

THE CONVERSATION

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BBC's modern Sherlock owes his success to pure Victoriana

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This season, it's all about the jacket for Watson. BBC

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The third season of the BBC's Sherlock opens with a bang and gives us Derren Brown, Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlock in an action hero window smash, followed by an insouciant hair tousle and a Hollywood kiss with Molly Hooper. The opening of Empty Hearse is more in the style of Guy Ritchie's fantasy Victoriana Sherlock Holmes films, and could not be more different from the show's more procedural beginnings.

This similarity with Ritchie is certainly deliberate, because Season 3 of Sherlock shows its infinite adaptability by incorporating the style of the two recent Sherlock Holmes films, along with various elements of the infinitely flexible Sherlock canon. As someone who is quite happy at the prospect of living in an era with three different iterations of Sherlock (Cumberbatch, Johnny Lee Miller in Elementary and Robert Downey Jr. in the two Ritchie films), I'm also quite happy that they adapt and reference one another.

Sherlock as a series is also clever about its Victorian origins, particularly when it comes to costumes, and the latest season is no exception. Upon his return to London, we are treated to a sweeping,

Romantic image of Sherlock surveying the city from on high, clad in his now iconic great coat; an image that recalls the powerful 19th century explorer. This is just one of the myriad Victorian allusions embedded in the Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat's costumes and design for Sherlock.

Steampunk and shoulder patches

Consider the attention accorded to John Watson's black Haversack jacket, which he wears consistently throughout the three series. The jacket has received a GQ fashion profile, not to mention endless remarks on Twitter. Haversack is a Japanese label that reproduces and draws inspiration from traditional menswear and workwear. Watson's jacket expresses a sort of commercialised steampunk aesthetic, a gesture towards an earlier era. Its leather shoulder patch evokes the structure of military uniforms (something we see Jude Law's Watson wearing in *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*, for example) delineating Watson's status as soldier. The jacket is contemporary and yet evocative of Victorian "period" professions and pursuits.

The décor of 221B Baker Street in *Sherlock* is absolutely neo-Victorian, with its bison skull adorned with headphones that forms a focal point of the sitting room. The skull evokes the décor of traditional private men's clubs or military messes – the trophy from a big game hunt. The headphones on the skull reflect the contemporary presence of technology via laptops, smartphones, blogs, and the Skype-like software deployed in season two's *A Scandal in Belgravia*. The pairing of skull and headphones encapsulates the show's fusing of 19th and 21st century.

As embodied by Benedict Cumberbatch, Sherlock adapts the Victorian fantasy of total mastery over knowledge. Though apparently as flummoxed by composing a best man's speech as he was by his nemesis Irene Adler's voracious sexuality, he once more demonstrates this near-total mastery in *The Sign of Three* by delivering a deeply moving speech and solving the crime, just as he outwits Adler by confirming her deep longing for him in season 2.

The series as a whole mocks this aspiration to total knowledge while also, for the most part, presenting a Holmes who expresses an astonishing level of knowledge. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the line: "Get out, I need to go to my mind palace". Yet Sherlock's mastery is undermined by his frequently remarked-upon social ineptitude: Mary observes that he knows nothing about human nature after he bungles his reappearance in *The Empty Hearse*.

What also makes the original Holmes stories timely is that many of them centre around the theft and retrieval of information. In *A Scandal in Belgravia* and *The Hounds of Baskerville*, referencing two of the most well-known stories in the Holmes canon, concerns with information and technology are front and centre. The season 3 finale *His Last Vow* also centres on the information that surrounds Mary Watson's past and how the Appledore files of blackmailer Magnussen will be deployed.

All these versions of Sherlock Holmes can exist simultaneously because they demonstrate how the

presence of Sherlock and Watson act as anchors for the story. Sherlock has weathered the sometimes troublesome shift to the present moment particularly well due in no small part to its carefully constructed neo-Victorian references.

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