



MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Neo-Victorian Reflections: Recasting Victorian History, Identity
and Gender in Yorgos Lanthimos's Poor Things (2023)

verfasst von | submitted by
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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2025

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

UA 066 844

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme as it appears on the student
record sheet:

Masterstudium Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Sylvia Mieszkowski MA

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Univ.-Prof. Dr. Sylvia Mieszkowski, for supporting this project from the beginning and guiding me every step of the way. I am grateful for the detailed feedback and the meetings that shaped this thesis and helped me grow intellectually in ways I could have never imagined. A special thanks goes out to the CTL team at the university and my wonderful colleagues there for helping my writing improve and for believing in me to become a writing mentor, even when I did not believe so myself. Thank you for taking a chance on me.

No amount of studying would matter if not for my incredible family. I would like to thank my mother and my brother for their unwavering support throughout my degree. For visiting Vienna more times than I can count and being by my side despite the distance. As always, you are my rock. Sas agapo.

This dissertation is the result of two and a half years in Austria and it would be remiss not to dedicate it to the amazing people that shaped my time in Vienna. Whether we met at the university, at work or at a social gathering, thank you for embracing me in your communities and making my experience in Vienna the best I could have asked for. The list is too long but I trust you know who you are, though a special shoutout goes to my colleagues in the Anglistik department Jule, Nathalie and Nikita, who made Vienna feel home away from home. Danke für alles.

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Introduction: The Neo-Victorian World of *Poor Things*

On the 8th of June 2023, a strangely new yet oddly familiar world made its appearance in the cultural landscape, as the day marked the release of the official trailer and a new poster for Yorgos Lanthimos's long anticipated film *Poor Things*, which was released later in 2023. Media outlets emphasized the film's puzzling fantasy premise as teasing a "visually sumptuous twist on the Frankenstein story" (Lattanzio n. pag.), while they noted the trailer's "odd imagery" (McArdle n. pag.) and characterized the confusing poster as "a lot to wrap our heads around – but in a good way" (DeVore n. pag.). This reaction of mixed enthusiasm and confusion often follows the release of Lanthimos' films, which are characterized by weird storyworlds that masterfully evoke a sense of apathy and alienation (Falvey, "(A Late) Introduction" 11; "Notes Toward a Cinema of Apathy" 83-4).¹ A similar sense of perplexion emerges as we gaze at the official poster for *Poor Things*, which emulates a traditional Victorian portrait, depicting an upper-class woman in a respectful pose (see Fig. 1). Only there is something wrong with the woman, as she has no head; instead, a shrunken version of the same woman emerges out of her neck. Though the poster is puzzling at first glance, a contextualization of the film in its cultural and ideological framework can shed light to the poster.



Fig. 1

¹ Eddie Falvey argues that similar aesthetic and thematic threads run through Lanthimos's films, which warrant viewing his entire work as belonging to a wider storyworld that brings all these semiotic meanings together and allows us to comprehend how recurrent themes, such as the violence of power and the confrontation with the absurd, converge throughout his various films ("(A Late) Introduction" 12). Falvey employs the term 'storyworld' as defined by Warren Buckland, who describes it as the sum total of all fictional elements that can be found in a director's works (Buckland 5). Building on this, Falvey, argues that the prevailing feature that runs through Lanthimos's film is not so much weirdness as is apathy ("Notes Toward A Cinema of Apathy" 81). Storyworld as a concept is central to this thesis, as I will follow Buckland's definition to explore how *Poor Things* builds a unique storyworld that blends Victorian and contemporary influence, which I explore in Chapter 1.2 of the thesis.

My thesis's object of analysis, Lanthimos's film *Poor Things* is based on Alasdair Gray's eponymous novel from 1992. The film is set in an alternate version of the late Victorian era and tells the story of Victoria Blessington, who commits suicide after discovering her pregnancy. Her body is found by Godwin Baxter, a scientist who reanimates her by transplanting her fetus's brain in Victoria's body. Out of this bizarre scientific experiment, Bella Baxter is 'born', a woman with a fully developed body and the mind of a baby, who grows mentally by leaving Baxter's house and travelling throughout Europe. Learning furiously while traversing a hyper-Victorian world, imbued with fantasy and contemporary elements, Bella grows intellectually and subverts established Victorian norms in a journey of self-discovery and emancipation. The film was critically acclaimed and commercially successful, garnering praise and awards, including the Academy Award for Best Actress, for its unique fantasy style and direction as well as Emma Stone's performance as Bella Baxter. Nevertheless, it generated polarizing reactions for its portrayal of female sexuality and nudity.²

The film crafts a postmodern version of the Victorian era, which lends itself to a neo-Victorian reading. In its broadest definition, neo-Victorianism refers to cultural texts produced after the Victorian era that critically engage with this historical period (Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism* 6).³ While it would be tempting to characterize neo-Victorian texts as a subgenre of 19th-century historical fiction, such a definition would be inadequate. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn staunchly defend a view of neo-Victorianism as "more than historical fiction set in the nineteenth century" (4). More specifically, for a cultural text to qualify as neo-Victorian it should not merely be set in the 19th century, but also self-consciously engage with reinterpreting and revising the Victorian age (4). Thus, rather than merely indulging in past fantasies, the neo-Victorian genre is defined as the intersection of the Victorian and the contemporary, informed by a metatextual and metahistorical angle that seeks

² For an extensive discussion on whether *Poor Things* promotes female empowerment or employs a male gaze perspective cf. Ahmed et al.. For further commentary on *Poor Things*' split reception cf. Chapter 4.2 of the present thesis.

³ The two 'inaugurating' literary texts of the neo-Victorian genre are widely accepted to be Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) (Carroll 182; Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism* 5; Heilmann and Llewellyn 8; Kohlke 3). Neo-Victorianism does not have a stable definition and the limits of what is included under this term are rather blurry (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4). Addressing the difficulties of outlining this field of study, Marie-Louise Kohlke suggests opting for a wider definition of neo-Victorianism, expanding the strictly national and temporal features of the term to include contemporary fiction that is set during the entire 19th century and takes place in transnational locations of the era, beyond Britain and its colonies (2). Indeed, an inclusive approach to neo-Victorianism is necessary to explore the creative possibilities and potential of this field of study.

to adapt and re-imagine the Victorian age (4). Therefore, a truly neo-Victorian work involves a rigorous renegotiation of past discourses and representations in relation to our present historical moment.

The question that arises out of this discussion of neo-Victorianism is whether *Poor Things* manages to fuse the historical with the contemporary to represent the Victorian past in a way that could be characterized as neo-Victorian. To answer this question, it would be easy to turn to its source material, namely Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*. With its intertextual links to Victorian texts and metatextual ambiguity, Gray's novel has been discussed in the field of neo-Victorianism (Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism* 6; Kirchknopf 53). Nevertheless, the fact that Lanthimos's film is adapted from a neo-Victorian novel is not adequate proof to brand the film as 'neo-Victorian' in and of itself. Therefore, I propose that what would truly qualify the film as neo-Victorian is how it employs film-specific techniques to create the effect neo-Victorian literature produces: a defying version of the Victorian era that manages to raise contemporary issues through a revisionist and critical engagement with the past and its discourses. Though neo-Victorian works occur across media,⁴ the scholarship in the field has historically focused on the study of literary fiction, often neglecting to address the complex ways that neo-Victorian themes are reworked on diverse media, including film (Heilmann and Llewellyn 31; Kohlke 5). Focusing on this research area, this thesis investigates Lanthimos's film *Poor Things* (2023) with a focus on how neo-Victorian politics and aesthetics are adapted for film. My main research question concerns how *Poor Things* positions itself in relation to neo-Victorian issues regarding the representation of the past, the re-evaluation of Victorian literature and the discourses on identity and sexuality. More specifically, I explore how *Poor Things* promotes a postmodern understanding of history as a discursive product through the film's non-realistic aesthetics on the level of form and how the film intertextually engages with 19th-century literary texts and genres on the level of narrative. Lastly, I pose the question of how *Poor Things* explores subjectivity and gender politics from a neo-Victorian and postfeminist perspective, while touching on Victorian discourses that still haunt us today.

Regarding the theory that is used to examine these research questions, I work primarily within the research field of neo-Victorianism. Neo-Victorian studies focus on works set in the

⁴ Works with neo-Victorian elements and themes can be found in literature, such as John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), in film, such as Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), in theatre, such as Tanika Gupta's *The Empress* (2013), and in graphic novels, such as Alan Moore's *From Hell* (1989-98).

Victorian era that challenge established narratives about the period and foreground subjects that are largely absent or ignored in mainstream Victorian works (Carroll 193). In highlighting marginalized voices, neo-Victorianism suggests that neglected narratives, which contest mainstream representations of the Victorian past, allow us to consider history as a discourse and question the authority of the historical record (193). This ambivalent relationship with the Victorian past stems from neo-Victorianism's debt to the poststructuralist tradition, which is a product of postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon defines postmodernism's engagement with history as paradoxical, revealing both complacent nostalgia and radical revision at once (*Politics* 13). This thesis adopts this definition of postmodernism in its discussion of *Poor Things*, since it acknowledges the ambivalence of engaging with the past, illustrating our inability to completely break free from any nostalgic sentiments we have about our past, even while critiquing aspects of it.⁵ On the contrary, such a postmodern view addresses our biases when engaging with media representations of the past, thus helping us move beyond binaries and embrace a more complex approach to how we represent history. Not shying away from exploring the dark legacies of the Victorian era from poverty, colonialism, homophobia and sexism, neo-Victorianism engages critically with history to work out the collective traumas the Victorian era has inherited to our world (Kohlke 7; 9). In this way, the longing to reanimate the past rests at the heart of the neo-Victorian project.

Like Goodwin Baxter, the scientist who reanimates Bella's body, we also long to bring the past back to life, even if such an engagement reveals uncomfortable facts about the recent past as well as its continuing consequences for the present. Cathy Caruth draws a link between history and the exploration of past trauma, suggesting that the longing to revisit history stems from collective trauma collective, since "history is precisely the way in which we are implicated in each other's traumas" (Caruth 24). This aspect means that engaging with the Victorian era is far from a carefree immersion in a distant period. Rather, it is a way to address trauma, which stems from guilt about our role in history. In *Poor Things*, past trauma about the lack of female empowerment is reworked through delineating an alternative history of the Victorian era, one where Victoria Blessington, aptly named as representative of the era she lives in, is reborn as Bella Baxter. Neo-Victorian scholars have likened revisiting the past in fiction to a metaphorical haunting, where history persists in the form of trauma (Kohlke 9; Heilmann and Llewellyn 25). This is why spectrality remains a key feature of neo-Victorianism, as it hints

⁵ For an extensive discussion of Hutcheon's work as well as her key concept, 'historiographic metafiction', in relation to *Poor Things*, cf. Chapter 1.1 of the present thesis.

towards the repressed histories and lost voices that are not included in subsequent historical discourses about the period (Kohlke 9; Heilmann and Llewellyn 25). Bella constitutes one of these repressed voices, a fictional ‘history’ of an era we will never truly ‘know’, signaling our collective guilt at the failures of how we ethically engage with the past. Thus, the fascination to return to the Victorian era stems from this wish to bring the past back to life, “acknowledging how desire makes the specters dance to our tune, delimiting what we choose to hear when we make the ghosts speak – or speak for them” (Kohlke 14). Through this lens, Bella’s gothic reanimation resembles a haunting, rendering Bella a spectral presence, who, though ostensibly living in the Victorian era, speaks to contemporary audiences about today’s struggles (and failures) regarding female sexuality and empowerment.

In this context, *Poor Things*’ poster acquires a new meaning, since it oscillates between the past and the contemporary, reviewing the Victorian era from a postmodern viewpoint. Indeed, Bella’s reconstructed body, with the newborn Bella emerging out of Victoria’s body, can be interpreted as a metaphor for how neo-Victorian media simultaneously draw on and break with the Victorian tradition in innovative ways. Bella’s emergence constitutes act of breaking with former societal constraints that governed her previous body and life, thus negating the seriousness of the Victorian portrait. In this way, the poster becomes an apt metaphor for neo-Victorianism’s mission statement: the familiar Victorian pose gives way to an imagined emancipation that speaks to the present historical moment. Though Bella’s body is flawed, it is precisely this incompleteness that allows her to defy the Victorian norms and re-emerge as her own emancipated person. Bella is perhaps an attempt at ‘fixing’ the wrongs of history and the past; a flawed and mismatched body that was left to rot among the fish is reanimated to write an alternative history of what could have been. Thus, the Victorian past is resurrected in *Poor Things* similarly to Bella: seemingly in the same body but with a new voice that runs so contrary to the beliefs of the past self as much as Victoria’s body mismatches the size of Bella’s head.

