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William Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth*: An Exercise in Storytelling and Boredom

Abstract: William Oldroyd's film *Lady Macbeth* (2016 release from the UK) is a dark and disturbing portrait of a young woman, Katherine Lester, set in the bleak context of nineteenth-century provincial Scotland. The film offers a transmedia re-reading of Nikolai Leskov's "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" (1865), a novella roughly appropriating and involving the eponymous Shakespearean character. Avoiding the poetics of period drama à la *Belgravia* (2020) or *Downton Abbey* (2010–2015), which offers global audiences shortbread-tin versions of British literature and culture as windswept and white, Oldroyd's film introduces colour-blind casting to reveal the less-known facts of Britain's provincial life—astounding numbers of Black people in nineteenth-century north-east England and a complex system of race, class, and gender oppression. The film's poetics aligns itself with Leskov's naturalism and thus with the post-heritage darker, dirtier, and more brutal images of the past defined by Andrew Higson as "dirty realism". This article argues that *Lady Macbeth* is more interested in the *experience* of boredom that precedes storytelling than in the story's well-constructed plot, employs slow cinema strategies, and is influenced by Vilhelm Hammershøi's art. The film reproduces both Hammershøi's aesthetics and atmosphere. Rather than consider Oldroyd's work politically in terms of oppressive white privilege and patriarchy, this article tries to read the adaptation through the lens of a less-conspicuous undercurrent of storytelling, which foregrounds *experience* instead of scenarios focusing on narratives where moral judgment matters, and where the storyteller assumes responsibility for the life they are retelling.

Keywords: Nikolai Leskov, William Oldroyd, storytelling, adaptation, boredom, slow cinema

This well-made independent film has been variously reviewed by critics and audiences. What the critics seem to share is a sense of ambivalence concerning the nature of the film's indebtedness to the classic and its genre. Even if considered a promising debut, which opens up "a new avenue in the bonnets-and-bows world of classic literary adaptation" (Bradshaw), Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* floats vaguely

between popular culture and politically engaged art. Despite these neat, though radical, differentiations defining the spectrum of reception, the production incites a notably strong feeling of disorientation. This sense of uncertainty, which causes anxiety, accompanies the very first shots. An exposition rather than a typical mainstream title sequence, the opening maintains a sense of distance by refusing to offer any clear guidance to the viewer. Moreover, the film has been perceived by some audiences as “not an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*” (bastille-852-731547) at all, possibly its parody, a work vaguely or indirectly inspired by the bard’s study of “man’s weakness in his dominance” (jdesando), a “twist on a genre ... invented by Shakespeare” (Bradshaw), or a Victorian noir where a single line of intertextual overlapping, “It is done” (Shakespeare 1.4.60, 2.1.75) pays homage to the Shakespearean source text. Additionally, this instance of strictly intertextual embedding by means of no more than a single line from *Macbeth* is significantly relocated and visually foregrounded by being given to Florence Pugh in the lead role of Lady Macbeth, *alias* Katherine Lester, rather than to the possible counterpart of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, a character reduced in Alice Birch’s film script to Sebastian, an estate worker of mixed race in a role echoing James Howson’s Heathcliff.¹ If driven by the expectations of period drama, critics tend to find the scenario too complex while also finding its distant “intellectualized approach” an obstacle paradoxically preventing viewers “from feeling any complicity” with the main character (Taylor). Additionally, various misconceptions concerning Nikolai Leskov’s novella, imagined as a Russian tale of “robust wisdom” and “peasant myth” set in “lush descriptions of nature” (Taylor), clash with what must be perceived as a colourless and joyless setting of an austere country house in Northumberland (just below the border with Scotland) whose solid atmosphere and subdued palette has been borrowed from the paintings of Vilhelm Hammershøi. On the other hand, as a Shakespearean adaptation with colour-blind casting, unavoidably a product of diverse and “multiple acts of mediation and filtration” (Sanders 62), the film can be reduced to a politically-motivated narrative drawing out themes of multifaceted oppression,

