

## Visualising Victoria: Gender, Genre and History in *The Young Victoria* (2009)

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### Abstract

This article explores the ambivalent re-imagining of Queen Victoria in Jean-Marc Vallée's *The Young Victoria* (2009). Due to the almost obsessive current interest in Victorian sexuality and gender roles that still seem to frame contemporary debates, this article interrogates the ambiguous depiction of gender relations in this most recent portrayal of Victoria, especially as constructed through the visual imagery of actual artworks incorporated into the film. In its self-conscious (mis)representation of Victorian (royal) history, this essay argues, *The Young Victoria* addresses the problems and implications of discussing the film as a royal biopic within the generic conventions of heritage cinema.

**Keywords:** biopic, film, gender, genre, iconography, neo-Victorianism, Queen Victoria, royalty, Jean-Marc Vallée.

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In her influential monograph *Victoriana*, Cora Kaplan describes the huge popularity of neo-Victorian texts and the “fascination with things Victorian” as a “British postwar vogue which shows no signs of exhaustion” (Kaplan 2007: 2). Yet, from this “rich afterlife of Victorianism” cinematic representations of the eponymous monarch are strangely absent (Johnston and Waters 2008: 8). The recovery of Queen Victoria on film in John Madden’s visualisation of the delicate John-Brown-episode in the Queen’s later life in *Mrs Brown* (1997) coincided with the academic revival of interest in the monarch reflected by Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich in *Remaking Queen Victoria* (1997). Academia and the film industry brought the Queen back to “the centre of Victorian cultures around the globe”, where Homans and Munich believe “she always was” (Homans and Munich 1997: 1). This presence is continued and complicated by the most recent cinematic re-imagining of the monarch, Jean-Marc Vallée’s *The Young Victoria* (2009), which focuses on an entirely different phase of Victoria’s life: her youth, her accession to the throne, and her marriage with Prince Albert. This article will discuss how the film re-imagines the early years of the famous monarch by exploring its construction of the

iconography of the (royal) national past through the lens of gender relations and sexuality, aspects central to neo-Victorian discourse, especially as regards these themes' development via the incorporation of visual art, in particular actual royal portraits from the period. The focus on the "Young" Victoria challenges the film's own generic status as royal biopic, as heritage film, and as neo-Victorian production, as well as adding to the current understanding of the "problematic commodification of nostalgia" (Bowler and Cox 2009/2010: 6).

In both the nineteenth century and in the present day, Queen Victoria's image "crystallize[s] not only notions of the sovereign, but also ideas about femininity, nationhood, and the mass marketing of myth" (Casteras 1997: 183). Being not just a woman but also "the monarch, a cultural artifact, and a symbol of political power, patriotism, and public consensus" (Casteras 1997: 183), her representation in film or other media should provide insight into contemporary assumptions regarding the relationship between national heritage and gender. Therefore, it is striking that this ambiguous figure, which could prove highly profitable for understanding neo-Victorianism's investments in both gender politics and the national past, is still under-represented in contemporary film. My analysis of *The Young Victoria* aims to examine the position Queen Victoria currently occupies in (cinematic) neo-Victorian discourse, arguing that the film provides an ambivalent approach towards national history via the lens of royalty. The film is "*more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century" because it shows a "'self-consciousness' [that] distinguishes contemporary literary and filmic neo-Victorian culture from other aspects of contemporary culture which embrace historical settings" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, 5). Specifically, although the film's aesthetics refrain from a formally conservative approach, *The Young Victoria* nonetheless offers a highly orthodox take on Queen Victoria and thus on the nineteenth century itself.