As the analysis of the poster demonstrates, the influence of postmodernism on the development of neo-Victorian fiction as well as scholarship is not solely limited to the engagement with the past and the treatment of history as a discursive product but also extends to the techniques employed by neo-Victorian works. Therefore, this thesis makes extensive reference to Linda Hutcheon’s work on the ideological and aesthetic extensions of postmodernism on contemporary fiction, including neo-Victorian works. According to Hutcheon, self-awareness and self-contradiction lie at the heart of the postmodern project, an

act of “saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said” (*Politics* 1). In other words, Hutcheon locates contradiction as the defining characteristic of postmodern discourse and art, a paradoxical movement that entails both ironic appreciation and affectionate subversion. The paradoxical nature of postmodern techniques is taken into consideration in this thesis, to explore how *Poor Things* signals its departure from realistic representations of the Victorian era and creatively weaves 19th-century literary texts into its fabric, with prominence given to the concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality, a term coined by Julia Kristeva, constitutes a feature of any text, which is viewed as a transformative “mosaic of quotations” (66) that creatively absorbs previous texts.⁶ This thesis adopts Kristeva’s definition when navigating how *Poor Things* integrates into its cinematic fabric texts that were produced in the 19th century, bringing them together to playfully subvert the Victorian world they represent. Moreover, I draw on Roland Barthes’ theories on textuality, in order to explore the wider relation between *Poor Things* and the Victorian literary tradition.

Beyond the levels of narrative and aesthetics, this thesis turns to postmodern literature and poststructuralist theory on the subject and gender, in order to explore the richly layered representation of Bella in the film. Here, Michel Foucault’s views on the formation of the sexuality are central to my analysis of *Poor Things*. In particular, I refer to his landmark study *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1976) and specifically ‘the repression hypothesis’, namely the idea that sexuality is often represented as suppressed before the 20th century, in order to create the illusion that speaking about it represents progress, when it only serves to mask our own conservatism (*The History of Sexuality* 5-6). Drawing on Foucault’s thesis, I argue that *Poor Things* explicitly represents Bella’s exploration of sexuality to craft an alternative image of the Victorian era as a period of sexual discovery, highlighting Bella’s sexual awakening and her later employment as a sex worker. Centering on how Bella’s body is used to examine female subjectivity and sexuality, I follow Judith Butler’s poststructuralist approach that prioritizes treating the body as a sign that is culturally inscribed to produce categories of sexual difference (Butler 5). This cultural construction of the gendered body is pivotal to surveying how Bella’s identity is constructed through the film’s emphasis on her (re-animated) body, which becomes a site where control and emancipation clash.

⁶ Kristeva’s definition of intertextuality loosely developed out of the concept of dialogism, a term coined by Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (Martínez-Alfaro 275). For Kristeva, dialogism encapsulated the idea that texts engage in a powerful transformative dialogue with previous texts and discourses (275). Nevertheless, her reading of Bakhtin was influenced by French poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory, most notably Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan respectively (275-6).

Bringing together these theoretical frameworks, I propose that Yorgos Lanthimos's *Poor Things* (2023) reimagines the Victorian past through fantasy aesthetics and intertextuality, crafting a representation of the era that allows for the subversion of Victorian discourses regarding the female subject and sexuality. Equally blending past and postmodern aesthetic forms and narrative techniques, the film negates preconceptions about the Victorian past. Thus, the film reveals the discursive formation of history by eschewing realist aesthetics and by intertextually engaging with 19th-century literary texts. This destabilization on the levels of aesthetics and narrative allows *Poor Things* to contest Victorian discourses on a thematic and discursive level as well. Reviewing the era from a postmodern viewpoint, *Poor Things* undermines Victorian discourses on the female subject, identity and sexuality to illustrate a story about feminist empowerment, while the film's split reception demonstrates how Victorian ideas still inform the contemporary cultural landscape, revealing a conservatism in our approach towards body politics.

Offering an overview of my argument, I first posit that *Poor Things* undermines realistic representations of the Victorian era by integrating fantasy aesthetics into its narrative. In this way, *Poor Things*' non-realistic recasting of the Victorian past challenges established narratives about the period, allowing for neo-Victorian 'alternative histories' to emerge. This echoes postmodern perspectives, which view the Victorian past as a discursive product (Kohlke 13; Shiller 558). Drawing significantly on Hutcheon's work, I suggest that *Poor Things* adopts a postmodern understanding of history as incomplete, which is reflected in the fragmentary reconstruction of Victoria and Bella's lives. On a formal level, this is illustrated by the film's integration of surrealist and fantastic elements in its visual language. Utilizing Kathryn Hume's conceptualization of fantasy as a representational model contrasted to mimesis (25) and William Brown's study on how surrealist aesthetics blur fantasy and reality in contemporary digital (blockbuster) cinema (18), I discuss how *Poor Things*' non-realistic settings and special effects are instrumental in crafting a heightened sense of artificiality that disrupts verisimilitude. Thus, the film language of *Poor Things* mirrors its neo-Victorian view of history as discursively constructed.

The suffix 'neo' presupposes the existence of a Victorian corpus which is re-visited and re-negotiated; using Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva's work on intertextuality, I demonstrate how *Poor Things* intertextually returns to specific fictional texts from the 19th century. Along the lines of Barthes's view that any cultural text is created out of previous writings that are brought into a creative dialogue with each other ("The Death of the Author" 148), the film's

cinematic fabric is treated as a rich postmodern palimpsest. In this way, I explore the film's intertextual threads that go back to 19th-century fiction, drawing on both romantic and gothic literature, particularly Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Rappaccini's Daughter* (1844) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1852), while considering the Victorian *Bildungsroman* tradition. I illustrate how *Poor Things* reorganizes and playfully questions tropes and elements from this wide variety of 19th-century cultural texts, stressing the importance of intertextuality in postmodern works. Moreover, I propose that *Poor Things* could be considered a filmic *Bildungsroman*, not only in terms of mirroring the themes of the genre, but also in terms of how the film adapts the formal features of the novel to the medium of film through intermediality.

This self-reflexive engagement with the Victorian era on an aesthetic and narrative level is employed to frame a similarly subversive take on the period that critically reflects on Victorian gender politics and questions of subjectivity. Much like its radically postmodern approach to mixing past and present in its aesthetics and narrative, the film blurs the lines between the Victorian and the contemporary on a thematic level, since the film challenges established norms and questions Victorian gender politics. Neo-Victorianism foregrounds silenced perspectives that deconstruct Victorian discourses on identity and gender, which have influenced our present-day understanding of both issues (Carroll 195). Being the result of a bizarre scientific experiment, Bella is a marginalized subject given a second chance at life, which she uses to contest and parody Victorian femininity. Using Butler's view of the material body as discursively gendered through imposed social boundaries that control and limit it (27), I explore how the film represents the female body as a site upon which discourses are inscribed, allowing the film to explore themes of female emancipation in contrast to male control. More specifically, I argue that Bella upsets the male characters' efforts to contain her and counters the cruelty she has experienced by turning to kindness, another thematic pair that is prominent in the film.

Lastly, I focus on the film's representation of female sexuality through Bella's exploration of sex and her experience as a sex worker, arguing that *Poor Things* celebrates female sexual desire as a means of liberation from Victorian conservatism. Taking into consideration the divisive audience reception of the film's representation of nudity and sex work, I examine the film's body politics as subversive. With reference to Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, I contend that contemporary objections to Bella's sex work and exploration of sexual desire point that postmodern subjects remain what Foucault calls "the

other Victorians” (1), chained to outdated preconceptions regarding female sexuality. Thus, the film’s Neo-Victorian exploration of Victorian ethics reveals a latent conservatism in contemporary discourses on gender and body politics, issues that still dominate our current political and cultural landscape.

1. The Representation of the Victorian Past

1.1 Alternative History: Re-Animating the Victorian Era in *Poor Things*

This chapter explores how *Poor Things* problematizes historical representation by crafting an alternative history of the Victorian past. To be exact, the film destabilizes our assumptions about the era and questions the authority of the historical record, which is reflected in its aesthetic rejection of realism and inclusion of fantasy elements. In this chapter, I suggest that *Poor Things* represents our access to the past as fragmented and incomplete. This is achieved in three ways, which I will explore in the two subchapters: by reimagining the past through a mixture of history and fiction in Bella Baxter's unorthodox narrative of rebirth, by demonstrating the discursive formation of history through the fragmented reconstruction of Victoria Blessington's story, and by highlighting the contemporary viewpoint in retelling the past. I propose that this postmodern view of history is reflected in the film's aesthetic choices, since the film disrupts verisimilitude through its use of special effects, creating a feeling of heightened artificiality. By turning to fantasy, *Poor Things* creates a simulacrum of the Victorian era, suggesting that it is impossible to discover an absolute 'truth' about the past, something that realism tries to obscure through its supposed transparency.

Deviating from established narratives about the Victorian era, *Poor Things* reimagines the past by blending the historical and the fictional through irony, thus falling under what Linda Hutcheon refers to as 'historiographic metafiction'. Hutcheon coined the term 'historiographic metafiction' to describe the mixture of history and parody in postmodern fiction (*Politics* 14-5). This concept foregrounds the co-existence between postmodern irony and self-referentiality, on the one hand, and the representation of historical and socio-political conditions and forces, on the other (14-5). Irony, a key ingredient of postmodernism, is employed in *Poor Things* through the discrepancy between Bella's lack of awareness of the social codes of conduct and the audience's expectations of 'proper' Victorian femininity. This ironic approach to the Victorian era stems from the film's premise that Bella is the result of an experiment conducted by Godwin Baxter, a medical doctor who reanimates the corpse of Victoria Blessington by transplanting the brain of her fetus. This constitutes another fantasy element of the film, since this plot point implies the successful transplantation of a human brain, something that neurology has yet to achieve. As a fantasy element, this transplantation

creates a gap between Bella's mental and physical age, thus producing a comedic effect that manages to ridicule and poke fun at Victorian conventions.

By blending fiction with history, *Poor Things* charts an alternative history of the Victorian past, giving a second chance to a woman to shape her life through on the fantastical basis that her body can be reanimated. This alternative history stems from an equally ironic alternative version 'learning from one's mother's mistakes', since Bella inhabits the body of her not-quite-mother, Victoria, yet manages to learn from her 'mother's' mistake through her extraordinary reanimation. Thus, fantasy is a guiding principle in *Poor Things*, as it structures the film's plot, which is further reflected in its aesthetic, as will be shown in the second part of this chapter. The reason why the Victorian era offers itself as a potent locus for the mixture of fantasy and history lies in the Victorian 'tradition's' subversive potential, which allows for a transformative reinterpretation of the past (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4). This is coupled with the fact that neo-Victorianism draws on a postmodern understanding of history as discursively formed (Shiller 558). More specifically, it destabilizes the official historical narratives by imagining alternative histories and archives about the past (Kohlke 10). This blending of history and fantasy finds expression in *Poor Things* through Victoria and Bella's divergent stories, with the latter constituting an alternative reimagining of the Victoria past. Alfred Blessington, Victoria's husband who finds and lures Bella into his estate to entrap her, describes Victoria as relishing in cruelty and committing suicide after discovering her pregnancy (*Poor Things* 2:03:15; 2:04:04)⁷. It is implied that Bella's pain used to be confined within the walls of the Blessington estate under Alfred's watchful gaze, since he threatens to shoot Bella "if [she] tr[ies] to leave" (*PT* 2:05:53), with Bella describing herself "a prisoner" (*PT* 2:06:16). Thus, Victoria's story corresponds to pre-established narratives about the Victorian past. Victorian heroines like Bertha in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1947) have experienced confinement and seclusion within the domestic space and visions of unhinged and mad women are all too common in Victorian literature (Gilbert and Gubar 17).⁸ However, the reanimation of Victoria's body with Bella's allows for *Poor Things* to explore what would happen if a Victorian woman skipped the necessary socialization.

⁷ Hence referred to as *PT* in in-text citations.

⁸ On female confinement and madness in Victorian literature, cf. Gilbert and Gubar, who argue that Victorian texts often introduce the binary of the 'Angel in the House', the docile Victorian woman, and the 'mad woman', the former's alter ego who is punished for deviating from Victorian femininity and is symbolically threatening to the patriarchal Victorian world (17). For a detailed discussion of Gilbert and Gubar's arguments regarding female madness in relation to domestic confinement in Victorian literature and how these topoi are subverted in *Poor Things*, cf. Chapter 2.1 of the present thesis.

