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"One of us": Dorian Gray, Untimeliness, and *Penny Dreadful*'s Contemporary Victoriana

(In)actualités de *Dorian Gray* dans la fiction néo-victorienne contemporaine : le cas de *Penny Dreadful*

Camille Martin-Payre

- 1 In *The Art and Making of Penny Dreadful*, a companion, fan-oriented artbook to the Showtime/Sky television series, creator John Logan described the early process through which some of his characters came to be designed. As the show, set in Victorian times, borrows some of its main protagonists from well-known nineteenth-century novels, interpretative choices had to be made, some more unconventional than others:

I always envisioned that our Dorian Gray would look pretty much like you would imagine, like any other Dorian Gray, with the typical Victorian gear and the long flowing hair [...] That's what I was thinking until Reeve Carney walked in for his audition in New York. [...] I thought it was like Mick Jagger walking in. [...] I loved the way he looked—he had rings and jewelry and that hair. (Gosling 2015, 110)
- 2 Logan asked Carney, who played Dorian, to exacerbate this seemingly untimely connection: "John told me to study Mick Jagger" (Gosling 111). Unlike the other characters of the series, whose design could not be confused with contemporary fashions and looks, past and future trends were made to overlap in the character of Dorian Gray, to the point that "[o]n set, seeing him in his dressing room, it [was] often hard to tell whether or not the actor [was] in costume, so interchangeable is Carney's style with that of Logan's vision of Dorian Gray" (Gosling 2015, 109).
- 3 Should this anecdote matter, beyond its circumstantial insight into Dorian Gray's early design in a popular Neo-Victorian show? Is there more to this wish to model Gray on a 1960s rock'n'roll icon or on a present-day, New York-based actor? This article aims at exploring the cultural legacy of Oscar Wilde's most enduring character by contending that "untimeliness" is structural to Dorian Gray—that his archetype intrinsically

encourages untimely readings and adaptations. Through the example of *Penny Dreadful*, it will determine which of the character's inherent features motivate these anachronistic choices so systematically. This implies, first, reviewing the ways in which the concepts of the untimely and the contemporary might intersect, especially in the case of "contemporary Victoriana". In *Penny Dreadful*, the characteristically Neo-Victorian tension between the represented past and the representing present finds a particular mode of expression: namely through a tension between, on the one hand, the series' intertextual and generic foundations in Romantic poetry and Gothic literature and, on the other, its chosen historical setting—the 1890s. The character of Dorian Gray, by evoking the Aestheticist and Decadent movements inside the show's otherwise predominantly Romantic intertext, stands out as an untimely force within the series, bearing the traces of the present within the past. In doing so, *Penny Dreadful* thus reimagines Decadence as a timeless phenomenon and an untimely period in History, one best suited to express contemporary fears in aesthetic terms.

Defining contemporary Victoriana

"Le contemporain est l'inactuel"

- 4 In 2006, philosopher Giorgio Agamben offered his students at the Università IUAV di Venezia a seminar on the thorny question "*Che cos'è il contemporaneo?*" ("What is the contemporary?"), which was turned into a short essay published the following year. Agamben starts his reflection with a concise definition given by Roland Barthes, itself a paraphrase of Nietzsche in Barthes' last lecture at the Collège de France: "*Le contemporain est l'inactuel*" ("the contemporary is the untimely") (Agamben 40). The equivalence made between such supposedly antithetical terms is already at play in Nietzsche's use of the word "*Unzeitgemäße*" (literally "that which is not fitting with the times") in his series of *Untimely Meditations*. To Nietzsche, the artist and the philosopher's aim lies in fashioning his time by working *against* it, for the benefit, he hopes, of a future time (Nietzsche 60); their anachronistic, unseasonable or unfashionable approach to their present times is precisely what allows them to best observe, and shape, the contemporary. The untimely is that which is both out of time and against it, and the two competing translations of Nietzsche's concept into French, *inactuel* (not current) and *intempestif* (inopportune), aptly reflect the two-fold semantic reach of the English "untimely": the untimely is disjointed from current times, which is precisely what makes it eminently contemporary. This disjointedness, Agamben is quick to note, should not be confused with nostalgia or longing for the past: "Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands". "Contemporariness", rather, "adheres to [time] through a disjunction and an anachronism" (Agamben 41).
- 5 This philosophical lineage, from Nietzsche to Barthes to Agamben, finds many other ramifications in modern or contemporary French philosophy. But the concept of untimeliness has also been the object, in recent years, of a renewed interest in the field of literary studies, where the term has been likened to a way of *queering* a text. In his article "Untimely Mediations", published in *Early Modern Culture* in 2007, Renaissance specialist and cultural critic Jonathan Gil Harris presents the ways in which the concept of untimeliness had led to new readings of time in Shakespeare studies. "The

untimely", Harris writes, "is that which is out of time, inhabiting a moment but also alien to it. By resisting absorption into a homogeneous present it also brings with it the difference that portends the future even as it conjures the past" (Harris § 11).¹ Drawing on the works of Derrida and Latour, Jameson and Benjamin (§ 10-11; 16), Harris argues for a "counterintuitive reorientation of causality that allows the future to produce the past" (§ 16) and considers untimely objects, not as the traces of the past within our present, but as the active presence of the future within past works. Because the past is a construction, endlessly produced and refashioned by the present, past works bear, Harris argues, the untimely traces which will be left by future generations of readers and interpreters.

