented a “spring-cleaned” Dickens, even in terms of his “malodorous London”, while also treating the Victorian as “a signifier for *objets d’art*” (402).

¹⁷ *Our Mutual Friend* (1998) signified “a significant shift” in the BBC’s ideologies surrounding “cultural production and the projection of the nation” (Monk 2012 203) in certain other was, too. It embodied the “cool”, ‘New British’ identity promoted by the New Labour government”, attempting to appear “masculine, populist and closely affiliated to youth-orientated style culture” (Monk 2002 195). It cast fashionable, populist actors from contemporary drama, cinema, and even soap opera. Steven Mackintosh (Rokesmith/ Harmon) had played a crime baron in police television drama, *Prime Suspect*, also starring in cult films, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) and *Blue Juice* (1995); Paul McGann (Wrayburn) was the eighth Doctor Who in 1996; Anna Friel (Bella Wilfer), appeared regularly in soap opera, *Brookside*, and had participated in the first ever pre-watershed lesbian kiss. Such casting aligned the adaptation with the present, addressing a wider-ranging, atypical viewership. For the same reason, repeats were transmitted on Saturday evenings: twice following music programme *Top of the Pops 2* and on another occasion a Davis Cup tennis match.

opening, like Dickens, with Hexam and Riderhood fishing for corpses on the Thames, plunging the viewer into the subterranean world. It is barely possible to make out the action in this scene, let alone fetishize any authentic period detail; the narrative could not be further from the bourgeois/aristocratic affairs of heritage costume drama. In fact this seems exactly what the adaptation seeks to emphasize as it jumps to the Lammles's wedding breakfast at the Veneerings's in the West End (safer period drama territory) in scene two, which is completely antithetical, and as a representation of the nineteenth century suggested to be as much a veneer as the Veneerings.

Like in Dickens, this fleeting "society" interlude is followed by Wrayburn and Lightwood's thanatour into Limehouse's depths, heralding the first of the adaptation's montage-like leaps between juxtaposed scenes and disparate spaces (which are seemingly more pronounced here than in Dickens), so that the experience of watching the adaptation feels like a kind of cinematic thanatourism. Guiliana Bruno draws important attention to this close proximity between cinema and tourism, suggesting that both of them allow different "sites" and "sights" to be beheld and experienced (9). Bruno posits that "[f]ilm has much in common" with the "travelling geography" of tourism, "especially [...] its constant reinvention of space" (11): the "(im)mobile film spectator moves across an imaginary path, traversing multiple sites and times", their "navigation" connecting "distant moments and far apart places", so that they absorb and connect "visual spaces" like a tourist (15). Bruno's argument is compelling and convincing for considering this screen version of Dickens's novel. Throughout the highly cinematic adaptation, the "camera becomes the vehicle: it becomes, literally, a spectatorial means of transportation" (16), especially as space, the *mise-en-scène*, is experience mostly by following characters who are themselves on the move. Moreover, the deadness of the *mise-en-scène* is foregrounded and the text's murderous narrative threads prominent, so as in tourism there is a "carefully staged visual environment" (Law et al 155) that intensifies death's omnipresence, suggests the world of the adaptation as suitable for thanatourism, and distances itself from previous costume drama.

The opening journey from the West End to Limehouse is a prime example. Writer, Sandy Welch, has commented on the journey's extraordinary duration of two minutes and thirty seconds, revealing how she battled for it to remain in its entirety following

hostility from senior production team members.¹⁸ Welch felt that reducing or cutting the sequence would dilute the sense of the “abyss” between both high society and Limehouse (and, perhaps, between this representation of the nineteenth century and previous ones). Throughout the journey, the action cuts between close-ups of Wrayburn’s and Lightwood’s faces looking outside the carriage, and POV shots of the dark, squalid space into which they travel, encouraging the viewer to similarly consume the highly conspicuous mise-en-scène. “We shall fall fast over the edge of the world if we don’t stop soon,” Wrayburn exclaims at one point, holding his handkerchief to his nose because of the stench. The viewers’ immersion in Limehouse, as well as this somewhat progressive representation of the nineteenth century, is reaffirmed.

