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Heterotopian Disorientation: Intersectionality in William Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth*

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Abstract: This article reads William Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* (2016) through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of the heterotopia to explore the film's ambivalent gender and racial politics. The country house that Katherine Lester is locked away in forms a quasi-heterotopia, mediated through a disorienting cinematography of incarceration. Although she manages to transgress the ideological boundaries surrounding her, she simultaneously contributes to the oppression of her Black housemaid, Anna. On the one hand, the film suggests that the coercive space of the colony—another Foucauldian heterotopia—may threaten white hegemony: While Mr Lester's Black, illegitimate son Teddy almost manages to claim his inheritance and, hence, contest the racialised master/servant relationship of the country house, Anna's voice threatens to cause Katherine's downfall. On the other hand, through eventually denying Anna's and Teddy's agency, *Lady Macbeth* exposes the pervasiveness of intersectional forms of oppression that are at play in both Victorian and twenty-first-century Britain. The constant spatial disorientation that the film produces, this article suggests, not only identifies blind spots in Foucault's writings on heterotopian space as far as intersectionality is concerned, but also speaks to white privilege as a vital concern of both twenty-first-century feminism and neo-Victorian criticism.

Keywords: colonialism; domesticity; feminism; Michel Foucault; heterotopia; intersectionality; *Lady Macbeth*; neo-Victorianism; William Oldroyd; period drama



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1. Introduction

The unorthodoxy of *Lady Macbeth* (2016), directed by William Oldroyd, as a period film stands out from the very first shot, which shows the protagonist Katherine Lester (Florence Pugh) in her bridal veil at the altar, captured from the side. She moves her head to look at the man beside her, but the camera provides no eyeline match, and so the viewer only sees his shoulder. In a film that features sparse dialogue, no music, and little continuity editing, here, as elsewhere, disorientation prevails. Refusing to offer any form of guidance to the viewer and maintaining a curious distance from all its characters, *Lady Macbeth* therefore denies its audience the possibility of immersion, commonly acknowledged as a predominant feature of neo-Victorian aesthetics (see Boehm Schnitker and Gruss 2014, pp. 4–8). Processes of meaning-making, it seems, operate via spatial markers instead: the country house that most of the scenes are set in functions as a quasi-prison, firmly separating its inhabitants into upstairs and downstairs, inside and outside, self and Other.

This article reads the film's spatial politics through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of the heterotopia, exploring the extent to which *Lady Macbeth* reimagines traditionally coercive spaces as spaces of resistance against the hegemonic structures that govern them. The film follows Katherine as she frees herself from the patriarchal stranglehold that she finds herself in after the wedding; she first begins an affair with one of the stable boys and subsequently kills her husband, father-in-law, and her husband's illegitimate Black son, Teddy. Eventually, however, one of the housemaids and Katherine's lover are charged with the murders, while Katherine remains alone on the estate.

Foucault first mentions heterotopias in the preface to *The Order of Things* (1966) and more fully develops the concept in 'Of Other Spaces' (1986; originally published as 'Des Espaces Autres' in 1967). He famously postulates that all societies create heterotopias, which he defines as "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1986, p. 24).¹ As two specific sub-categories of heterotopian space, he names "crisis heterotopias", which segregate individuals who find themselves in what society deems a critical stage of their lives (e.g., adolescents at boarding schools), and "heterotopias of deviation", designed to contain those deemed outside the norm and, hence, considered a threat to the social order, of which he cites prisons, hospitals, and rest homes as prime examples (Foucault 1986, pp. 24–25). Heterotopias are defined as 'ideal' other-spaces, yet whether or not they display utopian rather than dystopian qualities depends not only on the societal laws and norms that a particular heterotopia contests or inverts, but also on the perspective of the individuals they govern.

Heterotopias have also found their way into neo-Victorian critical discourse. Female oppression and its representation via physical structures of incarceration, such as the classic Foucauldian heterotopias of the prison or the asylum, as well as the restrictive domestic sphere, are well-established neo-Victorian themes.² Critics have emphasised how these texts highlight the ways in which their female protagonists subvert oppressive power structures and thus defy containment. Though not envisioned as a space of resistance per se, the potential for transformation and subversion is nevertheless inherent in Foucault's definition of the various heterotopias, for they "always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (Foucault 1986, p. 26). The heterotopia, in other words, is inherently porous. This dialectic of incarceration and its potential subversion are at the centre of this article, which addresses the questions of whether at all, by whom, and at whose costs such heterotopias of deviation may be subverted.

Oldroyd's film is based on Nikolai Leskov's Russian novella *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1865), previously adapted to Dmitri Shostakovich's eponymous opera (1934) and Andrzej Wajda's film *Siberian Lady Macbeth* (1962). Oldroyd turns Leskov's novella into a "Victorian noir" (Bradshaw 2017, n.p.) or, rather, a neo-Victorian noir, a chamber piece that oozes claustrophobia and confinement. In contrast to Leskov's source text, whose engagement with heterotopian structures restricts itself to the confines of gendered domesticity (and, to a lesser extent, class), *Lady Macbeth* is heavily invested in the entwined politics of gender and race in nineteenth- as well as twenty-first-century Britain, both of which are negotiated spatially. Writer Alice Birch transports the film's setting from nineteenth-century Russia to an undefined rural part of Victorian Northern England, and reimagines three of the film's main characters—Katherine, her husband Alexander Lester (Paul Hilton), and father-in-law Boris Lester (Christopher Fairbank)—as the British Victorian counterparts to Leskov's original characters. The Lesters' stableboy Sebastian (played by British American–Armenian actor and musician Cosmo Jarvis) is a version of Leskov's Sergei, with the significant difference that Sebastian is visually racialised as Other. The Black housemaid Anna (Naomi Ackie) does not feature in Leskov's novella at all. For its casting of BAME actors,³ Oldroyd's film has been compared to Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* (2011), in which the young and older Heathcliff were played by Black actors Solomon Glave and James Howson, respectively (see Bradshaw 2017, n.p.). Whereas some critics felt that in *Lady Macbeth*, "racial difference is rendered visible and turned into a new source of tension" (Bradshaw 2017, n.p.), others have deemed the film's relentless victimisation of all those who fall outside the white norm racist in itself (see Taylor 2017, n.p.).