- 6 This innovative approach to the study of time, in its literary application, thus acknowledges and even promotes the inevitably anachronistic nature of the act of reading and interpreting.² But it is equally relevant to the study of adaptations and rewritings which also retroactively produce the past and shape our historical representations of it. Indeed, the act of adapting both establishes past texts as untimely productions and generates untimely readings of them. On the one hand, by choosing past works as the basis for a contemporary production, any given adaptation posits and actualizes the relevance (and agency) of this particular past on that particular present. But this untimely interference, as Christian Gutleben and Susana Onega have highlighted through the concept of "refraction", goes both ways: "[Refraction] designate[s] a double process involving the ways in which a text exploits and integrates both the reflection of a previous text and the new light shed on the original work by its rewriting" (Gutleben and Onega 7). Adaptations reflect a former text, but they are also reflected by them. By using a past work as a relevant subject-matter for their own present times, they tend to read the past as prophecy and to set the past works as untimely; they also redefine the past by stressing that which, within the past, already hints toward the future. By doing so, they retroactively feed new meanings, new hermeneutic potentials, into the older original sources they adapt. This untimely presence of the present within the past is, as this article posits, best represented in the TV series *Penny Dreadful* by the character of Dorian Gray.

***Penny Dreadful's* Victoriana**

- 7 The concept behind *Penny Dreadful* is an apt exemplar of contemporary Victoriana: several well-known characters from nineteenth-century British literature are brought together and made to inhabit the same chronotope, that of a heavily archetypal London in the 1890s. In addition to Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* lends the series the characters of Dr Victor Frankenstein, who creates not one but three creatures; Bram Stoker's *Dracula* provides the show with one of its main antagonists as well as several secondary characters; and the third season introduces Robert Louis Stevenson's character of Dr Jekyll. For their part, the characters invented for the purposes of the show, while also based on a combination of archetypes inspired by nineteenth-century literature, are further determined intertextually by the actors who embody them. Indeed, as Alison Lee and Frederick D. King point out:

an American werewolf (Josh Hartnett) is wandering the streets of London in the guise of a former American teen heartthrob doing his best interpretation of Stoker's Quincey P. Morris, as well as reviving Werewolf fiction like George W. M. Reynolds's penny dreadful *Wagner the Werewolf* (1847) and Clemence

Housman's *The Werewolf* (1896); *Doctor Who*'s Rose Tyler (Billie Piper) has left her parallel universe to be reborn as a consumptive Irish prostitute who also recalls such tragic figures in Victorian literature, the most famous being Nancy in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837-39); and Vesper Lynd, the 'Bond girl' from *Casino Royale* is recast as Victorian spiritualist Vanessa Ives (Eva Green). (Lee and King § 8)

- 8 These collected archetypes, past and contemporary, are placed on the same "ontological field" (King and Lee § 8) and, furthermore, within a singular time frame in which multiple signs of the past and multiple signs of the present are superimposed. The main focus of the show, at least in its first season, thus lies in revisiting these Victorian archetypes, having their paths cross, and renewing their narrative potential through new characterizations and unexpected plot-twists. In this sense, the show itself may already be considered as a form of contemporary Victoriana in that it compiles these archetypes as so many collectibles for the viewer's collection and consumption. Blending together a variety of tropes and literary references, multiple sources from multiple time periods, *Penny Dreadful*'s contemporary Victoriana are thus eminently Neo-Victorian in that its Victorian setting is synthesized, condensed and reshaped by altogether present concerns.
- 9 Nonetheless, while any Neo-Victorian work might, in this sense, be considered as untimely, and while all the characters from *Penny Dreadful* are therefore marked, to various degrees, by their own particular brand of anachronism,³ the character of Dorian Gray alone comes to symbolize untimeliness in this highly-synthesized Victoriana by crystallizing the viewer's modern presence and value systems within this foreign past. This is due to the particular intertextual network—the dense web of references and allusions—which Dorian Gray bequeaths to the TV series, and which diverges from the common cultural associations conveyed by the other characters. As such, Dorian Gray's untimeliness—and also, to refer back to Barthes, his contemporariness—finds its roots, first and foremost, in the generic and literary traditions that the character brings to the show, and which thus need to be studied at greater length.

The untimely "Yellow Nineties"

Spatiotemporal context of the diegesis

- 10 *Penny Dreadful*, contrary to the novels it is based on (which do not provide an entirely specific timeframe for the stories they develop)⁴ relies on a dense network of dates and references to situate the scene in the 1890s. In the way of historical novels, the show strategically peppers its narrative with well-known historical landmarks so as to "time-code" its setting, particularly in its inaugural episodes. The discovery of a severely mutilated body during the show's pilot episode leads policemen and newspapers alike to ponder: "Is it the Ripper come back?" (Logan 2014a, 00:33:20-00:33:21), thus setting the beginning of the series some time after 1888. Its third season, in the same vein, premiered with an episode entitled "The Day Tennyson Died", offering the widely mourned poet's passing on October 6, 1892 as a central event that the characters discuss together and reflect upon (Logan 2016a). Other broader contextual references, such as Lord Murray's quest for the source of the Nile, visits to underground rat-baiting rings (Logan 2014c), or Ethan Chandler's involvement in "Colonel Brewster's Wild West Show and Emporium of American Curiosities" (Logan 2014a), act as powerful, if not

always entirely historically accurate,⁵ symbolic cues and temporal landmarks targeted at the show's contemporary audience. They aim at recreating an archetypal, widely familiar chronotope—London at the end of the nineteenth century—characterized by many of the tropes already at work in Wilde's novel: a socio-geographical division of the city (between the western and eastern parts of London), technological advances (the advent of cable wiring, or photography, provide the characters with many a conversation scene), and England at the height of its colonial hegemony. Through this network of historical references, the series' timeframe, though a necessarily condensed construction, is therefore made to coincide explicitly with the Yellow Nineties.