This integration of the fantastical into the fabric of history is achieved by the film's differentiation between Victoria and Bella as distinct personalities, despite them inhabiting the same body. By blurring the lines between history and the fiction, neo-Victorian narratives allow for a negotiation of the limits between the Victorian and the contemporary (Heilmann and Llewellyn 19). This negotiation takes place in the film through the marked separation of Bella and Victoria's personalities. As Bella tells Godwin upon returning from the Blessington estate, Victoria's story "was just the story of someone else, not Bella Baxter" (*PT* 2:13:05), thus highlighting her distinct personhood from Victoria as well as demonstrating the possibility of rewriting history through a journey of empowerment. In contrast to Victoria, who was confined to the Blessington estate, Bella leaves London and travels to Lisbon, Alexandria and Paris, where she gains financial independence, while professing her desire to grow intellectually through philosophy (*PT* 01:10:38). Bella has a thirst for learning, gradually rejecting the advances of her jealous lover Duncan Wedderburn over having animated discussions with her co-passengers on the ship that lead to "ideas [...] banging around in Bella's heart and mind like lights in [a] storm" (*PT* 1:11:10). Bella is an unorthodox protagonist, which sheds a different light to the Victorian era through an 'anti-canonical' perspective. Such perspectives are employed in neo-Victorianism to center peripheral experiences in an attempt to deconstruct the Victorian tradition (Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism* 124). This is achieved by highlighting the perspective of sexually, ethnically and 'racially' othered subjects, which were pushed to the sidelines in the Victorian novel (Carroll 193). In *Poor Things*, apart from experiencing an intellectual rebirth, Bella also explores her sexual desires, eventually becoming a sex worker both as a means to gain money "and as an experiment" (*PT* 1:29:08), a choice she openly proclaims to Duncan and later Alfred, much to their dismay, as it radically breaks with the norms of upper-class Victorian femininity. Bella's nonchalant description of breaking a Victorian social taboo by engaging in sex work not only has a comedic effect, contributing to an ironic view of the past, but also highlights Bella subject position as other and peripheral.

A marginalized subject, Bella's bizarre experiences filter the past through her perspective, transforming our awareness of Victorian history in the process. Present legacies of the Victorian era take the form of gender discriminated, disabled and mentally ill, financially exploited and marginalized subjects such as sex workers (Kohlke and Gutleben, "Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century" 14).⁹ Bella falls into many of these categories, carrying the trauma of the past, which is inscribed on her body. Upon returning to

⁹ Henceforth abbreviated as "Introduction" in the following references.

London, Bella further deviates from Victoria's role as a wife by announcing to Godwin that she wants to become a doctor and use his surgery office (*PT* 1:56:03), as she is "never happier than when [she is] here" (*PT* 2:12:22). Bella's interest in philosophy, her open exploration of sexual desire, her job as a sex worker and her aspiration to become a doctor chart a life path that would be close to impossible for a Victorian woman. Such a self-conscious revision of historical narratives transforms any conventional understanding of the past by bringing to the forefront suppressed histories of gender, ethnicity and 'race' (Kaplan 3). Indeed, Bella's marginal subject position, both as a woman and a sex worker on the level of history and as a bizarre scientific experiment on the level of fiction, allows a unique viewpoint that revises established notions about the Victorian era.

This leads to another important aspect of historiographic metafiction, namely its suspicion towards authoritative accounts of the past. Postmodern fiction questions the limits of historiographic representation, distrusting any objective or 'total' history (Hutcheon, *Politics* 45).¹⁰ Resisting Hutcheon's approach,¹¹ Kate Mitchell defines neo-Victorian fiction in terms of cultural memory rather than history, arguing that memory reflects the fragmentary way of remembering the past, whereas historical discourses conceptualize the past as fixed (37). Thus, while historiographic metafiction is expected to problematize the limits of historical representation, a 'memory text' brings to the forefront how affect informs reconstructions of the past (29). For Mitchell, the relationship between neo-Victorianism and knowledge about the past is set in the affirmative, focusing on what we can discover about the past, while Hutcheon's definition lays emphasis on the difficulty of accessing the past. Despite this key difference in viewpoint, I would argue that both scholars agree on one point: whether the purpose is to highlight or negate the possibility of acquiring knowledge about the past, this

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson is the best-known Marxist critic of postmodernism, defending the concept of a 'total history' and attacking postmodernism as a symptom indicative of our waning sense of historicity (21). For Jameson, history in postmodernity becomes a simulacrum of the past (21). For more on Jameson and his criticism of postmodernism, cf. footnote 6 of the present chapter. Responding to Jameson's view that there has been a loss of history in the transition from modernity to postmodernity, Cora Kaplan argues that history has not been lost but has rather been transformed to include suppressed histories that challenge conventional narratives about the past (3).

¹¹ Though Hutcheon's view of historiographic metafiction as a way to show the limitations of acquiring knowledge about the past has been influential in neo-Victorian studies (Carroll 182), Mitchell suggests a different approach to constructing historical knowledge. In her book *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, Mitchell departs from Hutcheon and proposes instead that neo-Victorian fiction is occupied with how we can achieve historical knowledge about the past, no matter how provisional or incomplete this knowledge is (3).

knowledge is partial and incomplete, a point that is adopted in the present thesis in relation to the discursive aspects of historical narratives.

The discursive formation of history is thematized in *Poor Things* through the reconstruction of Victoria Blessington's story. Since neo-Victorianism adopts a postmodern approach towards history, it demonstrates the limitations of uncovering an ultimate 'truth' about the Victorian era (Heilmann and Llewellyn 21). In confronting the past, it becomes evident that historical knowledge is incomplete, since it relies on fragmentary material traces. Therefore, postmodernism approaches past narratives as a history of representation, loaded with biases and gaps (Hutcheon, *Politics* 55). Building on this, I posit that *Poor Things* presents Victoria's story by emphasizing the gaps and impossibility of knowing the past. The film opens with Victoria standing on a bridge, a moment before she commits suicide by leaping off it (*PT* 0:01:18). During the scene, Victoria's face remains hidden from the spectator, as she quickly vanishes into the river, her blue dress blending with the blue water (see Fig. 2). Much like the visual color palette of blues melting into each other, the spectator has a blurry view of Victoria's life and emotions. In fact, this is the only instance in the film where Victoria's actions are unmediated except by the camera. All other scenes with or about Victoria include characters narrating events about her life and constructing her story. Thus, this glimpse of Victoria provides little information about her emotional state: we only see a woman jumping off a bridge. This reflects how history is treated as incomplete and fragmented in *Poor Things*.



Fig. 2 (*PT* 0:01:46)

When Bella goes to the Blessington estate, she tries to learn about Victoria's life through the latter's material belongings and through other people's testimonies, reflecting how the past is constructed through discourse. Hutcheon posits that "we only have access to the past today through its trace – its documents, the testimony of witnesses, and other archival materials" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 55). In other words, any retelling of the past is incomplete, since

it relies on material remnants and testimonies, allowing us to paint a fragmented picture of history. The obscurity of the past is reflected in Bella's efforts to reconstruct Victoria's story. Victoria's room is dark with the only source of light being the window (see Fig. 3); her furniture is covered, a reflection of how Victoria's life remains a secret to Bella. Nevertheless, Bella is motivated to uncover the traces Victoria has left behind. This resembles the 20th-century desire to access the Victorian past through its material remains, even if this process of knowledge is incomplete and distorted (Kaplan 1-2). In a similar vein, Victoria's room constitutes a remnant of Bella's past and becomes a metaphor for our own relationship to history. From a postmodern perspective, history and the past can only be accessed discursively through limited documents and archival materials, which create narratives out of textual fragments (Hutcheon, *Politics* 34). Hence, it becomes impossible to access Victoria's thoughts proper; what remains is only her furniture, covered in dust and obscured by the lack of light, and her out-of-context scribbles of the word "fuck" over a surface (see Fig. 4) which expresses her despair. Therefore, we can only partially acquire knowledge of Victoria's story and emotions, based on the desperate tone of her scribbles.



Fig. 3 (PT 2:02:34)



Fig. 4 (PT 2:02:44)

This inability to represent faithfully the past is further reflected in the testimonies about Victoria that derive from unreliable sources such as Alfred. What renders Alfred unreliable is his paradoxical description of threatening his servants as "good times" (PT 2:03:37), a remark that leads Bella to infer that Victoria had "a love of cruelty [and that she] was not a kind person" (PT 2:04:13). Alfred scoffs at the notion that Victoria could be kind, as she "would never be so dull" (PT 2:04:19), a qualitative assessment that deviates from Bella's understanding of cruelty as inhumane. Bella asks Alfred questions about Victoria, with Alfred answering her that they met "at a ball" and that they "shared a love of good times" (PT 2:03:30). It is here that Mitchell's view of neo-Victorian fiction as 'memory text' becomes relevant. In contrast to

history's remaking of the past through fixed points in time, memory reveals how the present is involved in accessing the past, since memory is retrospective and fragmentary (Mitchell 35). Bella tries to piece together the story of Victoria through the testimony of Alfred, which is based on his subjective and emotionally charged recollections of Victoria. Thus, the spectator never learns the 'real' history of Victoria, which demonstrates the incomplete process of revisiting the past.

Alfred's description of Victoria's life also highlights which perspectives are ignored in history and how official accounts of the past are dominated by heteropatriarchal viewpoints. Under the influence of postmodernism, neo-Victorianism encourages the spectator to interrogate which histories are privileged and which voices are left out, thus problematizing the process of cultural memory (Kohlke 13). Alfred claims that Bella "will be as happy as [she] were before" (*PT* 2:06:23), in response to her statement that she will be effectively confined in his estate. The irony of Alfred's claim is not lost on Bella, who – ironically – wonders if she will be "as happy as [she] was before when [she] threw [her]self from a bridge" (*PT* 2:06:27). This exchange demonstrates that historical narratives about the past do not reflect the lived experience of female subjects but rather support dominant patriarchal views on gender. Expressing the latter viewpoint, Alfred describes the possibility of Bella finding happiness by replicating her past life, devoid of adventure. However, having embarked on an adventurous journey with Bella, the audience realizes the deep dissatisfaction Bella would have with this life. In this way, *Poor Things* is in line with neo-Victorianism's view that neglected perspectives contest the mainstream narratives of the Victorian past, thus allowing us to question the authority of the historical record (Carroll 193). More specifically, the dominance of Bella's perspective throughout the film renders Alfred's statements untrustworthy, revealing the biases of the historical record.

This point demonstrates the convergence of past and present in postmodern accounts of history, since the story of Victoria, no matter how incomplete, reveals the contemporary failure in representing peripheral subjects of the past. Neo-Victorianism reformulates history so that the past is told in relation to its present significance (Carroll 181; Kohlke 11). Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben suggest that neo-Victorian fiction uses past historical events as a displacement for 20th- and 21st-century collective traumas, indirectly addressing contemporary issues through the past ("Introduction" 1-2). Therefore, Victoria's experience becomes more relevant, once it is linked to the present historical moment. In light of its present relevance, Victoria's story constitutes a stark reminder of contemporary domestic violence

against women and reproductive rights, which loom large well in the 21st century. In neo-Victorian fiction, the individual victim becomes a metonymy for wider national, cultural and historical traumas (Kohlke and Gutleben, “Introduction” 30). Hence, neo-Victorianism prioritizes micro-narratives over macro-narratives in line with postmodernism’s suspicion of totalizing narratives and absolute truths (30). In this way, Victoria’s personal trauma becomes a metonymy for female oppression not only in the Victorian era but also in the present, even if the film counterpoints Victoria’s death with Bella’s rebirth.

Indeed, reflecting neo-Victorianism’s oscillation between the Victorian and the contemporary, Bella occupies a liminal existential space, caught between her own personality and Victoria’s body, which is inscribed by past histories of trauma.¹² According to Hutcheon, postmodernism’s engagement with the past is twofold, revealing simultaneous complicity and subversion, conservatism and radicalism at every turn (*Politics* 13). Hutcheon’s argument illustrates the liminality of the postmodern condition, situating our historical awareness in a state of in-betweenness. The paradox that lies at the heart of postmodernism is reflected in Bella’s own existence, since Godwin explains to Bella that she is “technically [...] [her] baby and also [...] [her] mother and also neither” (*PT* 1:52:29-36). Bella’s body links her to the past of Victoria Blessington, but her brain, a *tabula rasa*, points to the future. Hence, Bella is simultaneously chained to and free of the past, since she has no memory of Victoria but is also claimed by Alfred because of her bodily connection to her.