### 1. *The Young Victoria*: Heritage Film vs. Biopic

*The Young Victoria*'s focus on a previously under-represented part of the monarch's life troubles its generic status. In one sense, the film can be seen as part of the current "vogue for biography" (Kaplan 2007: 42).<sup>1</sup> As a royal biopic, it is discursively and stylistically categorised as a "subgenre of the heritage film" (Böhnke 2006: 4), a connection underlined by the fact that

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Andrew Higson discusses Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998) as one of the central examples in his in-depth study of British heritage films in *English Heritage, English Cinema*. The biographical approach of Vallée's film also points to its treatment of history from a personal perspective. This facilitates what Robert A. Rosenstone calls the "vital 'personal and emotional connection[s] with what has gone before'" (qtd. in Kohlke 2008: 11), a typical function of the neo-Victorian, which makes the genre so "well suited to re-popularising (nineteenth-century) history, rendering it accessible, newly topical, and appealing to present-day sensibilities" (Kohlke 2008: 11). By focusing on the person rather than the monarch, the royal biopic evokes "strong feelings of sympathy and compassion" for its protagonists (McKechnie 2001: 105), enables an experience of history in a personalised way, and thus forms the basis for audience identification with socio-economically remote characters. As a result, the protagonists in *The Young Victoria* are not so much 'Othered', or distanced, as modelled to fit contemporary notions of subjectivity, as becomes clear from the film's treatment of gender and sexuality to follow.

Heritage film dominated the re-imagination of the national past in British film during the 1980s and the early 1990s. From the mid-1990s onwards, however, a change occurred: there was a distinct move away from the "country house version of Englishness" seen in the *mise-en-scène* of stately homes, picturesque landscapes and the interiors of these earlier films (Higson 1996: 233). Sheldon Hall acknowledges the emergence of "a new strand of period/literary films with a deep consciousness about how the past is represented" (Hall 2001: 193), analogous to the often meta-fictional self-consciousness of much neo-Victorian literature. This ongoing development in heritage cinema has also influenced the iconography of the royal biopic in general and *The Young Victoria* in particular. The film makes use of traditional iconographic strategies of the heritage film as well as the royal biopic, such as quoting "historical modes of representation" like famous portraits or other images as basis for visualisation and authentication (Schaff 2004: 126). However, this "pictorial quality" does not necessarily lead to a traditional and conservative approach (Schaff 2004: 126). The film operates on a far more complex level because the frequent references to art objects and art forms in the film fulfil other semantic functions than merely that "add[ing] weight to the tasteful production values" (Schaff 2004:127). By its explicit references to forms of art the film constructs the past per se "as a

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work of art”, and the paintings become self-reflexive “markers of the film’s inherent fictionality and artificiality” (Schaff 2004: 127), thereby adding to its neo-Victorian agenda. The iconography of the film’s most significant moments is derived from the rich inventory of portraits of Victoria and the royal family.<sup>2</sup> The film’s quoting of royal portraiture starts very early in the film with the coronation of Victoria. Following the anointment and the reception of the royal regalia, the film offers a long shot of the coronation ceremony at Westminster Abbey that seems to be inspired by John Martin’s *The Coronation of Queen Victoria* (1839) as well as E. T. Parris’ coronation painting. Both pictures emphasise the immense size of the abbey architecture in contrast to the human figures inside in order to convey a feeling of grandeur and the sublime. The rather static camera work adds to the pictorial quality of these shots.

This strategy becomes even more striking in the scene of the announcement of Victoria’s accession. For the visualisation of this event the paintings *Queen Victoria Receiving the News of Her Accession to the Throne, June 20, 1837* (1887) and *Victoria Regina: Victoria Receiving the News of Her Accession* (1880) by Henry Tamworth Wells form the iconographic basis.<sup>3</sup> The film recreates the first painting in almost every detail: Victoria, in her white nightgown, stands in front of the kneeling Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lord Chancellor, receiving the news of her accession. Apart from the identical looks of the gentlemen, even the furniture of the room has been selected and arranged in a similar way. Here, the audience becomes privy to an intensely private scene, showing Victoria not only in a state of partial undress but at her most vulnerable, having only just woken from sleep. Susan P. Casteras argues that this “concept is rather voyeuristic, making outsiders instantly ‘insider’ witnesses to what was a quintessentially private and painful event” (Casteras 1997: 195). Thus the film visually addresses the fusion of the heritage genre in its quotation of national portraiture with the intimacy of the (royal) biopic denoted by Victoria in a nightdress. From a nearby window the light of the early morning sun enters the room and Victoria steps into the light that seems to shine onto the bright figure of the new Queen. In this scene, as in the picture which invokes Christian symbolism, the young and meritorious Victoria is the personification of goodness and self-sacrifice (Casteras 1997: 197). Again, the appropriation of the portraits is marked by little camera and

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character movement which contributes to the self-reflexivity the film presents.