The critical depiction of restrictive Victorian gender roles, the dullness of provincial life, and the (unjust) stigmatisation of female adultery makes *Lady Macbeth* typically neo-Victorian. Moreover, it invites comparison with canonised depictions of oppressive Victorian and early twentieth-century domesticity other than Leskov's (see Weston 2017, p. 36; Bradshaw 2017, n.p.), including Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Henrik Ibsen's plays, and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). Rather atypical of period

drama, a genre that “is intended for those who ‘belong’—a society which is imagined as, in broad terms, culturally homogeneous” (Hall 2005, p. 25),⁴ *Lady Macbeth* engages critically with imperial legacies. In this respect, *Lady Macbeth* not only marks an intervention as far as deviance from period drama aesthetics is concerned, but also in its challenge of the dominant narrative of an all-white Victorian society.

Financed by colonialism as a major source of revenue, maintained by Black servants and/or enslaved people, and located all across Britain, the country house functions as a microcosm of colonial exploitation. Recently, this gained wider public attention with the publication of the National Trust’s much-needed report on the ways in which their properties remain entangled in histories of colonialism and, particularly, economies of enslavement (National Trust 2020, n.p.).⁵ The setting thus intertwines the spatially negotiated concept of domesticity with that of the colony—another heterotopia in Foucault’s terms, and one that operates along multifaceted and nuanced racialised regimes of oppression—and, hence, forcefully encodes the ambivalent gender and racial politics of Oldroyd’s film. Although, eventually, all potential threats to the white hegemony of Britain’s imperial ‘centre’ are denied, initially, the film can be construed as a feminist, neo-Victorian reworking of the (gothic) trope of female imprisonment in domestic space. In the following, I suggest that, on one level, the heterotopia allows for a productive intersectional reading of the film’s aesthetics, in which characters are segregated into different spaces, their positionality constantly being compartmentalised and tied to that particular space. While for some characters, thresholds between different spaces are merely difficult to cross, Oldroyd implies that for others, it is altogether impossible. On another level, through the above-mentioned refusal to offer immersion and identification, the film resists interpretation itself. I reflect upon the latter in relation to the genre of neo-Victorian film, which has long tended to neglect systematic reappraisals of imperial politics and ideologies, mostly centring on white characters and operating with predominantly white casts.

2. Framing Katherine’s Domestic Imprisonment

With the exception of a handful of location shots, *Lady Macbeth* is set exclusively inside the Lesters’ country house, the heterotopian prison of Katherine’s domestic confinement. Told immediately after the wedding that she “ought to keep to the house” (Oldroyd 2017, 0:02:40), her reply—“I like the fresh air, I like being outside” (Oldroyd 2017, 0:02:50)—is not even acknowledged. The social arrangements of the house also mirror those of a prison, especially as the housemaid Anna keeps track of Katherine’s every move. Oldroyd himself describes Anna as “an antagonist in the sense that she is part of the police, because that’s her job” (Oldroyd qtd. in Weston 2017, p. 36). Unlike Katherine, Anna has the capacity to cross the threshold and move in and out of Katherine’s space, an ostensible freedom that is, of course, tied to her role as servant. A shadow under the door to Katherine’s bedchamber indicates that Anna even spies on her on the wedding night (Oldroyd 2017, 0:02:36), which leads Katherine to mistrust her early on. The daily morning ritual of tightening the corset visualises Anna’s confining function, with the close-up of her hands on Katherine’s white bodice already hinting at racial tension in this arrangement (Oldroyd 2017, 0:05:25). In employing a Black servant figure to monitor her white mistress, the film gingerly destabilises the normative power structures usually associated with period cinema set in the nineteenth century.

Other than thus depicting the setting as prison-like on the level of *histoire*, the *discours* of *Lady Macbeth* equally generates spaces of confinement. Here, the question of perspectivity acquires special importance. Film scholars such as Markus Kuhn have translated Gérard Genette’s concept of focalisation to the context of film, addressing the questions of whose knowledge about the diegetic world is transmitted and whether a character actually has access to this kind of knowledge. Like Genette, Kuhn distinguishes between three types of focalisation: the visual narrator shows more than a character knows (zero focalisation), exactly what a character knows (internal), or less than a character knows (external). In contrast to literature, film additionally operates via the level of ocularisation (visual

perception), thus differentiating between knowledge relations and seeing relations. In analogy to focalisation, the viewer sees either more, less, or approximately the same as a given character, i.e., zero, external, and internal ocularisation, respectively (Kuhn 2011, pp. 122–27). What sets *Lady Macbeth* apart from the generic structures of heritage cinema or contemporary period drama à la *Downton Abbey* (2010–2015) is its almost exclusive reliance on *external* focalisation and ocularisation, complicating any form of establishing interiority (and, hence, viewers' connection) with Katherine or any of the other characters.