- 11 At first sight, the literary sources of inspiration for the show appear coherent with the time period: *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dracula* were published, respectively, in 1886, 1891 and 1897. Frankenstein and his creature, on the other hand, would logically seem, initially, to be the "untimely" characters at odds with the evoked chronotope: their first appearance dates back more than seven decades prior, in 1818, and their story is set even further back in time, at the end of the eighteenth century. But a glimpse into the early conception of *Penny Dreadful* reveals *Frankenstein* to be the first, and most decisive, inspiration for the show: "in its earliest form, the series was to be a much simpler new version of the exploits of Shelley's tortured young doctor", John Logan stated (Gosling 62). The addition of the other intertextual characters, as such, stemmed from their generic ability to conform with this first, primary intertext: "in his re-reading of [...] the 'canon' of early horror texts, [Logan] realized that each shared common themes [with *Frankenstein*], meaning that their characters could quite comfortably move in the same world" (Gosling 62). Shelley's novel thus motivated the inclusion of the show's other intertexts, not the other way around.

The Romantic backbone of *Penny Dreadful*

- 12 *Penny Dreadful*'s main intertext, *Frankenstein*, sets the tone for a resolutely Gothic show, embracing the genre and its most ubiquitous, diachronic tropes, bringing together as many highly recognizable, all-pervasive signs of "the Gothic" as possible—or, rather, of a contemporary, popular reconstruction of the Gothic: decrepit castles inhabited by devil-worshipping witches, blood sacrifices, visions, possessions, spiritualist séances, vampires, demons, etc., are made to populate the world of the series. This patchwork of tropes and archetypes is, admittedly, more representative of the ubiquity of Gothic narrative shorthands in contemporary fiction⁶ than it is indicative of any intertextual strategy explicitly implemented by the TV series. But the literary references cited by the characters themselves, while not always Gothic *per se*, do tend to reinforce the Gothic tonality of the show by favoring Romantic sources.
- 13 Indeed, out of the fifty-odd literary intertexts⁷ found in *Penny Dreadful*, half are references to English poets tied directly to Romanticism: William Wordsworth (8 references), Percy Bysshe Shelley (5), John Clare (5), Alfred Tennyson (3), John Keats (2), William Blake (2), Lord Byron (1) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1) constitute the most cohesive and recurrent corpus of quoted authors in the show. Wordsworth's poetry is by far the most prevalent intertext of the series, and his poem "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" is quoted twice, at length, including in conclusion to the series finale, as the main characters gather around

Vanessa Ives' tomb (Logan 2016d, 00:51:55-00:54:13). The English Romantic poet is also credited by John Logan as constituting the literary starting point of the show, whose poetry laid the ground upon which the borrowed characters of the series (mainly *Dracula's* and *Frankenstein's*) found their common roots:

It all started with William Wordsworth. Ten years ago I was reading a lot of Wordsworth, which led to Byron, Keats, Shelley, and finally to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. All that poetry and those two great cornerstones of Gothic literature set me thinking about a new story built on original characters, my own monstrous creations. (Gosling 6)

- 14 Wilde's character is already noticeably occulted from his list, and this heavily Romantic intertext provides a form of official endorsement of the philosophical stances and themes explored by the show, some of which might strike the viewer as decidedly "un-Wildean". Alienation from society, technological anguish, self-authenticity or a quest for a "true" or essential self are recurrent concerns in *Penny Dreadful*,⁸ and their expression in the diegesis is often justified by Romantic intertexts, as this use of Wordsworth by *Frankenstein's* second Creature may attest:

Caliban: I learned that you favoured Wordsworth and the old romantics. No wonder you fled from me. I am not a creature of the antique pastoral world, I am modernity personified. Did you not know that was what you were creating? The modern age! Did you really imagine that your modern creation would hold the values of Keats and Wordsworth? We are men of iron and mechanisation now. We are steam engines and turbines. Were you really so naïve to imagine that we could see eternity in a daffodil? (Logan 2014b, 00:11:15-00:11:56)

- 15 Caliban's self-hating diatribe offers a traditional, linear chronology in which the bleak, mechanized reality of a contemporary "modern age" ("now") is contrasted with an irretrievable, idealized past marked by Romantic poetry and pastoral landscapes. The "values of Keats and Wordsworth" are not specified but merely suggested by the reference to Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (also referred to as "Daffodils"); they seem to encompass a wide array of archetypal Romantic tropes, particularly Man's experience of infinity through contact with nature. As such, *Penny Dreadful's* nostalgic inscription in Romanticism allows the show to offer a gritty but widely familiar take on the shortcomings and fears of a post-industrialized "modern world". While the show may well take the 1890s as its timeframe and allude to them in its title, its aesthetic and philosophical roots lie much earlier in the nineteenth century—and indeed the series, with one exception, contains no literary reference to contemporary texts, Decadent or otherwise.⁹