What is just as intriguing is the film's use of (royal) portraiture as props. *The Young Victoria* employs two portraits of the young princess, *Princess Victoria of Kent* (1823) by Stephen Poyntz Denning and *The Duchess of Kent with her Daughter, Victoria* (1823) by Sir William Beechey. The first painting appears in the scene right after the coronation sequence, showing the Duchess' comptroller Sir John Conroy, who was not allowed to attend the coronation, in a room of the palace. The room is filled with furniture and musical instruments, but no one is there apart from Conroy, drinking and listening to the cheering crowds outside, and Denning's portrait on the left side of the room. This picture shows Victoria at the age of four. Despite her young age, the princess is elegantly dressed in a wide black dress and an enormous feather-adorned hat. The gaze of this "miniature adult woman" is clear and indicates "a sense of independent spirit or liveliness" (Casteras 1997: 184-185). The rather traditional positioning of Victoria in the natural setting and the adopted perspective, however, require a more detailed consideration: Instead of being neatly placed within this rural environment, the infant-princess towers above the depicted fauna and seems to reach into the cloudy sky. Her body height might imply the greatness that both her body natural and body politic are to assume in the future. Although the picture is not actively integrated into the narration by any of the film's characters and seems to serve a merely decorative purpose, it provides an implicit gloss on Victoria's personality: though still young, she shows a "sense of independent spirit", and the straightforward gaze of the princess in the painting suggests the strong-mindedness and determination Victoria will display later on in the film. The portrait self-consciously comments on the absent presence of Victoria in neo-Victorianism as, even when the Queen is not there in person, her portrait represents her. In terms of neo-Victorian visual culture, the film's repeated reference to art by using paintings as props makes us "aware of the fact that we are also looking at a visual representation, a symbolic construct" (Schaff 2004: 128). This self-conscious reference is enhanced further in the first shot of this sequence: for a few seconds the audience is invited to linger on a still life that depicts the visual splendour of the elaborately furnished room with its golden ornaments, flowing curtains and

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enormous windows, before Conroy steps into the scene from behind a sculpture located in the middle of the room.

In another scene in the music room that also starts with a lingering single shot depicting the aesthetic value of the room's interior and carefully arranged immobile characters, Conroy complains to the Duchess of Kent about the waste of his "gifts", as he puts it. Here the Denning picture is still present. But this time it is accompanied by another portrait – *The Duchess of Kent with her Daughter, Victoria* (1823) by Sir William Beechey. This portrait shows the seated young widow and her daughter standing next to her holding a miniature painting of her late father, the Duke of Kent. This painting is also present during Prince Albert's interrogation of Conroy about the finances of the Duchess. The use of these portraits in the latter scene suggests not only the ubiquity of the new queen, but also the family relations – though rather invisible – that still exercise their function. Visually, the film makes the argument that the royal biopic necessarily treats the royal subject not just as an individual, but as always embedded within larger networks and contexts of power.

However, the film's *mise-en-scène* not only draws upon the art history of royal portraiture, but includes a wide range of other paintings, such as landscapes. One of these paintings, however, has a special function. The sequence of Conroy's departure from court opens with Victoria walking across a gallery of the palace straight towards a large painting of Jesus throwing the moneychangers out of the temple, which is placed at the head of the room. Just as Victoria is about to leave the gallery through a door to the left, Conroy enters the gallery from the opposite door. They face each other in shot reverse shot and Conroy addresses Victoria as "Her Majesty" – there is no further verbal communication. It becomes quite clear, however, that in this moment the towering painting functions first, to vicariously take over communication, and second, to anticipate the action of Conroy's expulsion from court. As earlier, Christian symbolism is evoked in relation to the young Queen in order to underline her moral superiority over her adversary. These explicit references to art by using paintings as props in combination with shots of interiors that look like still lifes function as "metonymical reminder[s] of the film's constructedness and symbolic dimension" (Schaff 2004: 129). The frequent references to forms and traditions of art in the film indicate its high degree of self-reflexivity. Paradoxically, despite employing traditional (royal) art history as