Such lack of identificatory aspects closely connects to the film's self-positioning vis-à-vis a range of Victorian imaginations of domesticity, chiefly works of the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916), a frequently cited inspiration for stage productions of Ibsen's plays. Oldroyd has also acknowledged Hammershøi's influence on the film's aesthetic (see Weston 2017, p. 36). Several of Hammershøi's paintings, such as those in the series *Intérieurs, 1864–1916*, depict a young woman dressed in funereal garb looking outside a window with her back turned to the observer. Rather than serving as a mere inspiration for the film's aesthetic, however, Hammershøi's paintings pre-structure the film's entire framing strategy, namely, its mediation of repressive domesticity.⁶ A recurring image shows Katherine standing at the window or sitting on the windowsill. In such scenes, Manohla Dargis points out, with reference to Stephen Heath, that Katherine resembles the titular character of *Madame Bovary*, in which “[t]he window is the frame of Emma's dissatisfaction” (Dargis 2017, n.p.). The viewer sees Katherine looking out, but the camera breaks with the filmic convention of the eyeline match, since it does not provide any indication as to what she sees outside (see, e.g., Oldroyd 2017, 0:04:17; 0:18:24). Whereas Katherine is literally incarcerated, the scene's external ocularisation—showing decidedly less than she sees—figuratively incarcerates the viewer, who, unlike Katherine, cannot even look outside the window. At the same time, it is made clear that what viewers see is not Katherine's subjective view because they cannot look through her eyes. Due to her status as protagonist, she functions as the film's focal character, yet not its focaliser. Where Hammershøi's paintings refuse to depict the women's faces, *Lady Macbeth*, by way of ocular and focal externalisation, translates the female sense of alienation into an unsettling heterotopian cinematography—heterotopian because it not only mediates Katherine's imprisonment, but also reverses conventional knowledge relations in neo-Victorian visual media.⁷

Similarly to this filmic simulation of internment, the camera repeatedly frames Katherine through doors and, thus, opens up two different spaces, demarcating the inside and outside. The cinematography thus restrains her, with the viewer adopting the position of the observer, looking at Katherine in her cell-like bedroom from the liminal space of the hallway. Oldroyd here ‘quotes’ Hammershøi again, as a glance at the painting *Interieur. Strandgade 30* (1901) reveals. When Anna wakes Katherine in the morning, opening the door and folding away the shutters, the scene is likewise shot through the doorframe (Oldroyd 2017, 0:05:03–0:05:14; 0:11:51–0:12:03). This tactic of enforcing the viewer's complicity in Katherine's imprisonment can be read as a somewhat sanitised reference to the (neo-)Victorian fascination with prisons and the observation of its female inmates in particular. One major reason that the film's setting lends itself to a reading along the lines of Foucault's heterotopia of deviation is thus its mediation of confinement.

To further increase the setting's prison-like qualities, Oldroyd conceals the outside of the country house. In another departure from the filmic tradition of period cinema, he withholds the expected establishing shot and, thus, vital knowledge about the diegetic world, which heightens the larger atmosphere of disorientation. Since Katherine's daily routine consists of lying around languidly and wandering about the house, we still experience the house from the inside. The shots' external focalization makes it seem as if the viewer is always positioned a little behind Katherine, never quite reaching her but never losing her trail either. In Peter Bradshaw's words, “[i]t is a world [. . .] in which movement is readily audible and easily monitored” (Bradshaw 2017, n.p.). Whenever Katherine moves around, she moves in controlled ways, as shots of her descending the spiral staircase with a firm grip on the banister imply (Oldroyd 2017, 0:05:39). In line with

this impression of strict regulation and control, everything about the house is conspicuously orderly, if not symmetrical. Katherine, in her stiff blue dress and rigid posture, always sits silently in the exact centre of the sofa (Oldroyd 2017, 0:05:55). Her neatly braided bun mirrors the pattern on the mantelpiece (Oldroyd 2017, 0:05:48), as if her very appearance was controlled by the structure of the house itself. That way, the camera produces a picture of “sepulchral quiet, mesmerizingly steady framing and unnerving order” (Dargis 2017, n.p.). As Dargis aptly remarks, Oldroyd thus enshrines and objectifies Katherine in the same way as do all the male characters in the film. Specifically, since she remains an opaque and detached figure, the camera “turns her into a specimen, a pinned butterfly turned taxidermy beast” (Dargis 2017, n.p.). Visually, *Lady Macbeth* aestheticises Victorian domesticity and, hence, transforms Katherine into a decorative object rather than making her an active agent in her own right. At the same time, it subverts such neat analogies in its politics of knowing and seeing, which always position her as superior to the viewer.

As soon as both her husband and father-in-law leave her alone for a couple of days because they have business to attend to, Katherine sheds the normative corset of female domesticity, both literally and metaphorically, and transgresses the ideological boundaries surrounding her. When taking a walk around the estate for the first time (Oldroyd 2017, 0:11:20–0:11:45), Katherine, as well as the film’s aesthetics, change drastically. She now wears her hair loose, the colour scheme changes to warmer autumnal tones, and she seems to blend into her surroundings. Analogous to this sudden freedom, the camerawork switches to “bursts of handheld tracking, and there are horizon-expanding wide shots of the moors: purple-fringed with heather or steel-grey under lowering skies” (Hutchinson 2018, n.p.). These aesthetics overtly invoke the Brontës’ Yorkshire moors; specifically, they reference their filmic rendition in Cary Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* (2011) and Arnold’s aforementioned *Wuthering Heights*, a tradition of contemporary period films in which *Lady Macbeth* positions itself.

A defining feature of the heterotopia of confinement is that it provides the mere illusion of having freed society from all forms of aberrant behaviour. Analogously, clichéd depictions of nature as the liberating outside space to the house’s confining interior are subverted in later location shots, all of which portray nature as equally oppressive, even dangerous. *Lady Macbeth* thus aligns itself with post-heritage cinema’s darker, dirtier image of the past. To borrow from Andrew Higson’s definition of “dirty realism”, in such films, “the landscape becomes bleaker, the dwellings more austere, and the streets, lanes and villages filthier. England/Britain generally becomes a far more dangerous place to inhabit; it is closer to nature, more primitive, less civilised” (Higson 2011, pp. 214–15). The stable hand, Sebastian, repeatedly uses the secretive space of the woods to intimidate Anna, who reads his comments and physical approach as threats of sexual harassment. Katherine’s inexpert attempt at killing and burying Lester’s horse under heaps of leaves and branches illustrates that no matter how hard she tries to eliminate all forms of oppressive masculinity around her, she will never succeed. In his depiction of nature, therefore, Oldroyd references conventional nature imagery only to undermine it. In so doing, he frustrates the viewer’s attempts to rely on the symbolism of space in the absence of other forms of signposting.