¹ The film contains further allusions and transtextual, rather than strictly intertextual, references to Shakespeare’s play. Katherine dresses Sebastian in her husband’s shirt with the words “There. Very fine indeed. Man of the house” (Oldroyd 0:40:41–0:40:45), and she seems to believe that. It is an allusion to the iterative imagery in Shakespeare’s tragedy where the notion of Macbeth being dressed in “borrowed robes” reappears (Shakespeare 1.3.110) as a comment on the new honours that “come upon him/ like strange garment” that may or may not fit over time “with the aid of use” (1.3). However, there is a noticeable shift in the use of these references in the movie. Macbeth’s “I have done the deed” (2.2.15) reappears in Katherine’s “We did it” (Oldroyd 0:54:40), which may evoke the dreams of partnership and greatness (Shakespeare 1.5) voiced by Lady Macbeth. The difference in the use of the pronouns indicates a significant shift from the domination of the male to the rise of the female character. Indeed, the fact that it is Sebastian who has nightmares after the murder of Alexander Lester remains proof of his greater vulnerability, a serf’s fear that the position recently gained can be lost, rather than his more sensitive conscience. In Leskov’s novella, Sergei’s social advancement hinges on Katerina’s control of her husband’s capital.

marginalization, abuse, and violence (Bradshaw) that is analysable in terms of, for example, intersectional oppression. Following a political interpretation, the disorienting spatial organization the film generates tends to be interpreted as a Foucauldian heterotopic space where its viewers discover “blind spots” (Tronicke 3). Most problematic in such a reading of the film is Hammershøi's contribution to the *mise-en-scène*. Still, if Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* is to be viewed primarily as a politically-engaged film, white privilege and its critique must dominate as a significant concern of twenty-first-century progressive audiences. In that case, however, Nikolai Leskov's mid-nineteenth-century project for a collection of tales about women emerges as more politically flavoured than it was intended by the author.

This article reads *Lady Macbeth* as one more exercise in a multi-layered filtration of a classic—that is, a form of complex storytelling. Additional interest resides in the motivation, justifying still another return of a widely-known story in the retelling of a less-recognizable Russian novelist to be adapted by an aspiring British film director, William Oldroyd. What is the novelty of this retelling? The character of Lady Macbeth has been rewritten in various ways by critical approaches producing a series of monolithic orthodoxies, especially those deriving from early twentieth-century concepts of naturalistically-drawn figures turning Shakespearean protagonists into Victorian portraits (A. C. Bradley, W. Moelwyn Merchant, and Inga-Stina Ewbank). They were superseded by propositions of non-naturalistic research on the history of theatrical convention and reconstructions of an Elizabethan worldview (E. K. Chambers and E. M. W. Tillyard), as well as cultural studies, and New Historicism, with its turn towards class and gender conditions, as well as social contexts and their institutions.² More recent research has focused on the character by going back to textual studies which address readers rather than viewers. No longer in search of the original master or performance text, they study the discrepancies between information drawn from paratexts, such as speech headings and stage directions, and the main text. The renewed interest in paratexts is additionally motivated by their significant appearance in convergence culture. The analysis of paratexts shows that, as opposed to the dialogues, in speech prefixes and stage directions, Lady Macbeth is never called “Queen”. She is “Macbeth's Wife” by analogy to Macduff's (Erne 91–92). Among the earlier adapters speculating on Lady Macbeth's role as spouse is Maurice Baring who, in “Lady Macbeth's Trouble”, a piece from the collection *Dead Letters* (1909, 1920), imagines the two characters primarily as wives (n.b., named Flora and Harriet in adaptation) immersed in a curiously affectionate correspondence about children (99–106). Analogously, Gordon Bottomley puts on stage *Gruach* (*Gruach* 1919, a prequel) as the future wife of the Envoy named Macbeth. In David Greig's *Dunsinane*, *Gruach* (the source for Shakespearean Lady Macbeth) also appears in the roles of

² For an extensive discussion of the critical approaches, see Mark Thornton Burnett, Terence Hawkes, and Steven Mullaney.

former and future wives: Alba's and Macbeth's widow, followed by the role of Malcolm's wife-to-be. As in Bottomley's prequel, the power belongs to the "Queen", who holds the allegiance of the clan and keeps it for her son (Greig 30). The wife/queen polarity has been variously used by adapters. While in Greig's play, the complex "Lady" and Queen dominates the stage, in Oldroyd's adaptation, Lady Macbeth reappears in the role of a merchant's wife.