Like Bella, the world of *Poor Things* is both and neither – it is a past that carries traces that semiotically identify it with the Victorian era and elements that deviate from it. Christian Gutleben proposes that neo-Victorian works imitate yet subvert Victorian discourses, venerate yet mock the Victorian world (*Nostalgic Postmodernism* 185). This fascination with the Victorian era stems from a sense that the present moment is found lacking, producing a paradoxical nostalgia for a past which is simultaneously desired and disavowed (192; 194-5). This is evidenced in *Poor Things*’ creation of a distant Victorian world that never existed, which is admired, while being parodied as twisted and conservative. Bella views the Victorian era as astonishing during her travelling explorations, a feeling that is reflected in the colorful

¹² The discourse of trauma in relation to neo-Victorianism’s approach to history highlights the lingering aftermath of past violence that occurred in the 19th century and yet whose consequences are still felt in our current historical moment, inviting us to work through this collective and individual trauma (Kohlke and Gutleben, “Introduction” 3). It is no coincidence that discourses of trauma have become more prominent in postmodernity, since the latter is characterized by a distrust towards grand narratives and fragility of knowledge, a loss that takes the form of trauma (4; 30). Cf. *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering*.

buildings and futuristic flying trams she sees in Lisbon (see Fig. 5). However, this magic is undercut when Bella confronts the conservatism of the Blessington estate. In contrast to the blooming garden in Godwin's house at the end of the film, the Blessington estate is associated with decay and death, with barren trees and a neglected garden with no flowers (see Fig. 6). This is further enhanced by the stormy clouds and smoke that surround the Blessington estate, as well as the bluish tint given to the location that crafts a gloomy mood. This atmosphere of death reflects the stagnation and suffocation experienced by Victoria which led to her decision commit suicide.

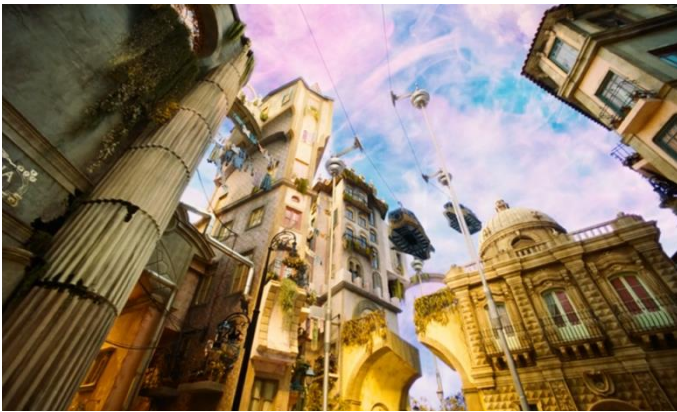


Fig. 5 (PT 0:44:59)



Fig. 6 (PT 2:01:29)

This juxtaposition between Bella's adventures and Victoria's entrapment reflects how the film oscillates between contemporary nostalgia and critical disavowal. To grasp this, I turn to Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism as a 'complicitous critique' with a self-reflexive potential to destabilize ideological structures, moving between historicity and parody (*Politics* 13).¹³ Andrea Kirchknopf also notes the tension of postmodern works to walk the line between

¹³ There is an extensive academic debate regarding whether the discursive and aesthetic forms of postmodernism reveal a latent neo-conservatism or a subversive potential to critique the status quo and question hierarchies of power. Jameson deems postmodernism's engagement with the past superficial and indulgent, devoid of any critical reflection or subversive potential (17-9). Hutcheon contests Jameson's view that postmodern culture constitutes the aesthetic expression of late capitalism, suggesting that this perspective ignores postmodernism's potential to critique these structures, even if it operates within them (*Politics* 25). Firm in her belief that contradiction remains at the core of postmodern politics, Hutcheon argues that postmodernism is situated between a nostalgic desire to recreate the past and a need to contest the present (12). This doubleness, which allows postmodern works to contest traditional representations, is ignored by critics of postmodernism (15-17). Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism as partially complicitous and nostalgic accepts the basic premise of Jameson's criticism, but also builds on it by suggesting that this nostalgia works side-by-side with criticism about past failures. This thesis adopts Hutcheon's viewpoint, as it encompasses the valid concerns raised by Jameson regarding postmodernism's indulgence in superficial and rose-tinted representations of the past, while positing that alongside this nostalgia, genuine criticism about past and present structures of power can be found. Similar concerns have been raised about neo-Victorianism, specifically around the question of whether neo-Victorianism has meaningful political extensions in public discourse. For an in-depth exploration of this academic debate, cf. Chapter 4.

nostalgia and critical perspectives, particularly in feminist and postcolonial revisions of the 19th century (68). Building on this, Gutleben posits that Hutcheon's definition crafts a 'nostalgic postmodernism' which signals the simultaneous desire to return to the Victorian past and the postmodern disavowal of its discursive and aesthetic forms (*Nostalgic Postmodernism* 200). This contradictory nostalgia is exhibited in *Poor Things*; Bella falls in love with the world around her, despite it also containing cruelty and ugliness. Through its candy-colored landscapes and Bella's thirst for life, the film invites the audience to fall in love with a re-imagined Victorian era, while simultaneously bringing to the fore the conservatism of the Victorian era.

Moving between this nostalgic historicity and parody, *Poor Things* employs irony to enhance how the Victorian past is narrated from a contemporary perspective, thus highlighting historical injustices that concern us in the present. Postmodern fiction blurs the lines between the fictional and the real, having self-reflexivity as its guiding principles (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 7). For example, the contemporary perspective, from which the past is narrated, is reflected in Bella's comments on philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. Bella says that though Emerson speaks about "the improvement of men [...] he does not give advice to woman, perhaps [because] he does not know any" (*PT* 1:10:12-19). Though the exact phrase 'the improvement of men' does not appear in Emerson's writings, it can be a paraphrase of Emerson's line "if men can be educated, the institutions will share their improvement" (Emerson n. pag.) in his famous essay "Politics". In this line, 'men' is used as metonymy for 'human', something that occurs throughout the essay. In this context Bella's humorous comment highlights the underrepresentation of women in 19th-century philosophical texts, where 'man' is used as a metonymy for 'human'. Bella's emphasis sheds light on the erasure of women from the historical record. At the same time, her concern about the invisibility of women constitutes an issue that has gained much more prominence in the present rather than the Victorian era. This is in line with how historiographic metafiction playfully engages with history to show how narratives about the past are shaped by our present ideological socio-political aims and biases (Hutcheon, *Politics* 56). Indeed, in this scene, the film uses the Victorian era to address contemporary issues regarding female representation, reminding us that this film is a product of its own 21st-century moment.

Indeed, in imagining an alternative version of the past that defies the conservatism of the Victorian era, the film allows Bella to emerge as an emancipated woman at the end of the film. The advantage neo-Victorian texts have over historical discourses is that in their blend of

the fictional and the historical they can lend a voice to ‘the forgotten of history’, creating politicized representations of past suffering (Kohlke and Gutleben, “Introduction” 19). Since history must confront questions of objectivity and accuracy, this symbolic inscription of the voiceless in the discourse can be achieved in a space like historiographic metafiction. In the case of *Poor Things*, through Bella Baxter’s purely fictional story, a very real history of Victorian suffering, violence and suppression surfaces. In this way, subjects that are erased from history are given “a future by restoring their traumatic pasts to cultural memory” (Kohlke and Gutleben, “Introduction” 31). This outlook towards the future is reflected in the film’s ending, Bella resides in Godwin’s house and studies for her anatomy exams, finally triumphing over the husband that brought her misery in her ‘previous’ life as Victoria. The positive future that lies ahead of Bella in her aspiration to become a doctor is visualized in the vibrant color palette of Godwin’s garden (see Fig. 7). The sunny weather and the fertile green earth signals Bella’s rebirth, in contrast to the decay of the Blessington manor (see Fig. 6, *PT* 2:01:29). When juxtaposing these two spaces, we can notice that the color scheme is more saturated in his garden, which is associated with life in contrast to the muted representation of the Blessington estate, which symbolizes Victoria’s entrapment.



Fig. 7 (*PT* 2:14:35)

The film’s ending suggests that Bella has created the life she wanted for herself, a stark contrast with Victoria, who could only find a way out of Alfred’s authority in death. Neo-Victorian texts evade nostalgic entrapment by projecting the future in the past, thus “not repeat[ing] the already said, but rather giv[ing] birth to what has never been able to be born” (Kohlke and Gutleben, “Introduction” 22; 31). The idea of uttering ‘what has never been able to be born’ constitutes an apt metaphor for Bella as a subject who should have never existed based on scientific discourse yet managed to be born in a fictional text. The film’s ending constitutes a new beginning for Bella, who has a future as a medical doctor, an aspiration that is more viable for a 21st-century woman than a Victorian one, once again suggesting the

influence of the present in our interpretation of the past. Indeed, though medicine was a male-dominated field, from the 1850s public debates were held about the practice of medicine by women, which were met both with support and misogynistic dismissal (Brock xv). Therefore, though it would not have been impossible for Bella to become a doctor, she would be entering a professional field where men vastly outnumbered women, whereas in the film she is seen studying with no external limitations to enter a medical school. This suggests the possibility of rewriting the past to symbolically address past gender biases.

Nevertheless, *Poor Things*' alternative history of a woman reinventing herself highlights the impossibility of such an option for the real Victorian ancestors of Bella. In a postmodern vein, neo-Victorian fiction looks backward critically and playfully, proving that history is always narrated from a contemporary perspective (Heilmann and Llewellyn 13-4). Indeed, *Poor Things*' ending produces an absurd effect, since Bella surgically removes Alfred's brain and replaces it with that of a goat before she goes on to enjoy drinks with her friends. However, this parodic re-writing of the past is undercut by a sense of criticism about the possibilities of women in the Victorian era. As Hutcheon reminds us, "historical representations, however parodic, get politicized" (*Politics* 12). The ridiculous notion that Bella and Alfred have their brains transplanted and somehow live peacefully reflects how unlikely it would have been for a 19th-century woman to be able to become fully emancipated and study medicine. The unrealistic premise of the ending is further accentuated by the use of a fish-eye lens in the scene (see Fig. 7, *PT* 2:14:35), which distorts the edges of the camera, thus rendering the image artificial. Oscillating between the immersion in the Victorian world and the criticism of the Victorian tradition, neo-Victorian works exhibit a tender yet critical nostalgia towards the past (Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism* 200). In a similar vein, the film's ending is bittersweet, producing a feeling of vindication for past wrongs, while foregrounding the limited possibilities offered to women. This happy ending starkly contrasts with the film's beginning, which ironically enough coincides with Victoria's death, as she commits suicide. Victoria's demise constitutes a more likely scenario for a Victorian woman than Bella's journey of self-fulfilment and emancipation.

In conclusion, the representation of the past in *Poor Things* is related to broader discussions within postmodernism about the objectivity of historical narratives. *Poor Things* offers a revision of history by blending the historical with the fictional and by replicating the discursive reconstruction of the Victorian past in Victoria's narrative. According to Hutcheon, postmodernism is preoccupied with the past and our relationship to it (*Poetics*, 4). This return

to the past is not a nostalgic escape, but rather a harsh confrontation with the political and cultural legacies of the Victorians upon the present (Kohlke and Gutleben, “Introduction” 13). Hence, *Poor Things*’ recasting of the Victorian past is filtered through a contemporary perspective, balancing between immersion and criticism, to demonstrate the pitfalls of representation, as I investigate in the following subchapter in terms of the aesthetic techniques employed to bring the Victorian era to life.

1.2 Fantasies of Realism: The Aesthetics of *Poor Things*

In the previous subchapter, I demonstrated that *Poor Things* treats the past as a representation created from a viewpoint anchored in our present. The idea that the past exists only as representation brings us to the question of how *Poor Things* presents its narrative on a formal level. In this subchapter, I will suggest that *Poor Things* mirrors its postmodern view of history in its aesthetic, and that it does so by disrupting realism, through implementing fantasy elements that suspend the illusion of verisimilitude. First, I explain the difference between realism and fantasy as representational modes and illustrate how these are brought together in *Poor Things*. In a postmodern manner, the film disrupts filmic verisimilitude, mirroring how neo-Victorian novels – such as John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) – subvert literary realist conventions, by utilizing self-reflexive cinematography and a radical approach to costume design that moves away from historical accuracy. The disruption of verisimilitude is also achieved by including fantastic and surrealist elements to represent the Victorian past. Due to the implementation of digital effects, *Poor Things*’ aesthetic clashes with standardized representations of the Victorian era, thus formally reflecting its re-evaluation of gender and sexuality on a narrative and thematic level. It is this critical reimagining that renders *Poor Things* neo-Victorian in its engagement with the past.