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iconographic basis, the film foregrounds its constructedness as a result of this strategy. The self-reflexivity is enhanced further by the relation between film and reality since in *The Young Victoria* the pre-filmic reality, i.e. royal portraiture, is itself an aestheticised form.

As has been outlined above, *The Young Victoria* makes excessive use of nineteenth-century portraiture, particularly for its visually most opulent sequences. Thus, it “self-consciously mimic[s] the strategies” of Victorian painting (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 175). This can be classified as a form of meta-spectacle, as the continual quotation of Victorian paintings reminds the audience of the fact that it is watching a visual representation (Schaff 2004: 128). This is again emphasised by the film’s very last image that depicts Victoria and Albert in royal attire entering a room of the palace, which then morphs into a freeze frame evoking the iconography of royal portraiture.

The film’s ambivalent approach to national history is continued in its *mise-en-scène*. *The Young Victoria* differs strikingly from many other heritage films that deal with episodes of the British past in its use and representation of exteriors, with a comparable shortage of establishing shots of stately homes or palaces. Although the film visits some of the most significant royal locations, such as Windsor Castle, Kensington Palace or Buckingham Palace, as well as the residences of the German princes and the Belgian king, it does not introduce these with the stereotypical nostalgic dwelling shot. Instead, the necessary information about the locations is conveyed by subtitles, and the audience is presented with fragmented images of the respective location. This shortage of establishing shots also applies to the nostalgic depiction of British landscapes conveying the pre-industrial rural idyll of the countryside, common in other heritage films such as *Howards End* (1992) or *Sense and Sensibility* (1995). If landscape scenery is depicted in the film, as in the riding sequence that follows Victoria’s wedding, its picturesque potential is ruptured by a cloudy sky and heavy rain.

Ambivalence towards visual nostalgia extends to the interior shots which make up most of the film. These interiors display a lavish spectacular excess of opulent, gold-laden and ornate furnishings and decorations. The richly decorated rooms provide the audience with high gloss images. This can be seen best during the birthday reception of King William IV, where a flamboyant shot along the long line of arranged glasses at the dinner table is

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followed by a long shot of the royal banquet. However, this idyll is disturbed shortly afterwards when the King – who has apparently been drinking too much – rises to address the guests and to attack the Duchess of Kent for keeping Victoria from court. The Duke of Wellington comments on this incident: “Families, who’d be without them” (Vallée 2009: 27:24-27:30). Another instance of this ambivalence would be the inspection of Buckingham Palace, the Queen’s new residence. The sequence starts with an exterior shot of the palace’s portal lined with a regiment of Foot Guards saluting the Queen, who arrives in a four-in-hand coach. Starting with an impressive yet limited shot of Buckingham Palace, the audience’s lingering gaze is disturbed by guards closing the iron gates. The sequence continues with shots of the rich and vast interiors of the palace that are accompanied by a swinging yet mocking waltz melody.

Henry M. Taylor has classified the biopic as a “supragenre” in need of further auxiliary genres to support its narrative (Taylor 2002: 21). For this reason the royal biopic often draws on strategies from heritage cinema – as outlined above. As if realising this need for support, *The Young Victoria*’s cast consists of an interesting mixture of upcoming stars, such as Emily Blunt and Rupert Friend in lead roles, established actors and actresses, such as Miranda Richardson or Paul Bettany, and an uncredited Princess Beatrice as Lady in Waiting to establish its status as ‘royal’ biopic.<sup>4</sup> Other recurring conventional elements of the royal biopic are romance and spectacle, which reflect the tension between individual and society. Whereas romance focuses on personal experience, spectacle emphasises the public life by means of *mise-en-scène* including scenery, costumes or setting (Taylor 2002: 89). As quasi cinematic *Bildungsroman* the film deals with questions of identity or coming-of-age and depicts psychologically individualised characters. This also has an effect on the visual level, as the scenes concerned with the protagonists are almost entirely shot in close-ups or medium shots that reduce the distance between characters and audience. Spectacular effects are derived from events of public life, that is, the film’s conservative vision of the national past such as the coronation of the young Queen or the birthday celebrations of William IV. Thus, despite the “museum aesthetic” the film creates to a certain extent by provoking a “detached gaze of admiring spectatorship”,<sup>5</sup> the film’s production of “history as spectacle” is undermined by first, the conflict between romance