Studies of Shakespearean adaptations and appropriations show that literary classics, iconic images, archetypes, and familiar stories are constantly circulating and metamorphosing to experience still another return. As observed by Julie Sanders, they "persistently enact and re-enact the activity of storytelling" (62). Hence adapters, as storytellers, often focus on tools that have been used for centuries. What distinguishes Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* is a withdrawal from explicit concern with the familiar iconic image, one of the monolithic orthodoxies. Instead, the film concentrates significantly on a sense of stasis that precedes the very activity of storytelling and on a unique atmosphere. Leskov may be less widely known to Anglo-Saxon audiences, but his talent for storytelling and an awareness of its important social function was acknowledged by Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay "The Storyteller", a discussion followed by a series of translations.

Linda Hutcheon refers explicitly to a set of tools shared by adapters and other storytellers who do not invent, but rather retell and revise with the use of actualization, concretization, selection, amplification, extrapolation, and critique (3).³ Seen in this light, the difference between parody, appropriation, and adaptation—terms used by critics in reference to *Lady Macbeth*—consists not so much in the use of radically-different strategies as it depends on whether the "sources" remain hidden or are openly announced, a decision which directs the activity of the audience to a different selection of transtextual interactions involved in the process of retelling. Fidelity-oriented heritage adaptations guide their audiences to the familiar classics to capitalize on the pleasure of repetition. Introducing *Lady Macbeth*, American, British, and Polish trailers resist establishing a relationship with the originating text. Falling into three overlapping categories of genre, story, and star-oriented epitexts, they seem to concentrate on the genre, signalling in that way a form of drama which puts emphasis on romance, crime, and Victorian noir, but ignores the sources of the story so that the audience does not immediately expect a "retelling". Another place where indebtedness to "original" sources is often signalled is the title sequence. Located within the "continuities" of the motion picture, its status may be more difficult to investigate. Additionally, the hierarchies of text, image, synchronization, and music in peritexts remain under-theorized in film studies (Betancourt 22). Still, in spite of the complexities of continuity, title sequences tend to be perceived by viewers as informative "independent units", often juxtaposing the crediting and

³ Shaw argues that stories, as closed units, have to be challenged and function as hypertexts, i.e., adaptations consisting of multiple threads (5).

narrative functions Gérard Genette sees as antithetical and mutually cancelling (410). The “title sequence” in *Lady Macbeth* surprises: it erases the initial crediting function almost entirely to inform the viewer after four minutes and in complete silence about the full title of the film being *Lady Macbeth* (Oldroyd, 00:4:12).

For the audience, the film opens *in medias res* with a marriage ceremony scene in progress. It features the bride in a close-up from a hand-held camera. The prospective husband, whose shoulder is barely visible, the invisible priest, and the two remaining members of the household disappear in the slightly blurred background of an austere chapel interior. Still, they clearly surround the young woman, the “wife-to-be”. This scene cannot be traced back to either Leskov or Shakespeare. *Lady Macbeth*, whose name is Kathryn, remains as if trapped in the gaze of the invisible onlookers, although, turning her head, the woman makes the effort of “looking back”. Further on, in the equally austere bedroom of the wedding night, the bride stands stark naked and ready for inspection, only to become a discarded object, a powerful and recurrent image of a woman reduced to the flesh. The visual organization of space in the opening shots may be interpreted in terms of Foucault’s ocularcentric paradigms (xiii). However, it is worth noticing that the opening sequence oscillates between visual control and a static *tableaux vivant* indicative of the slow cinema poetics which undermines the more obvious political reading. The “title sequence”, providing no recapitulation, withdraws from performing its regular explanatory inter- and intra-textual function. It takes the form of a non-narrative exposition rather than prologue, an anticipatory opening demanding audience engagement and exceeding a mere interest in the sequence of events. If credits are viewed as an extra frame, a potentially “destructive eruption of style” (Betancourt 35), the attempt to suppress them or delay, as in *Lady Macbeth*, demonstrates a desire to produce pictures that either melt unobtrusively into reality or displace lived *experience*, making its creation real. This technique of bridging the fictional and the extra-fictional is shared by Nikolai Leskov, who collapses the extra- and intra-literary, thus inviting the complicity of the audience. Leskov tends to employ the plural possessive pronoun when directly addressing the audience (as “you”) and sharing, in the capacity of a storyteller, information or experience concerning “our part of the country” and “our neighbourhood” (1). Foregrounding commonality, the movie emphasizes the context, the very experience of storytelling, and draws attention to what leads to its eruption rather than to the diegesis.