When the thanatour reaches its final destination, Limehouse morgue, period drama conventions and expectations are further challenged and the close connection between the Thames at Limehouse and death further reaffirmed. Inside the morgue, low ceilinged and claustrophobic, and filmed through unsteady, handheld POV shots, we are presented with a clear, prolonged shot of a corpse, gruesome and decomposed. It reaffirms Limehouse as the textual space that most causes and contains death, and as the urban space that features most in the adaptation, it comes almost to represent the whole of Victorian London. Indeed the production team seemingly centered the filming of the text on this space, where water literally washes up death onto land, as Production Designer, Malcolm Thornton, revealed to the *Radio Times*. According to Thornton, the Limehouse shoreline was constructed artificially in Cardiff Docks from scratch, costing £150,000. Unlike authentic “Dickensian locations” that the production team scoured for five weeks, it provided the precise “geography”, including a “clean horizon”, which would not “spoil the integrity of the set” (Yates (pagination unavailable)). Indeed, the action returns here continuously, flaunting the wooden, partly river-submerged walkways, ramshackle wooden slums and warehouses, and muddy shoreline. Dickens’s narrative is even altered so that extra scenes can be set there, including having Mr. Dolls die by drowning to allow further lingering, set-piece long shots of it as his corpse is hauled

¹⁸ Welch made this comment at an “Adapting Our Mutual Friend for TV and Radio” panel organized by the Birkbeck Nineteenth-Century Studies Forum on 4 June 2015. See my plot post in the *Journal of Victorian Culture Online* on “The Cultural Afterlives of Our Mutual Friend: ‘Adapting Our Mutual Friend’ for TV and Radio” <<http://blogs.tandf.co.uk/jvc/2015/10/23/james-cutler-the-cultural-afterlives-of-our-mutual-friend-adapting-our-mutual-friend-for-tv-and-radio-panel-report/>>.

from the river, before it is exhibited in a close-up, one of the many corpses given this treatment. Although the adaptation certainly gets its money's worth from the costly shoreline set, the corpses it washes up are displayed more frequently than there are opportunities to view the urban river fully, which are actually never provided. In part, this stems from the functional constraints of filming in Cardiff Docks. However, the inability to see beyond more than just a few metres of the river, even though characters often stand at the water's edge, apparently gazing over the river just beyond the frame's parameter, makes the text's key signifier of death resist the viewer's full contemplation and comprehension. Without perimeters and bounds, the river and the deadness it represents appear uncontained and infinite, invoking their underlying affective omnipresence throughout the surrounding urban space. The adaptation thus resists objectifying and displaying the "period" space of the river, as in heritage period drama. Instead it seeks greater affective complexity, subjectivity, and realism in its depiction of experiencing the nineteenth-century urban.

Consequently viewers are most often immersed within the urban, rather than beholding it from a safe distance, and so because of the deathly Thames's ubiquitousness and uncontainability, experiencing Victorian London becomes nightmarish, imprisoning and dangerous, which are elements of Dickens's text that are exaggerated. "The Chase" sequence in part three is a good example in this respect. It follows Wrayburn and Lightwood as they lead the obsessive Headstone around the city, goading, tormenting and grinding him "into madness". Lasting approximately six minutes, the scene is a significant expansion of both Dickens's brief coverage and its fleeting transmission in under a minute in the 1976 television adaptation. Consequently it becomes almost more Dickens-like than in Dickens in its interpretation of the deadness with which the aesthetics and affect of Dickens's London are imbued. Carolin Held points to the significance of this scene's interpretation of Dickens's London, particularly because of its *mise-en-scène* and editing in her insightful reading of the adaptation as "anti-heritage" (2004).

Significantly, the scene is framed at its beginning and end by almost identical shots that linger on the Thames's shimmering reflection on a lonely colonnade. Immediately the scene is located alongside the Thames and so aligned with the death that the river signifies, in a kind of "metaphorical prolepsis hinting at Headstone's suicidal drowning [...] at the end" (Held 118). The urban experience here is thus intended to trouble and jar. Such affective relations to the city are

evinced by the “gloomy and labyrinthine, oppressive atmosphere”, as well as the imprisoning narrowness and confining enclosure of the architectural space through “high walls, arcades and colonnades, upper and lower levels linked by stairs, tunnels and dark corners”, which are heightened by shadowy expressionist lighting, deep, isolated spacing, and frequent camera angles from above (Held 117). The scene further employs a repetitive and discordant score, characterized by eerie piano and string sounds, as well as cuts between various POV shots and bird’s eye shots of vacuous spaces that Headstone glides into and relentlessly invades, as when he disturbs a flock of pigeons, the sound of which echoes inharmoniously around the imprisoning stone walls. Importantly, the entirety of “The Chase” occurs on the move. The cinematography is therefore constantly mobile, invoking the sense of travelling through the various urban spaces as well as frequently cutting between them, exemplifying the sense of cinematic (thana)tourism, as well as adding pace and drama that were uncharacteristic of television costume drama at this time.