Dorian Gray's untimeliness

An incomplete integration within the show

- 16 Understanding Dorian Gray's questionable inscription within this highly Romantic, highly Gothic world requires that his own intertextual network be developed first. The literary constellation which Wilde's novel alludes to, and which Dorian Gray, as an archetype, comes to denote within *Penny Dreadful's* diegesis, singles him out from the other characters and from the show's Gothic inscription. Admittedly, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, much like *Dracula* and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, is an often-cited instance of the late-Victorian Urban Gothic, which saw the revival of the eighteenth-century genre by transposing its exploration of the "aesthetics of fear" into an urban,

contemporary setting.¹⁰ Among many other literary sources that it blends together, the novel does also borrow a number of themes, motifs and stylistic features from Gothic literature; its Gothic sources of inspiration, from Edgar Allan Poe to Ann Radcliffe and Charles Maturin, whose works all featured fantastic, life-mimicking paintings, have been studied at length. At its most basic level, the metaphor of the painting, as a way of representing the duality of human nature, conveys the same dichotomy as that embodied by Frankenstein and his creature, or by Jekyll and Hyde, though transposing it in the aesthetic, rather than scientific, realm. But these intertexts remain implicit—pervasive but unacknowledged influences—throughout the novel. More surprisingly, considering how Wilde's novel so consistently weaves together various heterogeneous intertexts (borrowing from different art forms, different countries, different time periods and different movements),¹¹ overt references to or quotations by English Romantic poets are conspicuously absent from the text.¹² Unlike *Penny Dreadful's*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray's* explicit intertexts favor timely references, especially to the French Symbolist Théophile Gautier, who is quoted five times within the novel (Wilde 2007 [1891], 92; 107; 136-138): his poem "Variation sur le Carnaval de Venise" is one of the most extensively quoted texts from the novel. Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À rebours*, a staple of French Decadent literature published a mere seven years prior to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, may not, for its part, be mentioned explicitly in Wilde's novel, but its style and narrative content are extensively integrated to and imitated by the description of a "poisonous" (104) yellow book gifted to Dorian by Lord Henry, and of its corruptive influence on the young man.¹³ By doing so, Wilde thus summons up a highly specific, highly Decadent *Zeitgeist* for his novel, one aesthetically characterized by an emphasis on artificiality, proliferation, and intense codification, which sits uneasily with *Penny Dreadful's* Romantic-nostalgic ethos of authenticity and immediacy.

14

- 17 Dorian Gray, as a character in *Penny Dreadful*, was therefore made to undergo a few changes aimed at facilitating his integration into the show's Gothic syncretism. Dorian's painting perhaps best exemplifies this "Gothicizing"¹⁵ process. The painting's surroundings, for instance, feature a secret entrance concealed behind one of the paintings of Dorian's living room; the door opens to a dark, curved passageway with walls made of mirrors, leading to a bare, stone-walled, circular room reminiscent of a cellar or an *oubliette* (Logan 2014c, 00:03:18-00:04:16). This conventionally Gothic or dark Romantic setting¹⁶ bears little resemblance to Wilde's chosen hiding spot for his own painting: Dorian's childhood study at the top of his house, filled to the brim with discarded, yet highly-refined, tokens of his past—an Italian *cassone* with "fantastically painted panels and tarnished gilt mouldings", a satinwood book-case "filled with [...] dog-eared schoolbooks", a Flemish tapestry of a "faded king and queen" (2007, 101). Much as Wilde's original painting resists any particularizing description throughout the novel, Gray's painting, in *Penny Dreadful*, initially resists monstration. Throughout the first season, the portrait indeed remains concealed from the spectator's view, including in scenes where the painting appears onscreen: in these cases, such as the portrait's first apparition within the diegesis, the front of the portrait remains stubbornly turned away from the camera's lens. However, its full viewing, which is delayed until the second half of the second season, finally reveals a crouching, emaciated figure, naked and in chains, whose body shows signs of decomposition, with strips of flesh missing in places, revealing muscle and bone. From text to screen, the

portrait is thus materialized by accumulating pervading, all-purpose Gothic tropes which were absent from the original text.

- 18 While these adjustments to Wilde's character help reduce, to some extent, the aesthetic gap separating Dorian Gray from his fellow Gothic protagonists, his integration within the diegesis remains, in many ways, problematic and seemingly counterintuitive throughout the show. Of all the main protagonists of the series, Dorian features in the lowest number of episodes and is missing from half the episodes of the first season.¹⁷ He remains at the margin of each season's main narrative arc, to the point of being, by the third season, effectively relegated to a secondary role in Lily Frankenstein's already secondary plot. This struggle to assimilate the character to the rest of the diegesis might be symptomatic of some of the shortcomings of the show, in its attempt to create a self-contained, coherent whole out of disparate source-materials. But, more interestingly, this potential narrative flaw has an additional side-effect, which is to encourage an even closer, almost narratological, association between the signifier "Dorian Gray" and the notion of "unnaturalness", or departure from the norm. Gray's intertextual dissonance in *Penny Dreadful*, his intrinsic links with the Decadent movement rather than Romanticism, make him stand out as a narrative afterthought in the genesis of the show, a cultural choice that imposed itself after the fact, rather than a natural continuation of Logan's original concept.¹⁸ By doing so, the show, perhaps inadvertently, reinfuses Decadence with what David Weir has identified as the defining trait of this movement: its propensity for "aesthetic interference" (1995, 13-17) and for making "simultaneous appeals, aesthetic and otherwise, to both the past and the future" (xv).¹⁹