In order to illustrate how *Poor Things* comments on the limits of realism as an aesthetic mode by utilizing fantasy elements, it is useful to explain the differences between mimesis and fantasy as representational modes. Kathryn Hume argues that since Plato and Aristotle fantasy – as a mode of representation – has been historically dismissed as incapable of faithfully capturing reality, whereas mimesis was favored as the mode of representation *par excellence* (5-6). Hume identifies both mimesis and fantasy as the driving forces behind literature, with the former employing verisimilitude to depict reality and the latter desiring to alter and reimagine reality (20; 25). Tracing the evolution of mimesis and fantasy throughout history,

Hume focuses on the development of 19th-century realism, which depended on mimetic representation (29-30). She criticizes realism as implicitly promising a transparent and objective representation of reality but failing to capture complex psychological and emotional experiences, which instead can find full expression by switching to fantasy, as the late 19th-century gothic and horror genres show (43). Hume's study draws our attention to two matters that are relevant to our discussion of *Poor Things*: the first is the failure of realism, a representational model that is synonymous with Victorian literature, and the second is the gradual rejection of realism in favor of a representational mode that draws on fantasy.

Here, Hume echoes criticisms against realism that were prevalent in 1980s scholarly debates and have influenced neo-Victorianism. Poststructuralist theorists, like Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, criticized realism as an aesthetic mode that creates the illusion of being continuous with reality, conflating representation and experience, when in fact realism masks ideology as 'truth' (Anchor 107). Thus, while purporting to reflect reality, realism conceals its illusionary nature through an aesthetic associated with the factuality and rationality of science (108). Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn note the contribution of 1980s criticism of Victorian realism as ideologically problematic in shaping neo-Victorian studies (3). Therefore, rather than offering a transparent window to the world, realism constitutes an aesthetic mode that legitimizes gender, 'racial' and class differences by presenting itself as transparent and objective.

Following the poststructuralist criticism of realism, neo-Victorian works upset realist conventions by implementing postmodern techniques that blur the limits between history and fiction, which is achieved by turning to fantasy. Heilmann and Llewellyn note that readers are often drawn to neo-Victorian novels expecting the formal characteristics of a Victorian novel, forgetting that the former destabilize the narrative techniques of the latter (14). This is achieved by including metafictional nods that point to a text's artificiality, thus challenging Victorian realist conventions, such as narrative omniscience (14-5). Building on that, I argue that one of the aesthetic illusions challenged is the Victorian novel's objectivity, which is supported by its realism. Neo-Victorianism demonstrates that realism is a discourse aimed at giving validity to the events it describes. Neo-Victorianism destabilizes this by offering alternative visions of history. This is evidenced in *Poor Things*' treatment of its historical timeframe. Though it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment at which *Poor Things* is set, we can infer the last decade of the 19th century, the fin-de-siècle. The most concrete reference comes in the form of Duncan's question to Kitty, a dinner guest in Lisbon who is asked if she saw "the new show in

London by Wilde” (PT 00:49:21) to which Kitty replies that she found it witty, referencing the line “a handbag” (PT 00:49:25) from Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). This reference would place the film’s action in 1895 or later, since this year marked the London premiere of Wilde’s play. Nevertheless, the vagueness of the exact temporal frame is intentional, since *Poor Things*’ storyworld includes steampunk technology, such as flying trams (PT 0:44:59), which did not and do not exist. This approach to representing the Victorian era crafts a simultaneous sense of familiarity and displacement, which is a postmodern effect. This oscillation between reality and illusion is further evidenced in the film’s color scheme, which shifts from a black-and-white to saturated pastel palette for most of the film, deviating from realism, as will be addressed in this chapter as well.

The discussion of this postmodern blend of history and fiction in *Poor Things* requires some further contextualization of how fantasy and realism work in the film. Though useful, Hume’s account relies on a binary juxtaposition of the mimetic and the fantastic mode in literature, which is inadequate to explain the integration of fantasy into realism to destabilize the latter, which occurs in postmodern art. Postmodernism employs aesthetic forms of the past, while demonstrating a self-reflexive awareness of being entangled in the very structures that it seeks to criticize (Hutcheon, *Politics* 14). Therefore, indulging in traditional aesthetic conventions while flipping them on their head is how postmodern art denaturalizes representation as a construct (8). This means that *Poor Things* as a film still employs realist conventions, blending the realist with the illusionary. Therefore, though I build on Hume’s idea that the semiotics of fantasy suggest illusion, which is key to understanding why fantasy is used to depict history in the first place, I simultaneously argue that postmodernism blurs the limits of fantasy and realism rather than completely abandoning realist techniques.

If neo-Victorian literature utilizes postmodern techniques to destabilize the transparency of realism as an aesthetic mode, I suggest that *Poor Things* similarly reflects this tendency by destabilizing verisimilitude, the equivalent of realism in the medium of film, to demonstrate the unstable nature of representation. Discussing different models of realism in film, Phil Watts distinguishes between ‘verisimilitude’, the film equivalent of 19th century realism in literature and painting which is used in most Hollywood films, and the ‘realist tendency’, referring to art cinema films that represent reality more faithfully and immediately without the unnatural filters of Hollywood, which only give a mere ‘illusion’ of realism (385).¹⁴

¹⁴ Academic debates surrounding realism in film studies have two different, if sometimes overlapping, foci, one concerning the ontology of film as a medium and the other concerning the aesthetics of film

To understand how *Poor Things* undermines realistic representation by evading filmic verisimilitude, we have to acknowledge the latter's rules to understand how *Poor Things* breaks them. To achieve verisimilitude, there must be stylistic transparency and continuity on a technical level for the film's action to be believable (Watts 385-6). This is required, because, like Victorian realism, filmic verisimilitude aims for suspension of disbelief, using techniques such as the narrator's omniscience in literature and unobtrusive framing in film to support the ostensible realism of the story presented on a narrative level. In terms of cinematography, utilizing a fish-eye lens and transitioning from black-and-white to color in *Poor Things* exhibits a degree of aesthetic self-reflexivity that breaks with stylistic transparency. More specifically, the interchange between black-and-white and colored cinematography signals the film's awareness that it can implement different kinds of cinematography to mediate its story, thus reminding the audience that they are watching a film. Indeed, the film's first scene with Victoria committing suicide is shot in color (see Fig. 8) and quickly succeeded by the film's title card with a heart beating (see Fig. 9) and Bella playing the piano (*PT* 00:01:53), both of which are shot in black-and-white, with color fully returning when Bella starts her affair with Duncan in Lisbon (*PT* 00:41:00). As the film's director of photography Robbie Ryan has highlighted, the use of color is related to Bella's intellectual and emotional growth, since the contrast between the black-and-white and colored sequences in the film reflects Bella's phenomenological perception of the world around her (Giardina n.pag.). This can be related to Hume's argument that fantasy engages with real experiences while simultaneously opening the possibility for the creation of new meanings and ideas that transcend the real (25; 28). In this case, *Poor Things* chooses to amplify the audience's perception of the Victorian era by filtering it through Bella, who views the world not 'as it is' but as she imagines it. Hence, the portrayal of Bella's story and the history of the Victorian past are always mediated and unreliable as well as incomplete.

in terms of representation. In the former debate, 'realism' refers to the film medium's unique capacity to capture reality due to its photographic nature and thus discussions in this field are concerned with questions regarding film's ontology (Thomson-Jones 17). The latter debate, which is of relevance to my discussion, views realism as a representational model in film and does not focus on the nature of the medium per se, but on the stylistic choices employed to represent reality on film (Watts 385).



Fig. 8 (PT 00:01:46)



Fig. 9 (PT 00:01:47)

The disruption of verisimilitude is also achieved in the film's design, since historical accuracy in costume design is rejected in favor of reimagining Victorian fashion from a contemporary viewpoint. Contemporary works set in the Victorian era either stylistically imitate Victorian aesthetic forms or juxtapose Victorian elements with a postmodern viewpoint, thus crafting an ironic evaluation of the past (Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism* 218). The latter category seems to define more accurately the aims of the neo-Victorian project. While Gutleben outlines the aesthetic codes employed by neo-Victorian novels, I argue that *Poor Things* transcribes the mixture of Victorian and postmodern aesthetic forms of neo-Victorian novels in filmic terms. Namely, I suggest that 'faithful' adaptations of Victorian works aim for verisimilitude, reflecting the Victorian novel's implementation of realism as an aesthetic of objectivity. By contrast, *Poor Things* deviates from historical accuracy, breaking instead with the principles of verisimilitude. To maintain the illusion of verisimilitude, Hollywood period films rely on crafting historically accurate costumes on the level of production design (Watts 386). This is disrupted in *Poor Things*, since Bella's wardrobe consists of an amalgam of Victorian and contemporary fashion. The film's costume designer, Holly Waddington, coined the term 'Bella style' to describe how Bella's clothes combined late 19th-century Victorian fashion with stylistic influences from 1930s French lingerie fashion and 1960s haute couture inspired by André Courrèges and Pierre Cardin (Whitlock n.pag.). Bella's blend of different historical fashion styles reflects her own journey of emancipation. For example, Bella's outfit in Lisbon combines a Victorian puffy-sleeved shirt with 1930s-influenced shorts and a 1960s pair of peep-toe boots (see Fig. 10), which reflects her sexual awakening and her break with Victorian conventions. Whereas period films prioritize historical accuracy and authenticity in costume design, Waddington moved between the aesthetics of period dramas, sci-fi films, surrealism and haute couture for Bella's costumes (Whitlock n.pag.). Mixing fashion styles

from different time periods goes against verisimilitude, thus undermining our knowledge about how the Victorian past ‘really’ was. In this way, *Poor Things* follows neo-Victorianism in using signs that point to the Victorian era, while destabilizing their meaning by adding contemporary and anachronistic elements.



Fig. 10 (PT 0:45:52)

The introduction of fantasy elements in the realist model in order to subvert it suggest that in postmodernism both aesthetic modes are in a playful dialogue with each other. At this point, William Brown’s study on how surrealist aesthetics blur fantasy and reality in contemporary digital (blockbuster) cinema can be useful to understand how this mixture functions. Using Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *Amélie* (2001) as a case study, Brown suggests that the use of digital effects in contemporary film can be linked to the politics and aesthetics of surrealism (18). Brown draws on André Breton’s definition of surrealism as the dissolution of the limits between the real and the imaginary, which leads to the creation of artistic works prioritizing absurdity and the irrational (19). Surrealists expressed enthusiasm for cinema as an artistic medium with the potential to capture this conflation of dream and reality, with the two blurring indistinguishably (19-21). Brown views the advent of digital cinema and the integration of special effects into film as realizing cinema’s surrealist potential today, since digital effects allow for the simultaneous juxtaposition of fantasy and reality rather than a mere shift between the two states (23). This approach to representation is found in the making of *Poor Things*. Director Yorgos Lanthimos explained in a feature about the production design of *Poor Things* that the film “use[s] the latest technology, but also tap[s] into some old-school techniques, like miniatures or painted backdrops” (Searchlight Pictures “The World Of Poor Things’ Featurette” 2:29-38). This statement is echoed by the film’s cinematographer, Robbie Ryan, who cited Francis Ford Coppola’s Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1992) as an influence on the aesthetic of *Poor Things*, specifically the highly artificial feeling Coppola’s film evoked through its integration of early cinema techniques, such as false perspectives, miniatures and

processed backgrounds (Giardina n.pag.). One such use of miniatures and matte painting is the first appearance of Dracula's castle (see Fig. 11), where the landscape is a matte painting and the castle itself constitutes a miniature that was superimposed on the painted background and then combined with the shot of the carriage moving in the foreground. Here, the sense of artificiality results from the fact that these early cinema techniques lack in photorealism and thus create a heightened reality, which disrupts verisimilitude. Similarly, *Poor Things*' mixture of traditional techniques with special effects results in the surrealist juxtaposition of reality and fantasy, since they become indistinguishable from one another.



Fig. 11 (*Bram Stoker's Dracula* 0:11:20)

This blend of historical accuracy and fantasy in *Poor Things* is deeply postmodern, since it questions the legitimacy of realist representations. The co-existence of history and parody in historiographic metafiction questions realism as a transparent mode of representation and invites us to reflect on the legitimization of ideology and power through aesthetic forms (Hutcheon, *Politics* 14-5).¹⁵ Ironical approaches to representation are utilized, in order to denaturalize ideological, discursive and aesthetic modes that appear 'natural' and demonstrate that they constitute constructs instead (2). Therefore, the rejection of realist representation denaturalizes our knowledge about the world. This is demonstrated in *Poor Things*' Lisbon cityscape (see Fig. 12), where the architecture, though inspired by Lisbon's historical buildings, is amplified by surrealist curvy structures, while people roaming the urban space wear clothes typical of the late 1800s. At the same time, this representation is supplemented by the candy-

¹⁵ The blend of historical fact and fiction in representation in postmodern art can be related to Jean Baudrillard's concept of the 'simulacrum'. Hutcheon mentions postmodernism's debt to Baudrillard's simulacrum in terms of destabilizing (realist) representation (*Politics* 31). Baudrillard coined the term 'simulacrum' to delineate how the real and the fake blur in postmodernity, thus producing copies that go beyond merely reduplicating the original as they substitute "signs of the real or the real itself" (366). In this way, *Poor Things*' Victorian storyworld constitutes a postmodern simulacrum, as there is an indistinguishable mixture of the real and the fake.

colored sky and the fish-eye lens utilized to frame these shots. In this way, *Poor Things* draws our attention to how representation is always illusionary and thus destabilizes our assumptions about the past.



