

“CAUGHT IN THE TRAP”:
WILLIAM MORRIS, MACHINERY, AND POPULAR FILM
FROM CHARLIE CHAPLIN TO NICK PARK

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In “*News from Nowhere* and Victorian Socialist-Feminism,” Florence and William Boos describe William Morris’s complex relationship with the late-Victorian women’s movement by discussing the character of Ellen. She is the figure who, in the revolutionary 1890 dream-vision, *News from Nowhere*, best embodies Morris’s contradictory attitudes. On the one hand, as the Booses put it, Ellen “bears witness to some of the residually conventional features of Morris’s ideals for women” (26), including an emphasis on beauty and domesticity. But on the other hand, she is “the ultimate spokeswoman of the book’s finest insights into the spirit of the new society” (27). That spirit includes the “sense of harmony with nature and the cycles of life” and with “universal earth,” articulated in the passage where William Guest, time traveller to the utopia of the future, reports that Ellen “cried out, ‘O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and the weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it’” (220).

Against this love of “all that grows,” William Morris evinced a deep hostility toward, or at least suspicion of, whatever does not. For him, as for many late-nineteenth century British socialist writers, the demonic nature of capitalism was summed up by the image of the Machine (with a capital “M”), which they denounced in evangelical rhetoric that emphasized its monstrous and unnatural character. Thus, in 1890, even as *News from Nowhere* was appearing in Morris’s socialist journal, *Commonweal*, Olive Schreiner published in the *New Review* her own dream-vision, “The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed,” and railed against industrial production through the image of the “wine-press.” In Schreiner’s eyes, the “wine-press,” a machine that crushes the workers who run it and turns them into wine for the consumption of the upper classes (and into dregs for the consumption of other workers), is what sustains

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