Dorian Gray's many anachronisms

- 19 Indeed, the result of this "unnatural" alliance between Dorian Gray and his Gothic counterparts is to set Wilde's character as an untimely presence within the show, marking the Decadent movement he embodies as an anachronism within the esoteric, grittily supernatural world of *Penny Dreadful*. In the dichotomy between past and future inherent in Neo-Victorianism, Dorian Gray is made to hint towards the future, that of a post-Victorian world. His outward aesthetic affiliations, first, dissociate him from the nineteenth century. For instance, his imposing living-room, with its strong vertical lines, marble-paved floor and geometrical wallpaper, was designed with Art Deco, rather than Aestheticism or Art Nouveau, in mind, as art director Jonathan McKinstry explained:

Dorian Gray's place was probably 30 years ahead of its time. He was pushing kind of Art Deco interiors. But because he was a character who was sort of timeless, I just felt that we could do that with his interior [...]. In a way, it's almost like Dorian Gray would possibly be the inspiration for the artists and architects who came up with the idea of Art Deco architecture 30 years later. (Ryan)

His physical appearance is strongly time-coded as well, and made to fit new beauty canons, drawing on Reeve Carney's own contemporary take on dandyism, and keeping his modern-day jagged-layered haircut.²⁰

- 20 While still characterized by his artistic and aesthetic practices, as he was in Wilde's novel, Dorian's approach to art also signals modern forms of consumerism and relies on the advent of new technologies. His appearance in any given scene is almost systematically accompanied by the intradiegetic playing of an operatic piece, which

Dorian listens to on his very own cylinder phonograph. While the device had been invented by Thomas Edison (among others) as early as 1877, and while different competing models were commercialized in 1888, its private, non-professional home use did not arise before the second half of the 1890s, and the sound quality for the recording of musical ensembles was subpar, thus marking Dorian's musical habits as pioneering, if not downright futuristic. One of the character's first appearances in the first season also shows him use the services of a photographer in order to create his own homemade stash of pornographic material. If both practices are not technically inconceivable in an 1890s setting, Dorian Gray's extensive, private collections bear the mark of modern practices of mass production and consumption of cultural products. Admittedly, Gray is not the only character who uses ground-breaking, soon-to-become widespread, technologies in *Penny Dreadful*; but he is the only one whose characterization relies on a systematic use of these technologies. To some extent, looking for historical coherence in a show such as *Penny Dreadful*, where the enduring appeal of literary archetypes, rather than historical accuracy, is the driving concept of the series, would ultimately defeat the purpose. I would argue, however, that in this chronologically inconsistent world, Dorian Gray's untimeliness and anachronism is structural, rather than circumstantial, as it may be for the other characters—a choice made all the more significant by the fact that, while Shelley's, Stoker's and Stevenson's texts all prominently feature the role of modern technology, Wilde's original material pointedly does not.²¹

- 21 A similar case can be made of the treatment of Dorian Gray's untimely sexuality. In *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, cultural critic Alan Sinfield studied how the originally distinct notions of "effeminacy" and "homosexuality" gradually came to be associated. He identifies Wilde's trials, in 1895, as marking a cultural shift, shaping and crystallizing subsequent views on male homosexuality: "[Wilde's works], the trials and the whole package that we call 'Oscar Wilde' were key sites upon which a modern key identity has been constituted. They did not produce male homosexuality, but they helped to produce it in a particular cultural mode" (20-21). This "particular cultural mode" is the culmination of the nineteenth-century essentialization of sexual practices, as theorized by Michel Foucault: "This new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an *incorporation of perversions* and a new *specification of individuals*" (42-43, author's italics). "Less a habitual sin than a singular nature", homosexuality thus became, in the late nineteenth century, a defining feature of a whole "species" (43) of men, constitutive of their identity. Most characters in *Penny Dreadful* grapple with this normative assignation of sexual identities and, as such, most of them exhibit, to varying degrees, an anachronistic stand on sexuality. Ferdinand Lyle, the invented Egyptologist from the British Museum, is the stereotypically witty, affected and closeted dandy according to whom one should "never underestimate the power of a queen with lovely hair" (Logan 2015c, 00:20:42-00:20:47); he is a quintessential avatar of Sinfield's post-Wildean construct of the homosexual. So is, in another way, the young cross-dressing Angélique, for whom Dorian organizes a Débutante Ball because she "deserve[s] a proper coming out" (2015b, 00:06:16-00:06:19). The female characters of the main cast, Vanessa Ives and Brona Croft, also bear social stigmata for their acts of sexual emancipation, and are confronted with the coercive power of societal institutions. Vanessa Ives is unmarried but sexually active; her possessions and psychic powers lead her to seek treatment in a mental institution and undergo, among other brutal treatments, a trepanation, which