Oldroyd and Birch modernize, recontextualize, and experiment in their retelling of Leskov’s “Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District”. Avoiding simplifications, they struggle to reach beyond binary approaches and constricting, ideologically-charged regimes inspired, among others, by Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (1994) and “Of Other Spaces” (1986), with its discussion of heterotopias. Tronicke, who proposes reading Oldroyd’s adaptation through the lens of these political ocularcentric grids and cinematic ocularization, does notice the “blind spots”, arriving at the conclusion that not everything can be “explained” by means of these concepts.

The socially-alert Foucauldian reading of Oldroyd's movie fails to penetrate either the impact of Hammershøi's aesthetics or the influence of slow cinema traceable in the work of the camera, where the focus on the mainstream sequence of events yields to an intensive insight into the "situation". It can be argued that, instead of seeking coherence and integrity, the retelling of *Lady Macbeth* foregrounds the process of "internal hybridization" in an adaptation designed to be more exploratory than mainstream. The film brings together strategies which involve a diversity of sources and aesthetic approaches (Halliwell 96) to produce a sense of "complexification" (Baetens 237) rather than homogeneity: slow cinema, literature, and Hammershøi's aesthetics. This blending complexification, addressed as hybridity rather than as a hybrid, entails withdrawal from neat spatial/temporal and word/image dualities. As Thomas Leitch argues, "the hybrid nature of adaptation ... adds one language to another in an exhilarating ... attempt to represent experiences that can only be invoked". As a consequence, the adaptation is best considered as a process in search of the "unrepresentable" (101–102), rather than a "product". The effect may be disorientating.

While trying to grasp the nature of this process and theorizing complexification, Hutcheon turns to postmodern theories to supersede the formerly dominant dialectical relations with the concept of multiple palimpsest intersections (143). Two years on, Rochelle Hurst proposes a hybrid unstable amalgam that "inhabits both sides of the binary" and, rejecting the discordance between film and text (186–7), becomes involved in an interplay of bridging and resisting the binary "without ever constituting a third term" (Derrida 43). This refusal to "settle" and, as Kamilla Elliott argues in her recent comments on Hurst, to align completely with any of the sources or sides, "comes closer to articulating the process" (271), and allows for drawing our attention to what has been left out. Accepting the notion of hybridity, in poststructuralist terms, adaptation, in general, becomes endless deferral, a rhizomatically-proliferating web of relations and revisions. It is, among other things, this state of "in-betweenness" which opens *Lady Macbeth*, the ending which offers no resolution but augurs some nondescript continuation, as well as the persistent effect of disorientation that subverts all expectations of a "finished product".

Shakespeare's plays are populated with extraordinary characters whose critical reassessments and adaptations in literature, theatre, opera, film, and new media have produced a rich network of relations. Thus, a return to the straw man of an imaginary, media unspecific source text must prove unrewarding, if not impossible. The filmic *Lady Macbeth* openly departs from the classic to tell its story via Leskov's "Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District" (1865), a novella immersed in expanding and culturally-distant contexts. It was inspired by a fashion for sketches or portraits, notably as Ivan Turgenev's "Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District", a story drawing the character of a contemporary superfluous man, a useless aristocrat. When compared with Turgenev, Leskov's project is more extensive and was to include 12 sketches of peasant (8 pieces) and merchant (4 pieces) women;