Fig. 12 (PT 0:45:14)



Fig. 13 (PT 1:12:03)

In order to question how knowledge about the past is mediated and ideologically colored, *Poor Things* turns to digital effects in order to create a heightened world that disrupts the transparency of the cinematic medium, thus problematizing the ideological extensions of realism as an aesthetic of unmediated objectivity. Brown argues that special effects allow *Amélie* to include fantasy elements alongside real places and objects (26-7). The power of special effects is what makes Brown favor digital cinema as a subversive medium, undermining realism and allowing for imagining new worlds (28). Building on Brown's argument, I posit that the co-existence of fantasy and reality is not merely surrealist, but inherently postmodern, since an ironic approach is used to destabilize standardized representations of the past. Winning the BAFTA Award for Special Visual Effects in 2024 (Yossman and Shafer n.pag.), *Poor Things* utilizes digital special effects to convey the Victorian world along with traditional techniques. Digital effects are used to portray the outside of the ship, the sea and the horizon (see Fig. 13), deviating from verisimilitude in the ship's bizarre structural design and the steam's green-yellow coloring. Rather than aiming for photorealism, *Poor Things*' special effects contribute to the artificial and surrealist feeling of its storyworld. A further example of this is the design of Alexandria as a location, the architectural landscape of which constitutes a surrealist blend of dream and reality that creates a heightened sense of artificiality (see Fig. 14). Adding to the city's bizarre architecture is the lighting and color grading used. More specifically, most shots during Bella's visit to Alexandria are yellow- and orange-tinted and highly saturated (see Fig. 15). Rather than 'accurately' portraying 19th century Alexandria, the representation of the city is filtered through Bella's eyes, with the high saturation reflecting Bella's distress at

confronting poverty in the city. Hence, the special effects, production design and cinematography evoke a fantastic version of the 19th century, disrupting the imaginary of the Victorian era as solidified in realist representations of the period. In this way, implementing fantastic and surrealist elements in the film disrupts verisimilitude, highlighting the limitations of realism as an aesthetic mode when representing the past.



Fig. 14 (PT 1:18:01)



Fig. 15 (PT 1:17:38)

Tracing the fictional in the historical constitutes a transgression of limits found in *Poor Things*, whose so eerily Victorian and so historically inaccurate world highlights how fiction and history blend together. Hutcheon points to postmodern narratives that blur these limits, crafting a ‘fictionalized history’ of the past (*Politics* 49; 51). These narratives challenge realism’s seamless and transparency and highlight how ideology shapes our knowledge about history through representation (49; 51). By showing the limits of realist representations of the Victorian era, *Poor Things* criticizes the aesthetic mode of realism by incorporating fantasy, showing the futility of ‘objectively’ representing the past. In his analysis of *Amélie*, Brown characterizes the film’s depiction of Paris as ‘surrealist’, arguing that by eschewing realism the film reimagines Paris, implementing fantastic elements, in order to also transform the audience’s awareness of the world (23). Applying Brown’s analysis to *Poor Things*, I posit that the Victorian world is built anew and transformed in a surrealist blend of dream and reality. A good example of the blend between the historical and the fictional is Bella’s discovery of trams in Lisbon. Bella describes a sense of wonder when she first hears the sound of the tram and “walk[ed] to the noise and [...] found it” (PT 0:48:52). Electric trams were invented in the last quarter of the 19th century and were implemented in Britain before the end of the century, starting with Brighton in 1883. Bella’s amazement at discovering the tram echoes the novelty of the invention in the 19th century as a means of transport. The invention of the tram places the film in a Victorian timeframe. And yet the trams of *Poor Things* are floating in the air (see Fig. 5, PT 0:44:59), resembling the steampunk inventions found in the books of Jules Verne.

Hume's definition of fantasy as a departure from reality includes utopian and science fiction as well as narratives that represent alternate worlds (Hume 21-2). This fits with *Poor Things*' representation of the Victorian era as alternate history. Therefore, fantasy blends with history to heighten the effect of Bella's excitement at discovering something new that still seems impressive to a 21st-century audience.

Bringing this chapter to a close, I suggest that *Poor Things* reevaluates our assumptions about the past by showing how history is represented from a contemporary viewpoint. This is achieved by deviating from verisimilitude, which demarcates the limitations of realism in representing the Victorian era. Postmodern techniques question realism's invisibility as a mode of representation that unobtrusively and transparently depicts reality, negating any 'natural' link between representation and the world (Hutcheon, *Politics* 32). Therefore, realism is shown to be an aesthetic mode that aims to present ideology as natural, since it represents the world 'as it is'. Distancing itself from verisimilitude, *Poor Things*' postmodern blend of history, fantasy and surrealism rejects the transparency of realism, thus demonstrating that objectivity itself is a construct and that knowledge about the Victorian past is culturally and discursively formed. *Poor Things*' formal reimagining of the Victorian past on a formal level reflects its transformative take on Victorian literary texts through intertextuality, as I show in the next chapter.

2. *Poor Things* as a Neo-Victorian Palimpsest

2.1 Reworking the Victorian ‘Canon’: *Poor Things*’ Intertextual Engagement with 19th-Century Fiction

Moving from form to narrative, this chapter explores how *Poor Things* revisits 19th-century literature through intertextuality, both by reworking specific literary texts and by adapting wider Victorian narrative patterns to film as a medium. As neo-Victorianism constitutes a postmodern return to the past, it follows that Victorian literature is not only referenced but critically revisited in neo-Victorian media. In this subchapter, I suggest that *Poor Things* models itself after iconic 19th-century texts, only to subvert them through intertextuality. By analyzing the film’s relationship to three literary texts, namely Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844) and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), I posit that *Poor Things* employs intertextuality not merely to replicate these works, but to rewrite them from a postmodern perspective. More specifically, *Poor Things* upsets *Frankenstein*’s heartless ‘mad’ scientist archetype by having Godwin Baxter recognize Bella’s agency in creating her identity beyond his influence. Similarly, the film intertextually references “Rappaccini’s Daughter” to highlight the controlling nature and sexist extensions of female confinement. Finally, the film revisits *Jane Eyre* by criticizing the use of the madwoman in the attic archetype to mask marital abuse through the film’s negative portrayal of Alfred Blessington as a villainous character.

To map out how *Poor Things* engages with Victorian fiction, I turn to intertextuality as a key theoretical framework. Intertextuality, coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s, developed out of Mikhail Bakhtin’s earlier concept ‘dialogism’ and refers to how texts are open meaning-systems that contain traces of previous cultural texts, which are absorbed and transformed by the newer text (Martínez-Alfaro 268). As intertextuality developed in the context of poststructuralism, attention has shifted from the text as an individual unit to how it interacts with other texts (268).¹⁶ In this way, intertextuality is closely related to neo-Victorianism’s tenet of ‘rewriting’ the Victorian era. Imelda Whelehan points out that, in transforming the past,

¹⁶ Though intertextuality is a relatively new term and has been associated with postmodern art, it is by no means a new artistic phenomenon, being employed since antiquity (Martínez-Alfaro 269). Martínez-Alfaro notes the importance of engaging with intertextual theory when analyzing postmodern works, as the latter are constructed on the principles of intertextuality (284).

neo-Victorian works craft a rich palimpsest of allusions to Victorian culture (272). Such an approach highlights the significance of considering the Victorian literary tradition in discussions about neo-Victorian media, which can be investigated by turning to intertextuality. Indeed, the neo-Victorian genre is defined at the intersection of the Victorian and the contemporary, informed by a metatextual and metahistorical angle to re-imagine the Victorian age (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4).¹⁷ Lingering between the Victorian past and the postmodern present, neo-Victorian works like *Poor Things* inevitably engage with the Victorian literary ‘canon’.

An important aspect of intertextuality is its dialogic potential for subversion and ambiguity. Kristeva emphasizes intertextuality as primarily a dialogic relationship, in the sense that a text has no fixed meaning in itself but rather constitutes a dialogue with different writings (65). At this point, it is crucial to note Bakhtin’s influence on Kristeva, specifically through his concept of dialogism. Bakhtin divides literary works between monologic and dialogic, with the latter resisting authoritative meanings, since they allow for a plurality of meaning on an interpretive level through contrastive voices within and outside the text (Martínez-Alfaro 275). In this way, Bakhtin highlights that multiple ‘voices’ clash in any respective text, giving rise to a plurality of meanings. Roland Barthes hints at a similar conceptualization of texts as a network of relations, a semiotic approach that views the text as consisting of signs. Barthes views the text as a surface on which previous writings and meanings from diverse cultural sources come together through relations of dialogue, irony or subversion (“The Death of the Author” 148). For Barthes intertextuality allows texts to enter into a critical dialogue with previous texts, which are (critically) positioned in relation to texts to which they refer. This dialogic aspect of intertextuality reflects Bakhtin’s dialogism, linking Barthes and Kristeva in their belief that texts produce plural meanings which have a dialectic relationship. The concept of Bakhtin’s dialogism also emerges in neo-Victorianism. Kirchknopf stresses the dialogic nature of the neo-Victorianism, arguing that intertextual transformations of 19th-century discourses and texts are central to neo-Victorian fiction (Kirchknopf 54). Here, Kirchknopf

¹⁷ Following a different approach, Samantha Carroll objects to emphasizing the 19th century as a prime feature of neo-Victorian fiction, as it obscures neo-Victorianism’s contemporary character as a 20th- and 21st-century creation (180). Carroll suggests that by framing the neo-Victorian novel against the Victorian novel, we create a false binary where the former is portrayed as an ‘inferior’ imitation of the authentic Victorian novel, thus reducing its value to a transitional step to approach the supposedly more complex and well-crafted original (179). Though Carroll astutely points out that by defining neo-Victorianism against the Victorian canon we run the danger of obscuring the contemporary relevance of neo-Victorian media, it remains important to investigate how neo-Victorianism transforms the Victorian tradition.

highlights the integral importance of intertextuality in neo-Victorian works. Moreover, her emphasis on dialogue can be tied to Bakhtin's dialogism as a fundamental tool for understanding the narrative structure of neo-Victorian works. Building on intertextuality's dialogic nature, I focus on how *Poor Things* subverts or comments on certain plot points, discourses and character archetypes found in 19th-century texts. Thus, I suggest that *Poor Things*' postmodern utilization of intertextuality lies not only in alluding to Victorian texts but also in its metatextual awareness that it reworks them in an ironic and critical way.

The first major 19th-century literary text *Poor Things* calls back to is Mary Shelley's classic gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818), which tells the story of a young scientist who assembles parts of dead bodies and reanimates them with catastrophic consequences. Both Gray's novel and Lanthimos's film *Poor Things* have been described as a postmodern retelling of *Frankenstein* (Esser 139; Fiorato 283; Lattanzio n.pag.; Tiitinen 315), with Bella being reanimated from a corpse and gradually developing her own mind and mentally growing up like the Creature in the novel. As the focus of the present thesis is the adaptation of Gray's novel, I explore how the film enhances the intertextual links to *Frankenstein*, which are already baked into Gray's novel, specifically in its portrayal of Godwin Baxter as well as its imagery that alludes to the film adaptations of *Frankenstein*.¹⁸ Despite Bella's similarities to the Creature, I argue that it is in Godwin as a character that the film presents the most parallels with Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as he is conducting illegal experiments using dead bodies, much like Victor in the book. More specifically, Godwin notes that "it is rare to get a body, albeit dead, but so close to life" (*PT* 0:22:02-7) in relation to illegally retrieving Bella's corpse from the river, implying a fascination with reanimation as "all [his] research had come to this moment" of discovering Bella's body with a live infant inside her (*PT* 0:22:58). This echoes Victor's own illegal methods of "collect[ing] bones from charnel-houses [...] [and materials from] the dissecting room and the slaughter-house" (Shelley 80) in order to bring his "work near a conclusion" (80). Victor's ambitions go beyond human reanimation and aim at the creation of life, as illustrated in the subtitle of Shelley's novel: *The Modern Prometheus*, which

¹⁸ For an extensive analysis of Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* and its relation to Shelley's *Frankenstein*, cf. Tiitinen, "Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* and the Resurrection of Frankenstein's Monster". As *Poor Things* is an adaptation of Gray's novel, certain themes and intertextual references inevitably overlap. However, since the links between Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Gray's novel have been analyzed in the scholarship and the focus of this thesis is how the film utilizes intertextuality, I have limited my discussion to scenes and dialogue that are exclusive to the film. In this way, I explore how themes or scenes from the novel are reworked in the film, crafting their own intertextual links to the 19th century texts to create a neo-Victorian reappraisal of them.

alludes to a Titan who created humankind in some versions of Greek mythology. Through this reference to Prometheus' story, another layer is added to *Poor Things*' palimpsest, thus proving Barthes's view that cultural texts are created out of diverse cultures and meanings ("The Death of the Author" 148). More specifically, Prometheus steals fire from the Gods and brings it to humans, similarly to how Frankenstein uses lightning to reanimate his creation. The intertextual parallel between Victor and Prometheus becomes further evident when Victor claims that "a new species would bless [him] as its creator [and that] [...] no father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as [he] should deserve theirs" (78), casting himself as a father to a new species. This dynamic is replicated in *Poor Things* in Godwin, whom Bella affectionately refers to as "God" multiple times in the film (*PT* 0:11:27; 0:18:54; 2:09:14), reinforcing the idea of the scientist/creator as an almost-divine fatherly figure.¹⁹ Though both the novel and the film converge in casting the scientist as a father figure, they differ in the 'monster's' gender, since the Creature is male whereas Bella female. This gender difference may account for how differently Frankenstein and Godwin treat their creations, with Victor abandoning the Creature whereas Godwin seeks to control Bella by confining her to the domestic space, an issue that will be discussed more extensively in comparison with Hawthorne's short story.