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and spectacle, and second, through the ruptured and ambivalent *mise-en-scène* (Joyce 2007: 73).

If the film's intermedial references primarily support its neo-Victorian self-consciousness, its treatment of these images of the national past still remains rather reverential. This same ambivalence applies to the *mise-en-scène*: the restrained, meagre depiction of exteriors is compensated for by indulging the audience with the materiality of lavish interiors. While representing the "new, modified, or modern style" that can be attributed to neo-Victorianism (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 6), the film provides an example of neo-Victorianism chafing at Victorianism, even as it celebrates the same in embracing its relationship with heritage.

## 2. Victoria – A Proto-Feminist Monarch?

Today's ideas about gender roles are still influenced by Victorian concepts. This might, in turn, lead to the extreme interest of modern society (including neo-Victorian criticism) in Victorian sexualities and gender ideology. Thus, the analysis of the configuration of gender relations in *The Young Victoria* is a matter of peculiar interest, especially because the film offers a rather complex presentation that needs to be considered in detail. As a Queen regnant it is still difficult to categorise Queen Victoria:<sup>6</sup>

She was a monarch without precedent: neither consort nor king, she baffled expectations throughout her career. Never had England seen a reigning monarch so matrimonially devoted, so excessively maternal (nine children), and then so emphatically widowed. (Homans and Munich 1997: 2)

In a patriarchal society, a queen regnant always constitutes a cultural paradox, since she is above everyone else in the country, including every man. Yet because of her sex the queen is regarded as the "failure of issue male [sic]" and her reign is always determined by this fact (qtd. in Houston 1997: 159). Thus, although the queen occupies the nation's highest office, in terms of gender she is always in an inferior position. A review of Vallée's film claims that it presents a "proto-feminist monarch" (Burstein 2010). At first sight, the label "proto-feminist" seems well-fitted regarding statements by the protagonist, such as "You don't think I've come this far to walk straight into another jail [...] if I do [marry], I shall please myself", or

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“Can’t I be my own mistress for a while? Haven’t I earned it?” (Vallée 2009: 18:03-18:21, 39:44-39:52). However, the paradoxical status of the Queen is mirrored by the film’s problematic, at times far from politically correct representation of sexuality and gender roles.

An apparently common feature of royal biopics is the relationship between the monarch and his or her advisors. The female royal biopic often depicts the queen as unable to make autonomous decisions and strongly dependent on the influence of her respective main (male) advisor. There is a pattern of overcoming the first advisor as a seeming liberation, only to be followed by the installation of another advisor, who again exerts undue leverage over the monarch’s decision-making.<sup>7</sup> In *The Young Victoria* the elitist, arrogant and selfish Lord Melbourne is the first advisor of the young Queen. He persuades her to appoint the wives of his political allies as her ladies-in-waiting regardless of her concerns about likely perceptions of favouritism. Later in the film Melbourne is replaced by Prince Albert, who initially seems to be constructed as Melbourne’s opposite.<sup>8</sup> Whereas Melbourne does not want to meddle with established proceedings in Buckingham Palace and prefers to “let these things [reforms of social problems of poverty and working classes] develop naturally” (Vallée 2009: 49:10-49:19), Prince Albert is shown as passionate about alleviating the living conditions of the poor and intent on improving the management of the palace. Furthermore, Albert displays an arguably present-day, more egalitarian stance regarding the nature of marriage: during a game of chess, Victoria mentions that she feels like a chess piece in the game of politics and asks Albert, “You don’t recommend I find a husband to play it for me?”, whereupon he answers, “I should find one to play it *with* you, not for you” (Vallée 2009: 14:48-14:59). Nonetheless, both Melbourne and Albert seek the Queen’s favour, and her relationship with her advisors is complicated further by the insertion of a love triangle: on various occasions the film suggests an improper relationship between Victoria and Melbourne, whom the film constructs as several years younger than his historical equivalent, which in turn makes him a potential love interest. However, in this relationship between the monarch and a politician representing party politics, “the ‘private’ and the ‘political’ have become dangerously entangled”, as the Queen’s status requires her to remain an apolitical authority (Burstein 2010). Here we encounter a conflict between politics and