ultimately fails to rid her of her sexual urges (2014d). Brona Croft is an Irish prostitute who is revived post-mortem as Lily Frankenstein; she starts to kill men who prey on other women, but is ultimately secreted to Bedlam by Frankenstein and Jekyll in an attempt to find a medical treatment that would allow the two men to tame her rage (2016d). In different ways, these characters take on, or fight against, the normative assignation of culturally determined sexual or gender roles through ground-breaking or anachronistic modes of behavior. But Dorian Gray alone seems impervious to this dichotomy and is made to embody a different paradigm, one in which sexuality (his own, at least) is non-problematic and non-essentializing. His particular brand of libertinism and his disregard for gender or sexual constructions bring him closer to even more contemporary constructions of sexuality. Instead of presenting him as homosexual or even bisexual, which would still imply constructing his sexuality around a binary opposition of male and female genders, the character, rather, shows a wide array of sexual inclinations, irrespective of his partner's gender or sexual orientation, and which have, in recent years, been alternatively labelled as "omni-," "poly-," "pluri-," "multi-," "pomo-," or "pansexual" in LGBTQ+ communities and studies.²² Throughout the show, he is thus partnered indiscriminately with men, women and transgender people of different sexual orientations, showcasing his sexuality as fluid, dynamic—a spectrum more than a static, essentializing trait. In this sense, Dorian Gray—and the specific form of decadence he represents within the series—thus becomes "a crashsite that anachronistically bears the traces of the future" (Harris § 16), untimely portents of new takes on sexuality; this reading goes one step further in queering the character's hermeneutic potential.

- 22 Dorian Gray's untimeliness in *Penny Dreadful* offers an insight into the ways in which Oscar Wilde and his most enduring character have been remembered and reshaped as cultural constructs in the following centuries. In the prologue and epilogue to his seminal biography of Wilde, Richard Ellman asserted: "Wilde is one of us" (1987, xiv); "he belongs to our world more than to Victoria's" (553). By making Wilde "one of us", our contemporary, Ellmann thus separated Wilde from an implicit "them", the Victorians, and established him as an incongruous, untimely presence, out of sync with his own historical context. This retroactive reading of Wilde, showcasing him as a portent of modernity stuck in Victorian times, had a long-lasting influence on the cultural afterlife of Dorian Gray. It might contribute to explaining why the character still regularly features in productions like *Penny Dreadful*, in which he does not entirely seem to fit. A revealing symptom of this has been the somewhat recent, and recurring, portrayal of Gray as a time-traveler, whose fantastic power has become immortality rather than unchanging youth and beauty—as is the case in *Penny Dreadful*.²³ Unable to coincide with contemporary constructions of Victoriana, Dorian Gray has thus become both timeless and untimely—a fixed point in time while the world changes around him, or an all-purpose archetype tailored to reflect the particular decadences of other time periods.²⁴ These new readings remain active as palimpsests as we return to Wilde's text, feeding the century-old novel with contemporary concerns and anguish, and generating new "untimely mediations" (Harris). Decadence, crystallized in the ever-evolving archetype of Dorian Gray, has thus been severed from the nineteenth century from which it emerged, in order to become a paradigm for subsequent centuries. In his "Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde famously stated that "[i]t is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (2007 [1891], 4). And in keeping with this statement, it does appear that Oscar Wilde and Decadence, because of their disruptive

force within old and new Victoriana, hold a mirror to us in which we seem to recognize ourselves more than we do the Victorians.

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NOTES

1. Harris uses Linda Charnes' work as an example of this point: nostalgia, she argues, while a concept originating in the eighteenth century, is an untimely force at play within Shakespeare's play *Henry V*. This not only queers our traditional reading of Shakespeare, but also our traditional understanding of time as a unidirectional, fixed line from past to present, which Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon have named "heterotemporality", as opposed to "homohistory", and which Harris likens to the untimely (Goldberg and Menon 1612; Harris §19).
2. As he walks along the corridors of the San Marco Monastery in Florence, the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman's steps falter in front of a Fra Angelico painting, a small section of which reminds him of Jackson Pollock's drippings. Anachronisms, Didi-Huberman thus argues, are not only inevitable: they are also fecund for analysis (including for the historian) because the incongruous analogies they create generate new problems to analyze, new hypotheses to verify (Didi-Huberman 20-21).
3. These anachronistic characterizations are sometimes anecdotal (Ethan Chandler's quartz watch in "Night Watch" [Logan 2014a], for instance, was not invented until the late 1920s), sometimes cultural (the horror shows performed at the "Grand Guignol" theatre, which opened in Paris in the late 1890s, were not popularized in England before the beginning of the twentieth century). By the final season, they have become narrative and structural, as Lily Frankenstein leads a group of former prostitutes into emancipation, in a movement that borrows features from the suffragettes and from radical second- and third-wave feminism.
4. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* takes place in the 1890s, as attested by the performances of Adelina Patti and Anton Rubinstein, which Dorian attends in London (see Wilde 2011, 232n; Aquien 53), but no specific date or particular historical event is mentioned. The same can be said of *Dracula*, which never specifies the year in which the story takes place, although the epistolary nature of the novel makes it rely on a dense network of dates; the technological advances, however (the use of a phonograph to record diary entries, for instance), suggest that the narrated time and the time of writing are intended to coincide roughly. In *Frankenstein*, the inaugural letters only feature the first two digits of the date on which they were written, setting the story in the eighteenth century.
5. Lake Victoria, for instance, had indeed been confirmed to be the source of the Nile as early as 1875 by Henry Morton Stanley.
6. Gothic studies and criticism have expressed more and more interest in exploring the "gothic" (in lowercase) as a transnational, transmedial discursive mode rather than as a genre or a movement: see, for instance, Glennis Byron, who coined the concept of "globalgothic" (2013); Catherine Spooner, who defines the gothic as a "set of discourses" (2007, 2); Sage and Lloyd Smith, for whom it is "an anonymous language" (1996, 1); or Robert Mighall, for whom it is "a process, not an essence; a rhetoric rather than a store of universal symbols" (1999, xxv).
7. For the purposes of this study, I consider as a literary intertext any *explicit* reference to or quotation from an artistic text or its author. I also include theatrical references (which are overwhelmingly references to Shakespeare), as they mostly tend to emphasize the textuality of