With her newfound autonomy, Katherine begins to appropriate the previously confining domestic space. She no longer pays attention to her posture, refuses to wear a corset, dozes around, and drinks large amounts of alcohol. Most clearly, her defiance against oppressive structures shows in her affair with Sebastian, which is doubly transgressive in that he is not only a servant but also depicted as a racial Other. Katherine’s sexual liberation here coincides with her emancipation from the restrictive and objectifying conventions of period drama, in which such explicit scenes rarely feature. Rather, Katherine and Sebastian’s concomitantly passionate and violent sexual encounters can be read as rhetorically caricaturing and, hence, renegotiating the abovementioned affinity of post-heritage cinema with dirt, danger, and the primitive, which is here extended to sexuality. Concurrently, however, this is one of the many instances in which the film bares its conflicted positioning towards re-readings of the past. Sebastian forces his way into Katherine’s bedroom, but her taking the lead eventually turns the encounter from imminent

assault into a consensual act. On the one hand, these dynamics establish the protagonist as an actively desiring, sexually autonomous, neo-Victorian revenant of Leskov's Katerina, who, trapped within nineteenth-century gender ideology, must be punished for her sexual transgressions. On the other hand, this seemingly progressive portrayal of Katherine echoes misogynistic framings of rape, in which a woman's resistance is dismissed as mere posturing. Furthermore, such an overt sexualisation of the character uncomfortably taps into associations of female sexuality with 'evil' and, hence, risks affirming rather than deconstructing the normative gender politics of Leskov's (and, with it, Shakespeare's) source text.

Katherine's increasing control over her space is best mediated when the pastor (Cliff Burnett) comes to inquire why she has repeatedly missed church (Oldroyd 2017, 0:23:29–0:24:28), a scene that is fittingly preceded by Katherine and Sebastian having passionate sexual intercourse on the marital bed. Katherine makes polite chitchat and then, after the pastor's suggestion that she should stay indoors for a while, abruptly ends the conversation by standing up. Katherine's head leaves the frame, the camera resting on her waist and folded hands. Quite literally, this break with realist modes of cinematic framing conveys Katherine's refusal to be framed and, by extension, interpreted along the lines of normative Victorian femininity. Hammershøi, in his nineteenth-century paintings, simply depicts women's unease with female objectification accompanying Victorian gender norms; Oldroyd's heroine, in the twenty-first-century, undermines filmic representation itself.

The murder of Katherine's father-in-law escalates her revolt against both patriarchal oppression and its filmic mediation as per traditional period drama. Here, the scene's external focalisation is particularly poignant because the tension relies on something that the audience has not been privy to, namely, that Katherine has poisoned the food (Oldroyd 2017, 0:35:26–0:36:41). Her suspiciously generous gesture of asking Anna to have tea with her soon becomes torturous, as she forces Anna to stay seated while Boris Lester dies, hence making her complicit in his killing. In combination, sound (Boris Lester's muffled cries from the room next door) and image here create two distinctly gendered spaces, one male and the other female. Both are heterotopian spaces in the sense that they at once mirror and invert existing power structures. Firstly, both Boris Lester and Anna are constrained against their will. Secondly, the father-in-law's imprisonment in a domestic space, as well as the fact that he is killed by a woman, challenge the patriarchal status quo, while Anna's involuntary presence adds to the creation of a female space; however, simultaneously, Anna's seat at the table complicates the mistress/servant relationship between her and Katherine. Lastly, the filmic rendition of the scene is clearly parodic: As Lester can be heard dying next door, for 28 s, the camera stays grotesquely focused on the two women drinking tea. Katherine, it seems, is now in control—of her father-in-law, of Anna, and of the camera.

Against this premeditated and carefully planned first murder, the killing of her husband appears impulsive, a direct response to his verbal and physical abuse. "You've gotten so fat and foul-smelling" (Oldroyd 2017, 0:48:00), he tells her, thus linking her sexuality with disease and moral corruption as per conventional Victorian sexual mores and implying Katherine's 'deviance', which requires punishment and/or containment. Together with the larger theme of female confinement in domesticity, Katherine's indebtedness to Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* via Leskov's adapted text emerges in the murder she commits jointly with Sebastian.⁸ Oldroyd and Birch, however, introduce a decisive reversal of roles: Although in Shakespeare's play, *Lady Macbeth* is only involved in the planning of murder, in both Leskov's version of the story and Oldroyd's adaptation, all three murders are committed by Katerina/Katherine herself; Sergei's/Sebastian's role is merely to immobilise the victims (Boris/Alexander Lester, and later Fyodor/Teddy). In an ostensible deconstruction of both the film's focus on female imprisonment and normative Victorian gender discourse, the most drastic expressions of agency in *Lady Macbeth* are associated with femininity rather than masculinity. Notably, however, Katherine's acts of resistance are reversals of male violence against her. The murder of Boris Lester mirrors the way in

which he imprisons her inside the house, and her reprimand of Sebastian and the other farmhands, when she finds them molesting Anna (Oldroyd 2017, 0:13:54–0:13:59), mimics Alexander Lester’s earlier order to Katherine to strip naked and face the wall (Oldroyd 2017, 0:08:38–0:09:09). What is more, each of the men she kills only opens up a temporary power vacuum that is quickly filled by another male figure; in fact, Katherine herself helps to fill it by installing Sebastian as the new master of the house. Each new patriarch appears less threatening, albeit at first glance only, so much so that the sudden appearance of Teddy, who is too shy to even talk to Katherine directly, can only be deemed a parodic commentary on (Victorian) period drama’s seemingly endless perpetuation of male hegemony.