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love, which is common in films about female monarchs and is usually solved along the established narrative pattern of (self-)sacrifice.

The film's solution to this problem – the problem of female rule – is the marriage of Victoria and Prince Albert only a few months later. The narrative does not demand the private sacrifice of love for the Queen's public duties, as this relationship integrates Victoria into a patriarchal relationship. This forms a significant contrast to other royal biopics such as *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998) or *Mrs Brown* (John Madden, 1997), where the heroine has to sacrifice love in order to retain her power. On the contrary, the marriage stabilises Victoria's image as what might be deemed a middle-class housewife, in spite of her aristocratic status. Only by "taking the risk of giving away her power over herself", is the Queen able to retain this power (Homans 1998: 16). The whole issue of marriage is important in terms of domestic monarchy: Homans argues that "[d]espite her diamonds", Victoria's marriage can be read "as no different from any other, as a form of privatization" (Homans 1998: 7). Thus, although there is an ambiguous subtext of sexual and political powers in the relationship between Victoria and Albert, the film establishes this relationship as ideal and romantic in essentially traditionalist terms (Homans 1998: 17). At first, the film imagines the relationship between the princess and the German prince as one of complicity. They are shown to share sympathy for each other as they encounter similar difficulties – feeling like chess pieces in the game of power – that are used by the film to form the basis of the romanticised love story. Nevertheless, in this game Victoria is, as a matter of principle, the more powerful figure, since the German prince has no prospect of a throne of his own. This becomes obvious in conversations between Albert and his brother Ernst, which reflect on the problem of Albert's subordinate status that makes him unable to take decisive action to further his relationship with Victoria. According to the film's plot, the determining force is the Bedchamber Crisis, during which Albert becomes Victoria's support in the constitutional crisis caused by Victoria's selection of ladies from the wives of Melbourne's political Whig allies and her subsequent refusal to dismiss some of them on the advice of the Tory Robert Peel, whom she invited to form a new government following Melbourne's resignation. In the film, the idea of romantic love between Victoria and Albert culminates in Albert's heroic action of guarding his wife with his own body during an assassination attempt. As a result of this incident, Albert is shot and suffers

from a wound at his upper arm. Using this episode, the film facilitates the idea of the chivalric prince, who protects his vulnerable wife.

Being the object of many speculations, the proposal of marriage is a significant sequence to look at when analysing the representation of gender roles in *The Young Victoria*. Although the film refers to the problem that Albert is not allowed to propose to Victoria, the actual proposal depicts this differently. Albert is again invited by the Queen to visit her. The visualisation of Albert's arrival at court is highly reminiscent of Edwin Landseer's portrait *Windsor Castle in Modern Times: Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and Victoria, Princess Royal* (1841-45) which shows Victoria standing next to the seated Albert who is surrounded by the paraphernalia of hunting. In *The Young Victoria* Albert, accompanied by two greyhounds, enters the room where Victoria is awaiting him. Similar to the portrait, he wears

Byronic tights [... that] represent the costume of an earlier age and of outmoded aristocratic pleasures. Real men – prime ministers and businessmen, for example – [...] (after 1820) [wore] pants, so that costumes like Albert's here look romantic and effete. (Homans 1998: 29)