Poor Things' intertextual relationship is not limited to Shelley's novel, but also extends to film adaptations of *Frankenstein*, paying homage to the conventions of the horror and sci-fi film genres. This brings to the fore the issue of how intertextuality works differently when referencing the source material, a verbal medium in this case, and its adaptations on film, an audiovisual medium. In *Poor Things*' case, its intertextual relation to the novel focuses more on reworking plot elements and tropes on the level of narrative, while its references to film operate on the level of tone and imagery. Postmodern reworkings of *Frankenstein* on film have moved away from the strict boundaries of the classic horror genre to incorporate comedy and parody (Picart 191). Thus, genre hybridity emerges as a key feature of these adaptations, suggesting an overlap between classic horror film conventions, comedic elements and sci-fi film, which allows for a blend of disgust, humor and fascination (192). Building on this, I propose that genre hybridity is also present in *Poor Things*' reworking of *Frankenstein*, as the film incorporates humor, while explicitly paying homage to the horror genre through its visualization of Bella's reanimation. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, *Poor Things*

¹⁹ In relation the father/child dynamic, Godwin Baxter's name in Gray's novel constitutes a further intertextual reference, as it alludes to Mary Shelley's father William Godwin, a radical political philosopher, whose idealism about human nature and radical politics are reflected in Godwin Baxter's own moral and intellectual compass when creating and 'educating' Bella (Glendening 79-80).

pushes the limits of realism by introducing fantasy elements to its Victorian storyworld, which is illustrated by the visualization of Godwin's bizarre experiments. More specifically, Bella's reanimation pays homage to the iconic reanimation of the Creature in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931). In both scenes, emphasis is placed on the flashing currents of lighting storm in *Frankenstein* (see Fig. 16) and electricity in *Poor Things* (see Fig. 17). Moreover, Lanthimos draws on German expressionism and specifically references the animation of the robot in Fritz Lang's sci-fi film *Metropolis* (1927). The imagery used in *Poor Things* bears great resemblance to the scene where Lang's mad scientist, Rotwang, uses electricity to animate his robot, a doppelgänger of the workers' leader Maria. The rings of electricity surrounding the robot Maria's body as well as the close-up to her face as she opens her eyes (see Fig. 18) are referenced in *Poor Things*' depiction of Bella's re-animation (see Fig. 19), who also has electrodes close to her head as she gradually opens her eyes much like the robot Maria in *Metropolis*. This further indicates the genre hybridity of *Poor Things* as a postmodern



Frankenstein adaptation, bringing together horror and sci-fi visual topoi through intertextuality.

Fig. 16 (*Frankenstein* 0:23:09)



Fig. 17 (*PT* 0:23:32)

Fig. 18 (*Metropolis* 1:25:56)

Fig. 19 (*PT* 0:23:36)



Nevertheless, as it replicates the mad scientist archetype of *Frankenstein*, *Poor Things* simultaneously subverts Shelley's novel by negating that Godwin is Bella's 'creator' and placing emphasis on her agency in crafting her identity. Going back to intertextuality, Kristeva notes that "any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (66). Building on this, it can be proposed that *Poor Things* references *Frankenstein* by employing the mad scientist archetype and replicating familiar imagery in Bella's reanimation, while highlighting Bella's independence to contrast it with Victor's power over his creation. In this way, it simultaneously absorbs and critically transforms Shelley's novel as a truly neo-Victorian work. Godwin's gradual recognition of Bella's autonomy is already present in the novel, with the scientist moving away from his earlier attempts to fully control Bella, on which I will comment in relation to Hawthorne's short story, and deeming her ability to develop free will as his greatest achievement (Fiorato 296). This is further enhanced in the film, when Bella revisits Godwin after her travels. While Victor boasts that "many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me" (Shelley 78), Godwin's answer to Bella's claim that she is "[his] creation as is the other one [i.e. Felicity]" is that "neither of [them] are that" (*PT* 1:55:17-23). Relinquishing any claim to her development, Godwin comments that he "watched [her] fearlessly create Bella Baxter" (*PT* 1:55:28), effectively recognizing that Bella was not created in his laboratory but through her own actions of discovering herself and the world around her. Despite having the body of Victoria Blessington and the brain of Victoria's unborn child, Bella crafts a unique identity for herself, free from any pre-determined influence. Thus, in a self-reflexive subversion of the original novel, Godwin assigns self-determination and agency to Bella, which Victor denies to his own 'creations'.

The consequences of illegal scientific experimentation are also explored in Nathaniel Hawthorne's gothic short story "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844), which touches upon discourses about science, gender roles and domestic seclusion that were relevant in the 19th century, despite the narrative's 16th-century setting. "Rappaccini's Daughter" tells the story of Beatrice, a young woman who falls in love with the student Giovanni, while being confined to a garden by her father Dr. Rappaccini, who uses her to experiment with plants and imbue them with poison. Beatrice and Bella both experience confinement and use their infatuation with Giovanni and Duncan, respectively, in an effort to escape their imposed isolation from the world. Beatrice describes her confinement as "an awful doom [...] which estranged [her] from all society of [her] kind" (Hawthorne 312). This echoes Bella's growing frustration with her seclusion in Godwin's house, demanding that "outside [she] must go" [*sic*] (*PT* 0:15:02).

Similarly to Rappaccini, Godwin manipulates the young woman in his care, trying to get her to refrain from such thoughts. However, Godwin eventually succumbs to Bella's pleas by scheduling a controlled picnic with him and Max. During this outing, Bella catches glimpses of other people and expresses her curiosity to explore the outside world, but Godwin uses force by subduing her with chloroform (*PT* 0:19:44), in order to return her to his house. The way Godwin cuts her off from the outside world and Bella's growing frustration at the confinement is reminiscent of Beatrice's treatment by Rappaccini in Hawthorne's story. Additionally, the use of chloroform and Godwin's status as a scientist reflects Rappaccini's own involvement with poisons. Indeed, Rappaccini has acquired a reputation for having produced "new varieties of poison more horribly deleterious than nature" (Hawthorne 292). Though Godwin does not cultivate poisons, he similarly does not hesitate to use chemical substances to subdue Bella, much like how Rappaccini injects poison into Beatrice's body.

However, though Godwin matches the cruelty of Victor Frankenstein and Rappaccini early on in the film, *Poor Things* sees him grow to respect Bella's autonomy, finally releasing her from his influence. Much like Victor Frankenstein, who is cruel in his treatment of the Creature despite claiming to be a 'father' to a new species, Rappaccini treats his daughter merely as an object of scientific inquiry, isolating her from other people in the garden and imbuing her with poison to help him conduct his experiments. Indeed, "Rappaccini's Daughter" shares the mad scientist archetype with Shelley's *Frankenstein*, with Rappaccini standing in for the dangers of myopic scientific experimentation and the distortion of the natural world, a component of 19th-century discourses on science (Weinstock 49). More specifically, "his patients are interesting to him only as subjects for some new experiment" (Hawthorne 292), revealing a dehumanized nature that only cares to promote scientific knowledge, even at the detriment of his daughter's physical and mental well-being. Early on in *Poor Things*, Godwin expresses a similar detachment from Bella, emphasizing his role as a creator. When Max questions Godwin's domestic confinement of Bella asking him "why [he] must scare her so" (*PT* 0:18:32) about the outside world to which Godwin answers that "she's an experiment and [he] must control the conditions or [his] results will not be pure" (*PT* 0:18:34). Here, Godwin reduces Bella to an object of scientific observation and denies her personhood, like Rappaccini in Hawthorne's short story. However, in contrast to Rappaccini, whose actions lead to Beatrice's untimely death, Godwin eventually comes to terms with Bella's decision to elope with Duncan and explore the world on her own. Whereas Rappaccini exhibits a cold indifference towards Beatrice's fate because of his arrogance (Bendixen 65),

Godwin prioritizes Bella's freedom to form her life as an individual rather than merely treating her as a peculiar creature that is under his control. Indeed, Godwin's interest in Bella's sharply contrasts with Victor Frankenstein's cold neglect towards his creation, which leads to both his and the Creature's ultimate destruction (Fiorato 283-4). By drawing on Hawthorne's short story in addition to *Frankenstein*, *Poor Things* highlights the impact experimentation has on female subjects, thus allowing for a dialogic link to be formed between the three texts, since contrastive voices are juxtaposed (Martínez-Alfaro 275). It is this act on Godwin's part that sets Bella on a path of self-discovery and emancipation that would not have been available to a Victorian woman like Beatrice. This sets Godwin apart from both Rappaccini and Victor, as I pointed out above in the comparison to *Frankenstein*, thus subverting the original texts.

At this point, it is useful to note the role space plays in "Rappaccini's Daughter" and *Poor Things* in relation to the female protagonist's confinement. Rappaccini limits his experiments to a mutated garden full of deadly plants and herbs, which is likened to an "Eden of the present world" (Hawthorne 289). This biblical reference casts Rappaccini as a divine creator, much like Victor Frankenstein and Godwin Baxter. Nevertheless, this garden constitutes a twisted version of Eden as it is "no longer of God's making, but the monstrous offspring of man's depraved fancy [...] the result of experiment" (301), demonstrating how the garden has been perverted by Rappaccini's experiments. The topos of the twisted garden of Eden is also present in *Poor Things*, as Godwin's house includes a garden where his experiments, mostly animal hybrids, dwell (see Fig. 20). The monstrous hybrids surround Bella, tonally contrasting Bella, since they have dark tones, whereas Bella stands out in her white clothes, occupying the middle of the frame. Moreover, the plants take up most of the space in the shot, visually 'trapping' Bella within the garden, much like the poisonous plants surround Beatrice in the garden. Godwin refuses to let Bella outside of the house, as he "created a perfectly entertaining and safe world for [her]" (*PT* 0:15:18), reinforcing the idea of him being a powerful creator that locks Bella in a garden created for her. However, this garden is all but an Eden, since it constitutes a prison for both Beatrice and Bella, a space associated with violent confinement. Nevertheless, by the film's end, *Poor Things* resignifies this space, since the film ends with Bella willingly returning to the garden, where she finally achieves peace. Subverting Hawthorne's story, Bella finally becomes the master of this absurd 'utopia', outliving Hawthorne's Beatrice whose confinement poisons her and ultimately kills her.



Fig. 20 (PT 0:30:38)

Female domestic confinement, albeit in the context of marriage, constitutes a major theme in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1947), another landmark text of the Victorian era. *Poor Things* intertextually comments on and subverts through Bella's marriage to Alfred Blessington. Bella's treatment by Alfred presents similarities to *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester's first wife, who is declared mad and locked up in his house, representing the archetype of the confined madwoman. In *Poor Things*, Alfred expresses a similar desire to control his wife by locking her up in his estate, when he 'suggests' that they "stick close to the house for several months, maybe a year" (PT 2:05:33) due to Bella's supposed mental illness. This is a veiled threat on Alfred's part and illustrates his wish to confine Bella inside the house. Here, we can trace an intertextual link to *Jane Eyre* and the theme of locking women in a domestic space under the guise of mental instability. In their seminal book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar propose that madness has been used as a topos in Victorian literature to designate female characters, who deviate from Victorian gender norms of docility and subservience, as 'monstrous' (77-8). Indeed, mental illness is used to dehumanize Bertha who is described as "some strange wild animal" (Brontë 293), a parallel to how Bella constitutes a 'monstrous' female Frankenstein.