In contouring the nexus of agency and gender, the film’s title, *Lady Macbeth*, no doubt functions as a manual of how to read the film, and here it is worth briefly taking a look at the ambivalent critical reception of Shakespeare’s *Lady Macbeth* that already inspired Leskov’s Victorian adaptation of the character. Victorian audiences in particular were fascinated by the character’s portrayal of ‘female aberrance’, but even later critics have long tended to identify her as the play’s devil incarnate, regardless of the fact that she commits none of the murders herself and is even oblivious of Macbeth’s later crimes.⁹ Arguably, though, *Lady Macbeth* is one of Shakespeare’s most modern characters, and her struggle with the limited role that society grants women has the potential of speaking to twenty-first-century audiences. Yet, unlike *Lady Macbeth* with her many soliloquies or Leskov’s Katerina, who, despite being painted in rather broad strokes, is afforded with some interiority, identification with Oldroyd’s Katherine is rendered impossible. The film is not interested in establishing her as either sympathetic or unsympathetic; instead, attempts at reading her prove disorienting, since she defies binary categories of characterisation. Shakespeare’s *Lady Macbeth* eventually loses the battle against a genre that prioritises masculinity, as Shakespeare makes her descend into madness and subsequently commit an offstage suicide. Leskov’s Katerina is first exiled to Siberia together with Sergei and eventually drowns while fighting a woman who rivals her for Sergei’s affections. Katherine, by contrast, survives all the men that thwart her female agency. In this respect, Oldroyd and Birch seemingly invest their heroine with a lot more power than either Shakespeare’s character or Leskov’s nineteenth-century protagonist.

At the same time, the question arises as to what exactly Katherine’s additional agency affords her. On the one hand, her rebellion against domestic confinement and her resulting re-appropriation of the setting indicate that spaces of such strict regulation and segregation are not only toxic, but also unsustainable—or “illusory,” following Foucault’s diction (Foucault 1986, p. 27). Envisioned as a utopian form of government by patriarchal forces in the sense that it ‘frees’ society from all forms of ‘deviant’ behaviour—in this case, female ambition and sexuality—Katherine’s oppression results in a backlash against the patriarchy that has the exact opposite effect. On the other hand, she ends the film almost exactly where she began. Rather than being left to her, Lester’s estate will fall to the next male of kin, possibly her unborn child, provided it is male. As a woman, she remains imprisoned in a heterotopian domestic space that she may temporarily invert, yet not escape from. Even in terms of white feminism, then, Oldroyd paints a defeatist picture of male power structures replicating themselves, regardless of female attempts to intervene in such self-sustaining systems.

3. Reclaiming the Heterotopian Space of the Colony?

As my earlier reference to Anna, Sebastian, and Teddy as racial Others suggests, the film’s spatial politics extend beyond questions of gender. Her status as a white, upper-middle-class woman confines Katherine in her domestic role, yet her privilege simultaneously allows her to challenge male hegemony, if only to a limited extent. Notwithstanding her complicity in Katherine’s imprisonment, Anna is also imprisoned in the same physical structures, though in entirely different ways. As a Black female servant, she suffers threefold oppression. The heterotopian space of the country house, therefore, visualises how gender cuts across race. The country house intertwines domesticity with empire, a reality which aligns

with Foucault's insistence that "[t]he heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible" (Foucault 1986, p. 25). For this reason, I now turn to the film's engagement with the colony as another Foucauldian heterotopia to show how the film problematises Katherine's attempts at female emancipation and prioritises intersectional forms of oppression instead.

Next to the distinction between crisis heterotopias and heterotopias of deviation, Foucault identifies a further dichotomy according to which all heterotopias can be classified: They are either "spaces of illusion" that show real spaces to be even more illusory (e.g., theatre and séance rooms) or "spaces of compensation" creating "another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (Foucault 1986, p. 24). As examples of the latter, Foucault mentions the utopian design of early Puritan and Jesuit settlements in the Americas, although here, he appears rather vague: "I wonder if certain colonies have not functioned somewhat in this manner" (Foucault 1986, p. 27). Foucault's hesitation is justified in the sense that British colonialism in India, on the African continent, and in Oceania worked in decidedly different ways, with the (white) penal colonies of Australia and New Zealand forming yet another special case. Rather than aiming at the achievement of what he labels "human perfection" (Foucault 1986, p. 27), colonialism in these areas sought to intern and often also eradicate what was considered human aberrance. From a postcolonial perspective, Foucault's conjectures on the colony-as-heterotopia appear debatable, not least because they simplify and homogenise multifaceted imperial power structures as well as markedly different colonial contexts. I suggest that, for the purpose of this essay, it is nevertheless productive to consider British colonialism in the global South along similar lines. Conceptualised as spaces that are governed by strict rules as much as clearly allocated roles imposed by the colonisers, these colonies formed counter-sites to the 'messy' transformations and societal upheaval in nineteenth-century Britain.

Lady Macbeth suggests various ways that the colony may be re-appropriated as a space of resistance, and each time, this kind of heterotopian space is represented by a racially Othered character. First, in casting a number of roles with actors of colour, Oldroyd confronts what Kehinde Andrews has termed "celluloid hallucinations of the psychosis of Whiteness" (Andrews 2016, p. 436). Following Andrews, this psychosis is produced and maintained through an interplay of delusion and hallucination: Despite the rich documentation of a constant Black presence since at least Tudor Britain (see Kaufmann 2017), historical fiction, and film overall, continues to recycle delusions of a British society that, regardless of the respective historical chapter at hand, is imagined as exclusively white. Andrews here refers to the absence of Black presences and agencies in neo-historical films such as *Amazing Grace* (2006, dir. Michael Apted) and *Belle* (2013, dir. Amma Assante). Despite dealing with transatlantic slavery, both films feature surprisingly few Black characters (let alone in speaking roles) and, furthermore, locate all agency in the white characters. Such pervasive whiteness has also been discussed in relation to neo-Victorian studies more specifically. In her seminal study *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire*, Elizabeth Ho identifies postcolonial readings as a relative blind spot in neo-Victorian studies that is remarkable insofar as "'the Victorian' [...] has become a powerful shorthand for empire in the contemporary global imagination" (Ho 2012, p. 5).¹⁰ Similarly, the inaugural issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* already identified the ideological pitfalls of too narrow a definition of 'neo-Victorian' (see Kohlke 2008, p. 2). Since then, the question of whether the label should be applied to countries of the former British empire only or more fruitfully expanded to a 'global neo-Victorianism' has received considerable critical attention, and critics have equally addressed the potentially neo-colonialist implications that such a widening of the term may entail (see Ho 2019, pp. 1–7; Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015, pp. 1–10; Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013; Joshi 2011).