In addition to that, the dogs are a strong link to the Landseer portrait and its paraphernalia of hunting; however, quite unusually both painting and film locate their depiction of the hunter indoors (Homans 1998: 29). Whereas the configuration of Albert as effete indoor hunter and Victoria's superior position in Landseer's painting suggest Victoria's "sovereignty over a feminized Albert", the film adapts and transforms its codes in terms of gender dynamics (Homans 1998: 29). Here, a girlish and nervous Victoria awaits Prince Albert who dynamically walks down the hallway towards her. The ambiguity of the Landseer portrait, i.e. domestic femininity versus the Queen's superior position, is dissolved by the film's rather unproblematic interpretation which evacuates Victoria of her femininity.

Shortly after his arrival Albert is sent for by Victoria. He enters the room and Victoria invites him to sit next to her on the sofa. The Queen addresses Albert and introduces her intentions, but the crucial question is first voiced by him and Victoria merely repeats his words. Even though Albert is not the one taking action at first, in the end *he* asks her to marry

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him. The consequential difference between historical records (the Queen's journal) and the filmic representation is remarkable. Thus, the film is not only far from adhering to historical details, but it is also far from showing a self-confident and powerful or even 'proto-feminist' monarch.

This is emphasised in another crucial sequence where the pregnant Queen and her husband argue about his interference in government matters. In this scene, the film makes explicit reference to Victoria as a female monarch and the problems that ensue from her status. Victoria puts Albert in his place by telling him that he is her husband and nothing more and that she is the one wearing the crown. At this point in the argument, Albert explains that he will leave "before you excite yourself and harm the child" (Vallée 2009: 1:25:40-1:25:51). Although Victoria orders him to stay, he disobeys her and leaves. Central to this sequence is not only Albert's disobedience, but also the reason for his behaviour: the Queen's pregnancy. Victoria is not presented as monarch, but as a pregnant woman who is reduced to her body and implicitly criticised for her unreasonable behaviour in potentially endangering her unborn child and subordinating its needs to her rights as monarch. The film further domesticates the Queen by earlier reducing her to the status of an ordinary wife after the wedding night: on the visual level the film depicts a young affectionate couple in bed – there is no sign of royalty. This is emphasised by their conversation about having a family and children and, most significantly, by Albert addressing Victoria as "wife" as well as her remark that she is now "quite married" (Vallée 2009: 1:12:52-1:12:59). As a result the film's Victoria becomes an 'ordinary' and unthreatening woman. The film – similar to Victorian representations that form its iconographic basis – helps "to disseminate a complex picture of royalty's superordinary domesticity, to publicise the monarchy as middle-class and its female identity as unthreateningly subjugated" (Homans 1998: 19). Thus, the film's rather conservative depiction of and stance towards (royal) gender roles might be a result of its reliance on the highly artificial discourse of nineteenth-century royal portraiture.

The film's final montage presents a condensation of this domestication: starting with the new arrangement of Victoria's and Albert's desks and the birth of Princess Victoria, the film sets out to reaffirm the cliché of the idyll of (royal) family life. Edited with inter-titles, the film informs the audience about the lives of Victoria and Albert: it uses images of the newlyweds in bed and Victoria arranging Albert's wardrobe – just

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like a good housewife or domesticated monarch would do. Only the very last image depicts Victoria and Albert in royal attire entering a room of the palace. However, it is also the romantic couple that forms the last image and not the powerful monarch alone. As Homans suggests, in the nineteenth century, female authority was only possible by “means of the ideology of female submission” (Homans 1998: xxxvii); Victoria, therefore, had to give up her independent powers in order to be able to reign, and this is exactly what is implied in the last image. Although Victoria appears as sovereign, she is at the same time defined in a relational role as a married wife and mother, and this is constantly reinforced by Albert’s presence until the film’s closing shot.