Our Mutual Friend's (1998) cinematic thanatourism was a significant factor in its successful reanimation of Dickens and modernization of the nineteenth century, although it should be acknowledged that the adaptation did not break completely from heritage period drama conventions so that it did not alienate typical viewers and adversely affect ratings through too progressive a take on the text. Some scenes for instance do provide standard costume, historic building, and period authenticity fixes. As well as the “Society” interludes, scenes between Bella Wilfer and her father were filmed at seventeenth-century Queen’s House in Greenwich, and seventeenth-century Honington Hall in Warwickshire is used for Boffin’s House after his inheritance of money, and for the adaptation’s publicity shots, thus providing a certain period “look” and heritage type. Despite these apparent nods to particular “heritage” costume drama tastes through aesthetics and iconography, however, they are not as straightforward as they might first appear. Usually such scenes are positioned strategically in regular alternation with some of the most deathly ones, resulting in the self-conscious mutual intensification of *mise-en-scène* and narrative. It is no coincidence, for instance, that the adaptation’s opening scene, gloomy to point of incomprehensibility, is followed by the Lammles’ wedding breakfast; nor that we cut to a “Society” garden party after the opening scene in Limehouse morgue. Heritage period drama conventions are resultingly unsettled and seem short-lived; there is the sense that death is never far away and could re-appear at any moment. Furthermore,

some of the adaptation's most contemporary, mainstream cinematography (atypical of heritage period drama's naturalism and pictorialism) such as flashbacks, interior monologue voiceovers, playful jump cuts and fades is utilized in many scenes that appear typical of heritage costume drama, further destabilizing but also stretching and challenging the genre.

Whilst Andrew Davies's BBC television adaptation of *Bleak House* in 2005 is frequently cited as the most revolutionary Dickens adaptation of recent years, *Our Mutual Friend* (1998) deserves greater credit and attention in this respect. Farino's period drama accentuates the text's already foregrounded death and deadness through its interpretation of Dickens's narrative and its evocation of thanatourism by facilitating the traversing and connecting of various deliberately constructed cinematic spaces; this made Dickens seem more complex, modern and relevant. The adaptation consequently played an important role in both reanimating Dickens and reshaping the nineteenth century "period" on British television. Indeed, it achieved great critical acclaim, winning four BAFTA television awards, most notably for "Best Drama Serial" and "Best Production Design". It also heralded a Dickens revival on British television in 1999 when similar television interpretations of *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist* followed in its negotiation of heritage period drama conventions (acknowledging but also stretching and challenging them), thus re-animating Dickens for the new Millennium.

Our Mutual Friend's significance to Dickens's cultural afterlife has been pointed to by both Gallagher and Wood: Gallagher suggesting that Dickens's "Postscript" means he "apparently dies into the commodity, where he remains immortally suspended" (117); Wood asserting that the "Postscript" affords Dickens "the same suspended afterlife as a fictional character at the close of a narrative, which rarely marks the protagonist's decease" (138). Indeed, ironically, the novel in which Dickens especially ponders his posthumous cultural existence is the one that helped reanimate and sustain that legacy; the text filled with the greatest lack of life is one that contributed to sustaining Dicken's after-life. Influenced by Dickens's thanatourism, particularly his preoccupations with death and the posthumous animacy/inanimacy of the dead, *Our Mutual Friend*, through the BBC's remediation, contributed importantly to shaping and sustaining Dickens's posthumous cultural legacy by foregrounding and accentuating death to differentiate itself from old-fashioned, conventional costume drama trends in the 1990s. The adaptation

supplemented, I would contend, a wider cultural re-use of Dickens whereby the country's most significant Dickens heritage site sees fit to devote a room to death in Dickens, evoking thanatourism in particular; and more widely, the adjective, Dickensian, has come to be associated with death to the point of de-contextualisation and application to modern situations in which death dominates. Somewhat paradoxically, one important way in which Dickens lives on today is through the deathly elements of his life and work.

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