Yet, in spite of the rising awareness for such spatial and ideological concerns, profound enquiries into the legacies of empire remain comparatively rare, and not only as far as neo-Victorian studies as an academic discipline are concerned. In fact, neo-Victorian cultural

production itself continues to be a predominantly Anglocentric, white field that scarcely features characters of colour. Those films and TV shows that do feature non-white presences largely reduce them to stock characters, such as servant figures, and, furthermore, mark them as distinctly non-British—as, for instance, in the case of Sir Malcolm Murray’s manservant Sembene in *Penny Dreadful* (2014–2016), whose Senegalese heritage is communicated via his language as well as facial tribal scarring. In contrast, *Lady Macbeth* takes a different approach. All characters presented as Other—and here, the film’s reliance on visuals prompts viewers to adopt visual, racist markers of difference—are cast with British actors speaking in a British accent. Furthermore, Anna is the first female character to speak in the film. In terms of onscreen representation, *Lady Macbeth* thus challenges the normative whiteness so often perpetuated by period drama. It therefore seems that the heterotopian space of the colony here resists established (neo-)Victorian representations of empire: Rather than feeding into the narrative of colonial space as conveniently located at the far-away ‘margins’ and, hence, detached from Britain as the imperial ‘centre’, the film consolidates notions of Blackness and (Victorian) Britishness. As the widespread outrage over the National Trust’s 2020 report on colonialism and transatlantic slavery evidences (see [Young 2020](#), n.p.), in a socio-political climate that refuses to address the implications of what it means to be a former colonising nation, such a historical integration of Blackness and Britishness certainly has currency.

The second manner in which *Lady Macbeth* establishes the coercive space of the colony as a potential space of resistance is by instituting both Sebastian and Teddy as possible heirs to Lester’s estate: the former by Katherine’s discretion, the latter by law. Both these scenarios would contest the master/servant relationships of the country house, which traditionally proceed along the lines of ethnicity and often manifest in relations of enslaver and enslaved. For a while, these reversed power relations even become reality—for instance, when Sebastian, now the master of the house, has tea with Katherine and enjoys his new privilege of being served by his former fellow servant Anna ([Oldroyd 2017](#), 0:55:28–0:55:46). After the murder of Boris Lester, this is the second time that tea-drinking, the quintessentially colonial and domestic ritual, functions as a form of power play. A third instance occurs when Teddy’s guardian, his aunt Agnes (Golda Rosheuvel), announces her intention of taking over control of the household by ordering tea, which visibly irritates Katherine ([Oldroyd 2017](#), 0:57:45). Her subsequent order that Katherine give up her larger bedroom with the words “You don’t need all that space” ([Oldroyd 2017](#), 0:59:23) indicates how the film’s spatial politics have changed. Through these rising prospects for Sebastian and Teddy, (Victorian) Britain’s imperial legacies infiltrate the traditionally white space of the country house and threaten to turn colonial power structures on their head. With Sebastian’s deportation and Teddy’s death, however, both these implied success stories of colonial resistance are eventually repudiated. In fact, given that both Anna and Sebastian will be convicted for the murders Katherine has committed, colonial power structures appear even firmer than they were at the outset of the film.

The third component of agency that at least temporarily threatens the film’s white hegemony is Anna’s voice; this threat to Katherine and Sebastian’s plan looms large even when Anna falls silent after the murder of Boris Lester. As she herself remarks, Katherine fully counts on Anna’s silence, which can surely be read as a commentary on the white ruling class feeling secure that the exploited population will not raise their voice and rebel. The subject of the marginalised voice has attracted much critical attention with regard to neo-Victorianism, albeit in the context of biofiction in particular, as scholars have pointed out how the neo-Victorian’s curious ventriloquism is both inherently problematic and simultaneously unavoidable. Helen Davies, for instance, has asked, “if [...] certain Victorians have no voice, then what are the ethical stakes at play in contemporary authors providing such voices? [...] There can be no dialogue, no exchange, only neo-Victorianism talking to itself” ([Davies 2012](#), p. 7).¹¹ Davies here addresses two issues that are entwined in *Lady Macbeth*, namely, the general conundrum of speaking *for* others as well as the potentially resulting presentist, if not trivialising, accounts of marginalised experiences or

subjectivities. Oldroyd confronts this systemic problem by eventually denying Anna her voice and foregrounding her silence instead. Anna is not quite the subaltern in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's sense, as she is clearly identified as British, but Spivak's question about the subaltern's capacity to speak (Spivak [1983] 1994) elicits a negative answer. When asked to corroborate Katherine's version of events, for 35 s (Oldroyd 2017, 1:21:23–1:22:08), the camera cross-cuts between the silent tribunal of Katherine, Agnes, the doctor, and the inspector in front of Anna and a medium close-up of Anna, whose head is framed by the doorframe behind her—another image of confinement, this time in terms of race and class. As a Black female servant, Anna cannot subvert heterotopias of deviation. Arguably, in dwelling on this particular image, as well as through the larger focus on Anna's continuous silence, *Lady Macbeth*, in what can perhaps be named a symptom of the 'white saviour' narratives and 'psychoses of Whiteness' perpetuated by many liberal filmmakers, participates in a visual as well as narrative aestheticisation of Black victimhood. The film here substitutes the racist stereotype of the 'angry Black woman' with that of the 'silenced Black woman', the latter being an ostensibly more 'palatable' way of making Black suffering legible to white audiences and, with it, white fragility. Even though this ending appears pessimistic in the extreme as far as intersectional femininities are concerned, it interrogates the many overly optimistic neo-Victorian success stories of white feminism that all too often paint over the realities of intersectional structures of marginalisation and oppression. Anna and Sebastian are not brought down by white patriarchy, but by a white woman, who routinely partakes in Anna's humiliation. In Katherine, the film thus conflates the role of oppressor and oppressed, and her behaviour shows "just how easy it is to harvest even the slightest bit of privilege and turn it into power, and transform complicity into systems of oppression" (Weston 2017, p. 36).