By reducing the complexity of Queen Victoria’s representation, the film consciously refrains from constructing a Queen as too feminist for an audience in a (still) patriarchal society. *The Young Victoria* is set in a century “in which male dominion and the separation of spheres into sharply defined male and female areas” formed the ideological basis (Thompson 1990: 98). However, there are events and ambiguities that can be considered as transgressive in the portrayal of royalty even for today’s audience, such as the fact that the historical documents (Victoria’s letters and journal) describe Albert as the beautiful object of the Queen’s desire or the occasion when Victoria overrules Albert’s wish to choose his own (politically neutral) household (Homans 1998: 17). One need only recall the recent scandals surrounding the revelation of the intimate lives of Windsor royals and the celebration of Kate Middleton’s tactful media silence to appreciate the film’s toning down of the disruptive potential of the early years of Britain’s longest reigning monarch and its ambivalence in its re-imagination of her feminism.

### **3. Conclusion: The (Im)Possibility of Royal Neo-Victorianism**

From a neo-Victorian perspective, *The Young Victoria* depicts more than “‘straight’ historical fiction” (Llewellyn 2008: 176): it self-consciously and self-reflexively re-imagines the nineteenth-century past as a work of art. The film presents no (seemingly authentic) historical reality; rather, I argue, it depicts a hyperreality based on Victorian imagery. Nevertheless, the film also offers “royal spectacle and middle-class practices and values” that seem to form the “permanent hallmark of the royal family” (Homans 1998: 4). As an example of neo-Victorian visual culture, *The Young Victoria*

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demonstrates its entanglement in multiple cinematic genres that follow specific visual and narrative patterns – often rather conservative and nostalgic – and that are not always easy to reconcile with neo-Victorianism’s agenda of “(re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4). The film’s ambivalences in terms of visual aesthetics and its approach to gender politics illustrates the difficulties of extracting Victoria from the inherent conservatism of a royal national past and offers a way of explaining Victoria’s absence in much neo-Victorian production with a more obvious socio-political agenda. As a result of its repeated subversion of the supposedly proto-feminist take on Queen Victoria and its perpetuation of a conservative gender ideology, a definite classification of the film is highly problematic and does not seem promising in view of the ambivalences outlined above. Instead, this inherent complexity might become a starting point for the question of whether it is possible that neo-Victorianism itself exhibits neo-conservative (here anti-feminist) tendencies.

### Notes

1. Although the postmodern discourse declared the death of the humanist subject, the number of published biographies has increased in recent years. While there is no longer a coherent, linear and teleological biography after the linguistic turn, this growth and the genre’s perseverance indicate the public’s need for compensation in the face of the disorientation and inability to act characteristic of postmodern society (Nieberle 2008: 6-7).
2. These paintings are part of the long-standing tradition of female (royal) portraiture. Art has been celebrating female monarchs for centuries – the most famous example being Queen Elizabeth I. Queen Victoria, like Elizabeth I, was aware of the power of portraiture for the reaffirmation of the monarchy’s central role in terms of British national identity. Thus, she commissioned both state and private portraits of herself and her family. The iconology of the portraits reflects the changing perceptions of the queen regnant (Casteras 1997: 182-183).
3. With the 1880s also being the decade of Queen Victoria’s fiftieth year of rule, these paintings belong to the revival of interest in Victoria’s (private) life and the historical day of the accession (Casteras 1997: 195).
4. Her mother, Sarah Ferguson, acted as one of the producers of the film.

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5. According to Andrew Higson, this admiring gaze is combined with “the discourse of authenticity” (2003: 41).
  6. Before Victoria became Queen, British history had already produced a number of queen regnants: Boudica, Mary, Elizabeth I. and Anne. Nevertheless, in a patriarchal society a queen regnant poses ideological problems, and this is also true for the nineteenth century.
  7. This pattern can be traced in other royal biopics such as *Elizabeth* (see Shekhar Kapur, 1998). Here, the young queen dismisses the elderly William Cecil in order to reign on her own. However, the film introduces another male figure, Francis Walsingham who, as Elizabeth’s new advisor, also takes over parts of her political agency when he imprisons a number of voting members of parliament in order to facilitate the passing of the Act of Uniformity.
  8. The film does not address the difficulties Albert’s nationality entailed.

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