a collection Hugh McLean considers almost a sociological survey of Oryol Province. As a business representative of a Scottish investor, the writer had in-depth knowledge of the Russian people and was familiar with the provincial life he knew from autopsy rather than from “conversations with St. Petersburg cabbies” (Power). Hence, unlike contemporary nihilists, who spoke about the “disabilities of women” (McLean 145) in derogatory but relatively abstract terms, Leskov draws his women (notably in *No Way Out*, 1865) as more “real” and interestingly reminiscent of London city comedy characters of industrious and responsible women setting up their businesses.⁴ Therefore, a contemporary reading of Katerina Izmailova as primarily a victim of patriarchy—gender and class oppression—would be somewhat reductive and, presumably, influenced by the *avant-garde* but melodramatic adaptation proposed by Dmitri Shostakovich in 1934. Both Turgenev and Leskov declare their intertextual awareness of the classics at the outset but give this disclosure a twist by setting the scene in specific provincial contexts where Shakespeare was not staged.⁵ Despite a scanty embedding in Shakespeare’s drama, *Lady Macbeth* is neither a benevolent nor an unpleasant form of parody which would imitate for the sake of caricature. The juxtaposition of cultural centrality epitomized by the classic staged in Saint Petersburg with contemporary nineteenth-century provincialism adds an extra problematic quality to the realism of Leskov’s retelling by granting a provincial story an almost metaphysical dimension proper for great tragedies. This difficult combination renders any sense of homogeneity, if expected, almost impossible. Indeed, throughout the whole process of storytelling, the fictional storyteller remains confused in his efforts to understand the situation. This confusion is significantly foregrounded. At the end both audience and storyteller freeze in “astonishment” (Leskov 50). On the one hand, Katerina appears to be a very determined woman but, on the other hand, she lacks awareness of what she is doing (a tragic gap of awareness and a source of irony) and appears to be manipulated by some outside forces: love and power.⁶ It is tempting to see her either as a petty provincial schemer and murderer mistakenly called Lady Macbeth by “someone or other” (Leskov 1), or a powerful villain operating beyond the binary of good and evil. Additionally, Leskov’s Quaker upbringing allows for the perception of characters as fundamentally good but “caught by Fate in a restless, idle hour” (Pritchett 22), a concept which relieves Katerina from a deeper sense of responsibility and serious moral judgment. Even when Katerina abandons her newly-born child, she is not perceived as a wicked mother. Interestingly, the treacherous Sergey “for some reason” enjoys even “more general sympathy” than Katerina (Leskov 38). No wonder that the ending in Leskov’s novella foregrounds a sense of disorientation.

⁴ See *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* (1607), sometimes attributed to Thomas Heywood.

⁵ Katerina comments on the scarcity of entertainment. They do not go either to balls or to theatre (Leskov 22).

⁶ After the murder of the child, it is also divine retribution: “It seemed as though some unearthly power were shaking the sin-ridden house to its foundations” (Leskov 35).

A whole range of adaptations (or appropriations) has contributed to the *context* of Oldroyd's movie—the complex novella itself, operatic productions, paintings, and even the film's promoting epitexts launched on internet platforms. They elaborate and emphasize different aspects of the experience, showing the story from various angles and with the use of media-specific techniques. The significant contextual works which should be mentioned, include *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* (1934) by Dimitrij Shostakovich; its 1963 retelling entitled *Katerina Izmailova*; and a whole series of later productions, including those directed by David Poutney (1987), Marcello Lombardero (2010) and Krzysztof Warlikowski (2019).⁷ These three productions stage the adaptation of *Katerina Izmailova* in the shocking *mise en scène* of either an imaginary or a real slaughterhouse (*vide* Warlikowski)—a significant transfer from the unproductive, timeless domesticity (Groys) dominant in both Leskov and Oldroyd—into the “accelerated space-times” of capitalism. The 1934 premiere fascinated but also shocked with deliberate dissonance scores and eroticism criticized in the famous 1936 attack on Shostakovich where the anonymous author called the work “petty-bourgeois”, its representation of love “vulgar”, and the rehabilitation of a “predatory merchant woman” who murders to “scramble into the possession of wealth”, abominable (unsigned editorial). Still, the two early adaptations, as well as their later productions, though formally avant-garde, homogenize, rather than venture complexification. They tend to humanize⁸ Katerina Izmailova so that she is no longer the woman “whom you can never remember without an inward shudder” (Leskov 1); they introduce changes in the narrative and remove incongruent elements like the third murder “for avarice” to enhance the aesthetic effect by resorting to rampant eroticism and violence.⁹ In line with this artistic policy, the episode with Aksinya (Anna in *Lady Macbeth*) evolves from comic relief in Leskov into a scene of rape. As opposed to the tradition established by Shostakovich, Oldroyd's film version, shot by Ari Wegner, retains Leskov's sexiness but changes in the narrative eliminate, rather than enhance, violence and the accompanying atrocities. The emphasis on events has been reduced and the fact that Zinovy Izmailov's (Alexander Lester in Oldroyd's movie) body is buried in a pigsty and the carcass devoured by pigs (the danger of cannibalism indicated)

⁷ The producers of *Lady Macbeth* were aware of the 1962 *Powiatowa lady Makbet* (*Siberian Lady Macbeth*) directed by Andrzej Wajda, a film that comes closer to fairy tale images of life in provincial Russia and ignores entirely archival research of 19th-century merchant family life. This research was performed by Oldroyd's team so that, paradoxically perhaps, the image of Scottish conservative provincial life aligns with the Russian model. There was still a 1989 production entitled *Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda*. Warlikowski's 2019 production is mentioned as part of the series of ‘slaughterhouse productions’ though it was staged later. As opposed to the earlier productions, Warlikowski transferred the opera to the interiors of a real slaughterhouse.