the quoted work, and religious texts (the Bible, the Book of the Dead), as they are used for their metaphoric potential. I don't include references to scientific texts or to a few textbooks also mentioned in the show.

8. Several characters in the show (the witch Joan Clayton, Dracula and Vanessa Ives respectively, in the following quotations) present essentialist views of the self as a necessary imperative: "Be true" (Logan 2015b, 00:48:11); "Be truly what you are" (2016b, 00:42:47-00:42:49); "I accept myself" (2016c, 00:55:10-00:55:13).

9. Out of the mere ten literary references to post-Romantic sources in *Penny Dreadful*, R.L. Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885), quoted twice in one episode, is the only literary work whose publication roughly coincides with the decade in which the series takes place. Only two of the remaining references allude to a penny dreadful (*Sweeney Todd* [Logan 2014b, 00:19:49] and *Varney the Vampire* [2014e, 00:31:32], both published in the 1840s) (For further details on the "penny dreadful" *The String of Pearls*, featuring the character of Sweeney Todd, the demon barber of Fleet Street, see Manon Labrande's essay in this issue of *Polysèmes*). Finally, apart from quotations from William Shakespeare's plays or the Bible, only two references to John Milton's poems predate Romanticism.

10. This inscription within the present is indeed what Alexandra Warwick considers to be the main difference between the early forms of the Gothic and the Victorian Gothic: "The revival of Gothic, the point at which it could be said to be 'Victorian', is the moment at which it is being used explicitly to articulate the questions of the present, and setting them in that same recognisable present. The anxiety of the legacies of the past remains, intensified by the self-consciousness of modernity" (Warwick 33).

11. Wilde's intertextual strategy in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been compared to the making of cloth by several critics, in part to recall the textile etymological origin of the word "text", but also to suggest that, like a Harlequin costume (Louvel 2000), Wilde's network of references is made of countless, heterogeneous source-materials forming a semi-coherent whole.

12. Some critics have unearthed a few occasional allusions to Romantic and Victorian poems in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Michael Patrick Gillespie, for instance, postulates that Sibyl Vane's exclamation "I am grown sick of shadows" might be a variation upon the line "I am half-sick of shadows" in Alfred Tennyson's "The Lady of Shallot" (Wilde 2007 [1891], 74n); chapter III, "World had to be in travail, that the meanest flower might blow" recalls a line in Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (34n). But these two isolated allusions rewrite their original material and cover the tracks of their original source; they are not explicit references or quotations, unlike those found in *Penny Dreadful*.

13. The whole of chapter XI, in which the narrator painstakingly catalogues the aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual experiences undergone by Dorian under the influence of the yellow book, has been extensively studied as a direct rewriting of Huysmans' novel; in his letters, Wilde himself identified it as the model for the yellow book (2000, 524), although he later recanted (585).

14. Alternatively, Michael Riffaterre offers that the constant use of paradoxes is what distinguishes Decadence from Romanticism (1999, 66), operating a "deconstruction of Romanticism" (70) by displacing and transforming the tropes and value systems of Romanticism.

15. "Epochs, institutions, places, and people are Gothicized, have the Gothic thrust upon them. That which is Gothicized depends on history and the stories it needs to tell itself" (Mighall xxv).

16. Logan stated Alexandre Dumas' *The Vicomte de Bragelonne* (1847-1850) as the main inspiration for the painting and its setting: "I wanted something that felt *Man in the Iron Mask*-y, something that felt Alexandre Dumas" (Connolly).

17. Out of a total of 27 episodes, Vanessa Ives and Malcolm Murray appear in 25 episodes; Ethan Chandler and Victor Frankenstein in 24 episodes; Caliban (later John Clare) in 23 episodes; Brona

Croft (later Lily Frankenstein) in 20 episodes; Dorian Gray in 18 episodes. Reeve Carney is nonetheless credited as a member of the main cast throughout the run of the series.

18. This seems confirmed by Logan's previously quoted statement on his original inspirations for the television series, which conceals Dorian Gray from his own intertextual evolution from Romantic poems to Mary Shelley's and Bram Stoker's works.

19. My thanks to Marie-Luise Kohlke for suggesting this link following the presentation of an early version of this article.

20. John Logan and his team adopted diametrically opposed strategies for the design of Dorian Gray and Frankenstein, which are tell-tale signs of Logan's relationship with both novels as an adaptor. In the case of Frankenstein, Logan's deference to the source-material made him favor painstaking faithfulness over artistic license: "Mary Shelley writes a particular description, which is a pale, ashen face, long, lanky hair, black lips, and blazing yellow eyes. So we went through months and months of testing different eyes to find the ones that would allow Rory to act and would still have a glint of Mary Shelley's frightening yellow to them" (Gosling 152-153). With Dorian Gray, however, Logan had no such qualms: "Because I had the opportunity to explore the character differently, I chose to step away from some of Oscar Wilde's paradigms about him" (Gosling 108). These dual positions on both texts are representative of the imitation/reinvention dichotomy at the heart of adaptation studies: in the first instance, the adapting work is perceived as subaltern to the adapted work, while in the other, both adapting and adapted works are set on an equal footing, refashioning each other through mutual interaction.

21. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does feature discreet mentioning of trains (Wilde 2007, 124), telegrams (53) and photographs (41), which are no longer ground-breaking technologies by the time of its publication; these references, furthermore, may easily be removed from the text without impeding its comprehension.

22. See, for instance, Corey Flanders' introductory synthesis of the nomenclature in the *Journal of Bisexuality* (Flanders).

23. Other productions using this narrative change include the movie adaptation of Alan Moore's comic book *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) or the radio BBC series *The Confessions of Dorian Gray* (2012-16). In *Penny Dreadful*, Dorian Gray hints that he might be as old as the fall of Byzantium (2016c, 00:42:53); his curse, in his own terms, is to watch the world, and the people he knows, grow old and die around him, as he remains a fixed point in time: "All age and die, save you. All rot and fall to dust, save you. Any child you bear becomes a crone and perishes before your eyes. Any lover withers and shrinks into incontinence and bent, toothless senility. While you, only you, never age. Never tire. Never fade. Alone. [...] Small price to pay for such immortal perfection, isn't it?" (2016d, 00:16:11-00:17:42).

24. Dorian Gray's historical setting has been updated to provide a commentary on more recent decades, including the 1970s in Massimo Dallamano's film *Il dio chiamato Dorian* (1970) and the 1980s-1990s in Will Self's novel *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002).

ABSTRACTS

The densely intertextual world of the TV series *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime/Sky, 2014-2016) mostly borrows its characters and thematic stakes from the Gothic horror genre; its imagined Victorian London is filled with monstrous creatures collected from heterogeneous literary periods, including Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and thus offers a dark but

widely familiar take on the myth of the modern age and man. However, out of this diverse cast of Victorian literary archetypes, the character of Dorian Gray alone summons Decadence as a specific, circumscribed historical period and movement, notably through the artistic references he brings to the diegesis and the thematic content he has come to embody in popular culture. This dissonance with the predominantly Gothic strategies of the show sets him apart from the other characters and the main narrative and, consequently, intensifies the character's untimeliness, portraying Decadence and Aestheticism as anachronisms within the esoteric, grittily supernatural world of *Penny Dreadful*. Dorian Gray's untimeliness, already hinted at in 1891 by the infamous reviews of Wilde's seminal novel, also becomes a form of timelessness through the narrative transformations which the character undergoes, from being gifted (or cursed) with eternal beauty to immortality. In keeping with the fruitful intertextual legacy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Penny Dreadful* thus reimagines Decadence as a timeless phenomenon and an untimely period in History, one best suited to express contemporary fears in aesthetic terms.

Le monde densément intertextuel de la série télévisée *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime/Sky, 2014-2016) revendique un imaginaire noir et gothique ; son Londres de la fin des années 1890 regorge de créatures monstrueuses empruntées à des œuvres littéraires du XIX^e siècle, depuis *Frankenstein* de Mary Shelley (1818) jusqu'à *Dracula* de Bram Stoker (1897). Seul le personnage de Dorian Gray, inspiré du roman d'Oscar Wilde (1981), semble à même d'exprimer spécifiquement la décennie 1890 par le réseau de connotations décadentistes dont il enrichit l'univers de la série. Pourtant, la dissonance qu'il crée avec les stratégies gothiques de *Penny Dreadful* a plutôt tendance à le dissocier des autres personnages et de l'intrigue principale, à laquelle il ne parvient jamais entièrement à s'intégrer. Cette dissonance exacerbe, par conséquent, l'inactualité du personnage : le mouvement esthétique qu'il symbolise fait figure d'anachronisme dans l'univers ésotérique, surnaturel et scabreux de *Penny Dreadful*. Son intempestivité – une façon d'être contre et hors de son temps qui le caractérise dès sa création dans le roman de Wilde – devient une forme d'intemporalité au gré des réécritures du personnage, alors que d'immuablement beau, il accède peu à peu, dans la culture populaire, à l'immortalité en bonne et due forme. *Penny Dreadful* dépeint ainsi le décadentisme comme un phénomène à la fois intemporel et intempetif, permettant d'exprimer des angoisses contemporaines par le biais d'analogies esthétiques.

INDEX

Mots-clés: intermédialité, série, néo-victorien, intempetif, inactuel, décadentisme

Keywords: intermediality, series, neo-Victorian, untimeliness, Decadence

oeuvre citée *Penny Dreadful*, *Picture of Dorian Gray* (The)

AUTHORS

CAMILLE MARTIN-PAYRE

Camille Martin-Payre is a PhD candidate and teaching assistant at the University Paris-Diderot (France). Her dissertation on "The workings of intermediality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and its adaptations, updates and rewritings" is supervised by Professor Catherine Bernard. Her doctoral research explores how the intermedial evolution of artistic references in adaptations of Wilde's novel generates new readings of the Victorian novel and help fashion Dorian Gray into an ever-evolving, transmedial archetype.