Katherine's downright sadism towards Anna first surfaces in the introduction of Sebastian (Oldroyd 2017, 0:12:55–0:15:00), which, given his depiction as biracial, fittingly takes place in the liminal space of the stables. Katherine finds Anna stripped naked and dangling from the ceiling in a pig scale surrounded by cheering men, an image that Pamela Hutchinson describes as "a porcine reference quite the opposite of Arabella Don's bold introduction in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*" (Hutchinson 2018, n.p.) and that hints at habitual sexual abuse. Before the camera shows Anna, we only see her naked foot. Yet, rather than directing the view towards the rest of Anna's body as the scene's obvious focal point, and thus satisfying voyeuristic impulses often associated with neo-Victorianism (not least in the context of neo-Victorian depictions of sexuality), the camera then focuses on Sebastian instead. Katherine orders the men to lower Anna down but does not interact with her at all, showing no display of sympathy. Instead, the camera cross-cuts between medium close-ups of Katherine and Sebastian. The scene thus primarily sets up Katherine and Sebastian as future lovers and alludes to the ensuing power play between them. Anna, by contrast, is reduced to a mere prop.

Katherine's delight in degrading Anna most overtly shows when Boris Lester asks for more wine at dinner while his son is still away (Oldroyd 2017, 0:29:50–0:32:23). During his interrogation of Anna, the camera twice cuts to Katherine, who is slouched on a chair next to the dining table and watches Anna's reactions. Next, we see Anna with her back to her father-in-law, who is seated in the centre of the frame. Katherine amusedly watches the scene from the background, which is why the mis-en-scène resembles a theatre performance looked at from the back of the stage. Again, the question of perspectivity is key; the viewer needs to see Lester and Katherine watching in the same way that they see what and whom the two are watching. As Boris Lester orders Anna to get down on her hands and knees, she leaves the camera frame entirely, but the camera remains steady. After this brief 'empty frame,' the camera cuts to a shot from the corridor in which we see Anna crouching before him, thus visualising the power imbalance between them. When leaving the room, she still moves mostly outside the camera frame. What the filmic mediation of this scene highlights is Anna's symbolic non-existence. She is presented as unimportant, and therefore, the camera does not need to move for her. In addition, and more significantly, the scene

conflates Katherine's and Boris Lester's points of view into a white gaze. Whose position and ocularisation does the camera adopt here? The frontal camera angle indicates that the visual narrator employs Lester's rather than Katherine's ocularisation, but both of them are watching her for the same reason: to see her being shamed. Class and race, in this scene, trump gender, as Katherine objectifies Anna in the same way as her father-in-law does—perhaps even more so, given her unashamed delight in it all.

Through its mediation that constantly breaks with conventional period as well as neo-Victorian aesthetics, both Katherine's domestic imprisonment and the space of the colony read as oppressive, heterotopian structures that equally pervade the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. According to Foucault, one of the major principles of the heterotopias is their being "linked to slices in time" (Foucault 1986, p. 26). They condition what he calls "heterochronies" (Foucault 1986, p. 26), which, in analogy to heterotopias, can be understood as a form of other-time that turns existing structures of time on their head. In pointing beyond its Victorian context (and also, via its title, harking back to a medieval/early modern one), *Lady Macbeth* establishes heterochronies of intersectional oppression that appear infinite or timeless. The film denies any assumptions that such violations can be neatly allocated to clear-cut historical periods, thus ultimately raising the question of exactly how liberal twenty-first century audiences should regard themselves to be.

4. Conclusions: Intersectional Feminism and Neo-Victorian Disorientation

Foucault's theorisation of heterotopian space has been deemed notoriously fuzzy, to the extent that scholars have named it "nothing more than a practical joke on Foucault's part, itself emulating the bizarre taxonomy of [Jorge Luis] Borges's Chinese encyclopedia" (Knight 2017, p. 144). Connected to this lack of a clear definition, critics have also debated what context Foucault talks about in the first place, whether he refers to concrete material sites or merely their representation through language (Knight 2017, pp. 141–43). 'Of Other Spaces' describes heterotopias as real places, yet in the preface to *The Order of Things*, Foucault writes that "heterotopias [...] desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences" (Foucault [1966] 1994, p. xviii). In light of the latter definition, Kelvin T. Knight insists that the concept was always exclusively envisioned as an analytical tool to examine fictional representations of space (Knight 2017, p. 142). As I have argued, *Lady Macbeth* gestures toward the opposite direction. Framing the film's spatial politics with Foucault's notion of the heterotopia yields insights with regard to fictional representations of space as well as their real material dimension. The film's gender and racial politics are negotiated via highly symbolic spatial structures that, on their own terms, challenge previous representations of Victorian domesticity and magnify the interlinkage between British imperialism and ostensibly 'innocent' domesticity. In a second step, however, and in keeping with the neo-Victorian aim of probing ideological and structural ruptures and/or continuities between the Victorian Age and the present, the film exposes the pervasiveness of intersectional forms of oppression that are at play in both nineteenth- and twenty-first-century Britain. Aside from thus adding the layer of race onto Leskov's heterotopian vision—white women suffering at the hands of white male oppressors—Oldroyd and Birch also direct their heterotopian gaze inwards and away from essentialising trajectories of male versus female. Katherine's wilful emancipation at Anna's expense, which parallels Jane Eyre's liberation at the cost of Bertha Mason (see Primorac 2021, pp. 157–58), can thus be read as a commentary on the oftentimes exploitative self-involvement and complacency of white feminism—and, by extension, on neo-Victorianism's tendency to reproduce such narratives.