⁸ Irving Howe argues that the humanization of Katerina departs from Leskov's rationale, but in the case of Shostakovich it can be compensated for by the avant-garde “stark and brutal music” (453).

⁹ Marczyński locates Warlikowski's production between importunate naturalism and serious tragedy.

has been carefully eliminated. Causality and “accelerated time”, taken from the productive context of the slaughterhouse, have been replaced in Oldroyd’s film by *temps morts* and the use of static *tableaux vivants*, a timelessness which restores the atmosphere from Leskov’s novella. Additionally, long takes of the camera facing the character in the role of a sitter infuse a sense of stasis and invoke an overwhelming state of *ennui*, or inexpressible boredom.

Whether Walter Benjamin intended to enter the Shostakovitch controversy in his 1936 essay reflecting on Nikolai Leskov’s art of storytelling hangs in the air. The dilemma addressed by both Benjamin and, much later, Irving Howe was not political. Both asked what remained from the ancient art of telling stories in times when novels and newspapers began to dominate the orally transmitted information. This dilemma remains of interest to Oldroyd’s retelling as well. While Benjamin insisted on regarding Leskov’s art as a craft (367), Howe called it “art for art’s sake”, as there was no longer any external *rationale*, no tendency in Leskov’s writing to either *explain*, moralize or inform (Howe 448). Moreover, in the age of newspapers, literature as a source of information became an object of parody, *vide* Maurice Baring’s collection of dead letters which adapted literary material—parodic reports written supposedly from Sosnofka in Siberia. Leskov draws his stories from *experience* and makes it the experience of his reader-audience (Benjamin 361) by relying on immediacy. He counts on emotional involvement and intellectual engagement rather than interest in a well-constructed, cause-effect sequence of events. His narrative either lacks or does not force any psychological connections on the reader but names the emotions the reader shares with the imaginary audience and the storyteller: horror, amazement, and confusion.

In Oldroyd’s film narrative, focalization and ocularization endeavour to trans-mediate Leskov’s storytelling technique—notably the absence of psychological motivation, unclear causality and the treatment of time. In the film’s cinematographic narrative, external focalization prevails. The camera often stays behind the character’s back and the viewing narrator, as if following the protagonist, never gaining full access to what the character sees, knows and thinks. On the other hand, external ocularization, where the viewer sees less than the character, enhances the sense of puzzling disorientation thus preventing the audience from passing verdicts and easy moralizing. Whether Boris Lester has been poisoned (as in the novella) remains indeterminate. Locked in the adjacent room by a woman (in revenge for the imprisonment of Sebastian), a radical and humiliating subversion of power relations, the infuriated man might have died of heart attack. In the movie, more clearly than in Leskov’s story, Katerina wins our sympathy. The woman avoids punishment by re-telling and re-interpreting the story of Teddy’s death, acquires agency during the interrogation, gains control over her husband’s property and, finally, de-privatizes her position by winning public recognition and, in that way, the viewer’s “sympathy”. She masters the politics of experience through re-telling and renegotiating her subjective in-between where public and private interests are

at play. Almost mute and immersed in a state of boredom, Katherine ultimately acquires the position of a storyteller, an essential strategy for transforming the private into the public (Jackson 14–15).