Yet what does it mean that *Lady Macbeth* so methodically resists all attempts at cohesive meaning-making on the part of the viewer? Surely, rather than positioning the viewer as detached from and, hence, morally superior to Katherine's cruelty and racism, Oldroyd and Birch highlight white audiences' structural complicity with upholding normative whiteness. This extends to both British period drama, where whiteness is tacitly assumed as a given, and society more generally. While incessantly employing space—and the

concept of heterotopian space in particular—to demarcate the boundaries between its characters and segregate them according to gender, race, and class, the film’s constant challenging of inside/outside relationships, in particular, the characters’ eventual inability to control their respective spaces, manipulate and exhaust our desire to rely on spatial signposting. Through this positioning of both space and its characters as indecipherable in any reliable way, *Lady Macbeth* rejects neo-Victorian immersive aesthetics and, hence, can be designated as a meta-neo-Victorian film. Oldroyd and Birch seem to suggest that a decisive interrogation of what is widely considered ‘the Victorian’ is impossible, no matter how attuned to intersections of gender, race, and class such critical forays may be. The film reminds critics of their own responsibilities behind such undertakings; it attunes them to the ways in which white audiences and critics, too, are implicated in such intersectional structures of oppression in which, all too often, one form of Othering eclipses another. It should therefore not come as a surprise that *Lady Macbeth* proves disorienting at times, particularly for white female viewers who take second-wave feminism as the default approach for thinking about forms of oppression. For others, white (feminism’s) complicity with systemic oppression is a given, and so the feeling of disorientation itself becomes a symptom of privilege. Perhaps it is exactly this white disorientation, this confusion or fuzziness as to how space really relates to power and oppression, equally discernible in Foucault’s writings on heterotopian space, that the film reproduces. The actual act of resistance, therefore, lies in the film itself rather than its characters, which should not be taken as a dismissal of neo-Victorianism as such, but rather as a caution against naïve overestimations of its critical or, indeed, liberating potential.

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Notes

- ¹ On the genesis of the concept across various of Foucault’s writings, see (Knight 2017) and (Johnson 2013).
- ² See, for instance, studies on Sarah Waters’s *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002) or Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996) by (Arias 2009; Armitt and Gamble 2006; Pohl 2013; Toron 2011).
- ³ In an interview as part of the 2017 DVD’s special features, Oldroyd insists that for all roles, he relied on so-called colour-blind casting (Oldroyd and Pugh 2017, 03:34–04:25). Given how significant it is that precisely Anna, Sebastian, and Teddy are read as racial Others, such a claim appears implausible. On the casting process of *Lady Macbeth* and its relevance for the film’s racial politics, see also (Primorac 2021, pp. 158–61).
- ⁴ This dodging of critical interrogations of empire specifically applies to heritage films in the manner of the 1980s and early 1990s Merchant Ivory adaptations of Victorian classics. As Antonija Primorac has shown, since the post-heritage films of the 1990s, most adaptations of Victorian classics have moved further with regard to critical forays into gender and sexuality, yet many of them remain grounded in Orientalist aesthetics and ideologies (Primorac 2018, pp. 55–95).
- ⁵ For a discussion of how such heritage sites can be deemed neo-Victorian and of the obstacles and public onslaught many researchers delving into the previously elided colonial histories of British country houses have to face, see (Fowler 2021).
- ⁶ Jonathan Jones describes a 2008 Hammershøi exhibition at the Royal Academy, London, in a way that supports my reading of the paintings’ rendition of repressive domesticity: “[t]he lack of ‘fit’ between Hammershøi’s intimate themes and his bleakly incurious eye makes you realise with a shudder that he is not recording exterior reality at all, but finding correlatives for his state of mind” and “lets you glimpse a terrible nothingness through the rooms of an ordinary home” (Jones 2008, n.p.).
- ⁷ Notable exceptions that rely heavily on withholding knowledge are the adaptations of *Fingersmith*, both Park Chan-wook’s *The Handmaiden* (2016) and the BBC’s 2005 serial adaptation of Waters’s novel, directed by Ainsling Walsh. However, none of these centre on the withholding of visual information as *Lady Macbeth* does so regularly.

- 8 As one might expect, the film contains further intertextual references to Shakespeare's play. Katherine dresses Sebastian in her husband's nightgown with the words "There. Very fine indeed. Man of the house" (Oldroyd 2017, 0:40:41–0:40:45), thus literalising the notion of Macbeth being dressed in "borrowed robes" (Shakespeare 2015, 1.3.110). Similarly, her "We did it" (Oldroyd 2017, 0:54:40) is a direct reference to Macbeth's "I have done the deed" (Shakespeare 2015, 2.2.15). Like Macbeth, Sebastian starts having nightmares after the murder of Alexander Lester, whereas Katherine, similarly to *Lady Macbeth*, has none.
- 9 On the Victorian fascination with *Lady Macbeth* and the character's Victorian stage history, see (McDonald 2005, pp. 1–103). On the problematic critical reception of *Lady Macbeth*, as well as more sympathetic readings of the character, see (Burnett 1993).
- 10 In a recent special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* on *Neo-Victorian Asia*, Ho has reiterated the necessity to broaden the scope of neo-Victorianism beyond the British imperial context. Referring to the convoluted imperial history of Hong Kong, she remarks that "the nineteenth century can stage many memories of many empires" (Ho 2019, p. 2).
- 11 See also Marie-Luise Kohlke's contention that "this ethical cul-de-sac undermines the liberative aspirations of biofiction of marginalised subjects" (Kohlke 2013, p. 11).

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