These final, though decisive, moments are preceded by long sequences of overpowering inactivity and boredom, which in literature may be associated with domestic incarceration (*vide* Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, 1856), but in modern cinema become a basis for risky provocations and a crucial confrontation with oneself (Stańczyk 82). Timelessness, "dead time" or suspended time in Oldroyd's movie, concurrent with a strong renunciation of psychological shading and novelistic time-governed causality¹⁰ produces a sense of stasis and "unproductivity" but enhances the process of experiencing and assimilation, a form of meditation Benjamin relates to the state of boredom and defines as an increasingly rare form of "mental relaxation", "the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience" (367) and, finally, becomes the core of storytelling. Craftsmanship (relict of communal life) and storytelling are therefore interrelated as activities rooted in the disappearing reality of provincial Russia and rural Scotland, on the outskirts of the capitalist world of cultural acceleration. Notably, the industrial facilities and the mills in both retellings are located at a distance, a situation that is even more tangible in the movie. Still, Katherine/Katerina, living between naturalistically and eschatologically-determined realities, is accused of being unproductive in a world where she is expected to produce a male heir who will ensure continuity in the time-bound and property-oriented world gradually supplanting the rural and the provincial. Her transgressive mental and spiritual activity goes beyond worldviews governed either by the book of prayer in the film or the *Kiev Lives of the Fathers* in the novella. References to some greater powers governing the world (Leskov 35) bring back a time when man could see himself in harmony with nature, and when some greater powers provided explanatory grids while leaving interpretations to storytellers and their "naïve poetry" (Benjamin 370) written in the tradition of communal art. The overwhelming sense of boredom in the Russian tale, and in the film, is not a symptom of imprisonment, even if Sergey sees Katerina as a canary kept in a cage (Leskov 8). She is more of a precious bird beyond his reach.

The filmic adaptation transplants the action from Russia to the border of Northumberland and Scotland, preserving a historically-analogous context but referring to modern painting and using contemporary filming technique. Oldroyd's movie concentrates around "hatching the egg of experience" more than on action, while Ari Wegner's portrait-like cinematography adapts elements of slow cinema by blending long takes with a static camera facing the protagonist. Both strategies correspond to the poetics of Vilhelm Hammerhøi's paintings—a conflation

¹⁰ Reviewers referring to Leskov's "Lady Macbeth" often confuse generic categories (short story, novella, and novel), a differentiation which is seminal for understanding the text's logic.

practised already by Joanna Hogg.¹¹ Hammershøi's studies of female figures in domestic bourgeois interiors are vague and static providing in that way no material for "orthodox novelists" (Toop 121). Instead, what comes to fore is the solid atmosphere invoking a sense of *ennui*, weariness and melancholy (Wagstaff), conflated in *Lady Macbeth* with unproductivity and boredom. The architecture of frames and windows, "synchronically tied to one another" (Martel 70), rather than incarcerate (as in a Faucauldian reading) and isolate, opens up to new spaces of signification, introspection and thought provoking reflection whose effect is agency, creativity (Stańczyk 85) and liberation. Commenting on Vilhelm Hammershøi's *Interior*, 1908, Wendy Beckett grasps this complex mood transferred to *Lady M* due to the slow filming technique:

Hammershøi's woman sits in an enclosed space, head bent. She could be thought to be imprisoned by her context and weakly complicit with her lack of liberty. Yet the artist shows us door upon door, with a luminous window beyond. Light plays over the woman's form behind as well as from ahead. If she chooses, she has only to stand erect and move down the waiting corridor. If she stays motionless ... that is her choice.

Katherine in Oldroyd's movie, like Hammershøi's sitter, rests immersed in abysmal boredom. The protagonist's state of relaxation and detachment "draws all things, all men and oneself along with them, together in a queer kind of indifference" (Heidegger 364). In the course of the film, and due to its slow filming, this experience becomes increasingly indicative of what Martin Heidegger defines as the meaning-giving whole, accessible either through love or via boredom, that is, the opening up moods in which one feels attuned (*Stimmung*) to the meaning-giving-whole (364). Contrary to Heidegger's proposition, for the nineteenth-century Leskov, the meaning-giving-whole is marginally only signaled by some external governing powers, which grant the otherwise naturalistic novella an unexpectedly metaphysical dimension, a feeble sense of reliance on divine providence. However, the gradual rejection of the order of divine providence, pervasive in the concepts of *Deus otiosus*, creates a vacuum filled with existential boredom. Due to the slow cinema technique, the Heideggerian meaning-giving whole "overtakes" the subject in a mood of detachment from "things", signals and provokes introspection to promise greater self-awareness that stands in opposition to the superficiality imposed by postmodernity (Stańczyk 85–86, 89). Oldroyd's filmic retelling of Leskov's novella converges around Katherine's gradual emancipation through the mood of boredom and detachment from the superficially-conceived world of "things" invading rural Scotland, and through her refusal to submit to the culture of acceleration and objectifying productivity.

¹¹ Joanna Hogg drew her inspiration from Vilhelm Hammershøi's *Interior in Strandgade, Sunlight on the Floor* (1901), blending the idea of slow film with Hammershøi's poetics.

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