Adopting a postmodern feminist stance, *Poor Things* employs intertextuality to criticize how madness was utilized to silence and confine women through its parallels with *Jane Eyre*. In his book *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault describes madness as a historically contingent construct and traces its development through the ages in the Western civilization. More specifically, Foucault proposes that from the 18th century onwards, reason and madness

emerged as a binary construct regulated by the discourse of medicine (*Madness and Civilization* xi-xii). Diagnosing insanity was used to confine marginalized people and invalidate non-hegemonic discourses as ‘irrational’ (xi-xii). In the 19th century, this led to diagnosing women with madness and mental disease, when they deviated from the Victorian stereotype of docile and obedient femininity (Showalter 172-3), with *Jane Eyre* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Woman in the Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) exemplifying this trope.²⁰ In *Jane Eyre*, this problematic relationship between confinement and female madness is explored, as Mr. Rochester uses the discourse of insanity to exercise power over Bertha. More specifically, Mr. Rochester excuses his confinement of Bertha on the basis that she is “mad and came of a mad family [of] idiots and maniacs” (Brontë 292). Much like Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, female mental illness is used as a pretext to enable Alfred’s confinement of Bella, since he claims that Bella “left [him] in a state of some mental addlement and hysteria” (PT 2:00:00). Hence, mental illness is used to brush over Bella’s conscious decision of leaving Alfred and infantilize her. Alfred takes advantage of a discourse that favourably positions him to lay claim to Bella’s freedom and distort the truth about why Bella, in her ‘previous’ life as Victoria, left Alfred.

Nevertheless, Bella subverts the trope of the confined madwoman by escaping her abusive husband. In addition to employing the discourse of madness, Mr. Rochester and Alfred Blessington use physical force and threats respectively to restrain their wives against their will, thus hinting at the marital abuse Victorian women experienced in the domestic space. Similarly to Mr. Rochester who uses a “rope, which was at hand, [to] b[ind] her [i.e. Bertha] to a chair” (Brontë 293), Alfred demands that Bella drink a sedative threatening her with a gun, saying that he will “shoot [Bella] in the fucking head, if [she] tr[ies] to leave” (PT 2:05:53). Both scenes demonstrate the link between domestic confinement and marital violence, but *Poor Things* takes a further step by exploring the wife’s confinement from Bella’s viewpoint. Bella acknowledges that she is “a prisoner” (PT 2:06:16) and when she tries to leave the Blessington estate, she finds the gates locked. Bella’s entrapment is visualized by the camera that frames

²⁰ Overt sexual desire, rebelliousness, disobedience and speaking against the normative model of Victorian womanhood were considered the “symptoms” (Showalter 172-3). Similarly, madness is associated with resistance towards patriarchal norms and rage against gender inequality in *Jane Eyre* (Gilbert and Gubar 339). More specifically, Bertha constitutes Jane’s dark ‘mad’ double, embodying Jane’s own rebellious desires against male control and simultaneously serving as a warning against women who fail to conform to the standards of Victorian femininity (361). For a discussion of how *Poor Things* further comments on medical discourses about female hysteria, cf. Chapter 3.2 of the present thesis.

her as placed behind the gate's bars, which mirror the bars of a prison cell (see Fig. 21). In Victorian literature, the madwoman is usually introduced only to be destroyed (Gilbert and Gubar 78), which is the case with Bertha, who dies to clear the way for Brontë's heroine. However, this point is subverted in *Poor Things*, as Bella not only survives but ultimately overcomes Alfred's control. Commenting on Alasdair Gray's novel, Kirchknopf notes how the narrative self-reflexively references Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to juxtapose a feminist criticism of Victorian gender politics in relation to marriage and domestic confinement with the patriarchal trope of the madwoman in Victorian literature through Bella (Kirchknopf 57-8). The film enhances this by staging a final confrontation between Alfred and Bella. Protesting her imprisonment in the estate, Bella announces that she "will leave at [her] leisure, but [she] is flattered by [Alfred's] desire to trap [her]" (*PT* 2:05:40), humorously signalling her empowerment. Under threat from Alfred, Bella shoots him in the leg (*PT* 2:11:10) and flees the



Blessington estate, subverting Victorian gender dynamics. In this way, *Poor Things* rewrites the madwoman narrative by having Bella resist her seclusion within the domestic space and escape her husband's abuse.

Fig. 21 (*PT* 2:07:45)

All three 19th-century literary works analyzed above illustrate the inherent tension of neo-Victorianism, which overtly reworks Victorian fiction, in order to reposition itself to lingering Victorian discourses from a postmodern perspective. Neo-Victorian works establish a dual kinship with the Victorian 'canon' that is borne out of simultaneous identification and rejection (Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism* 186). *Poor Things* illustrates this dynamic by the way it intertextually weaves 19th-century literature into its fabric, since it adopts specific narrative structures, themes and archetypes present in Victorian literature, only to subvert them and point out their limitations. Barthes stresses this plurality of contradictory meanings, arguing that a text "is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing" ("From

Work to Text” 159). In other words, the multiple meanings and signs in a text do not simply build towards a single interpretation but instead lend to a text’s ambiguity. Suggesting that ambiguity and contradiction are a direct result of intertextuality echoes Hutcheon’s later conceptualization of postmodernism as contradiction (*Politics* 1). This explains how intertextuality heightens the dialogic and ambiguous qualities of postmodern cultural texts like *Poor Things*, since it is through intertextuality and the clashing of previous meanings that *Poor Things* both indulges in and deviates from Victorian fiction.

In conclusion, *Poor Things*’ extensive use of intertextuality demonstrates a postmodern awareness that neo-Victorian media signal a ‘return’ to the Victorian era, only to transform it from a postmodern viewpoint. *Poor Things* achieves this by overtly referencing Victorian fiction in a process of creative revision. In this dialectic process, contradictions emerge, as *Poor Things* replicates the mad scientist archetype only to reject it in order to empower Bella rather than her male ‘creator’; it revisits the gothic topos of female confinement only to grant Bella her freedom; it includes a husband that invokes female madness as grounds to seclude Bella but represents him in such a negative light that highlights the misogyny of Victorian discourses. In this way *Poor Things* ‘rewrites’ the Victorian ‘canon’, an intertextual reworking that is further replicated in its adaptation of Victorian genre conventions, specifically the *Bildungsroman* tradition, which is the focus of the following subchapter.

2.2 *Poor Things* as Filmic Bildungsroman

Up until now, I have examined *Poor Things*’ connection to 19th-century literature by tracing intertextual links to specific texts. By adopting a broader scope in this subchapter, I bring to the forefront the intermedial relationship between literature and film and I explore how it manifests in *Poor Things*. Though Roland Barthes’s conceptualization of intertextuality serves as a springboard, I turn to intermediality, particularly Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s work on ‘remediation’, in order to investigate how literary techniques are adapted for the medium of film. First, I explain how *Poor Things* uses intermediality to evoke the literary medium by imitating a chapter-like structure through remediation and by self-reflexively commenting on the act of reading through hypermediacy. Then, I posit that *Poor Things* not only remediates the literary medium in a postmodern way, but that it also reworks the *Bildungsroman* genre. As a neo-Victorian work, *Poor Things* adapts and subverts narrative and thematic patterns of this popular Victorian literary genre, while utilizing camera framing and

cinematography to formally translate the tight focalization of the Bildungsroman on film. In these two ways, *Poor Things* demonstrates a multi-faceted engagement with the medium of literature that allows it to rework the Bildungsroman tradition on a narrative level.

As I move from intertextuality to intermediality in my analysis of *Poor Things*' transformation of 19th-century literature, it is important to frame this discussion, in terms of theory. Barthes's theory of intertextuality is broader in scope than Kristeva's, in the sense that he views intertextuality as a quality all texts possess and he dismisses tracing the specific sources or origins of a particular text, as these are anonymous and innumerable ("From Work to Text" 160).²¹ Hence, if Kristeva defines a text as "a mosaic of quotations" (166), Barthes notes that these "are quotations without inverted commas" ("From Work to Text" 160). In other words, for Barthes, tracing specific intertextual references to other texts is to miss the broader scope of intertextuality as key feature of textuality. It is for this reason that Barthes's intertextuality is not considered particularly effective for the analysis of cultural texts, as it resists tracing particular references (Martínez-Alfaro 278). Though this thesis follows Barthes in viewing the cultural texts as the result of innumerable previous texts and discourses, up until now I have traced specific intertextual references to 19th-century texts in *Poor Things*. However, this has not been done to paint them as points of origin, but to explore how these texts are creatively revisited through intertextuality. Nevertheless, Barthes's conceptualization of intertextuality as a network of innumerable sources is a good starting point to explore wider questions about *Poor Things* and its debt to the literary medium as well as the Bildungsroman tradition.

To address how *Poor Things* engages with the medium of literature, I turn to intermediality, a body of theory that explores how media rework and interact with other mediatized forms. Film is a highly intermedial medium, since it brings together other media by evoking their traditions on the level of narrative structure (literature), dialogue (theatre), iconography (visual arts) and score (music) (Straumann 251). Despite their interaction with other media, each medium has its own unique formal and narrative techniques that differentiate it from other media forms, aspects that come into play when adapting a work from one medium

²¹ Throughout his theoretical writings, Barthes emphasizes the plurality of meanings that converge in a cultural text. In his book *S/Z*, though he does not specifically talk about intertextuality, Barthes notes that interpretation does not have to do with assigning a meaning to the text, but with acknowledging the plurality of meanings that coexist in the text (*S/Z* 5). Therefore, any text is a network of irreducible meanings that interact without one dominating over the other, even if they are contradictory (*S/Z* 5-6). For Barthes, semiotic plurality emerges as the key feature of texts, a view that informs his conceptualization of intertextuality as a polysemic network of meanings that come together.

to another (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* 34-5). Building on this, my focus on this chapter is how film uses techniques that are exclusive to it as a medium to evoke the medium of literature. At this point, it is important to note that adapting the content of a work should not be conflated with adapting a medium and its techniques (Bolter and Grusin 44). Indeed, adaptations of novels do not necessarily ‘translate’ the original medium’s techniques into the newer one; they focus on transferring the narrative to a different medium. In regard to *Poor Things*, I argue that both aspects are at play, since the film adapts Gray’s novel on the level of narrative, but its radicality lies in using intermedial techniques to call back to the literary medium.

Poor Things employs film-specific techniques to evoke the structure of a literary work. A central part of evoking a medium through intermediality, instead of adapting a work from one medium to another, is remediation. A term coined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, remediation refers to how media transcribe the codes and techniques of other media (65). In this way, newer media are inherently intermedial as they remediate and refashion older media (Straumann 254). In *Poor Things*’ case, I argue that the older medium of literature and its signature techniques are reworked in the newer medium of film. An example of such remediation is the use of title cards/intertitles, which introduce a new stage in Bella’s journey by signifying the places Bella visits (*PT* “Lisbon” 0:42:12; “The Ship” 1:04:48; “Alexandria” 1:16:16; “Paris” 1:24:07; “London” 1:51:10). In this way, they function similarly to book chapters, since they include paratextual information that inaugurates a new part of the narrative.²² In *Poor Things*, the paratextual nature of the title cards is further enhanced through their surrealist imagery, which show Bella walking on the fingers of an oversized hand (see Fig. 22) and crossing a bridge of eyeballs to get back to London (see Fig. 23). The prominence of body parts and anatomical features serves as a nod to Bella’s reanimation and the absurdity of the sequences, which evoke the grotesque genre, visually marks them as extradiegetic paratexts, much like book chapters.

²² Gérard Genette coined the term ‘paratext’. He notes that a text is often framed by extradiegetic markers, such as an author’s name, title, preface and chapter titles, all of which constitute ‘paratexts’ (1; 5). Paratexts occupy a liminal space, since they are extradiegetic to the main (narrative) text, but at the same time they extend it (1-2).



Fig. 22 (PT 1:04:48)



Fig. 23 (PT 1:51:10)

In addition to remediating literature, *Poor Things* utilizes hypermediacy to thematize the act of reading. Two contradictory forces are simultaneously at work in remediation: ‘immediacy’, which renders the medium invisible and immersive, and ‘hypermediacy’, which self-reflexively heightens the signifiers of the medium (Straumann 254). ‘Hypermediacy’ is of special interest to analyzing how the remediation of literature functions in *Poor Things* in a self-reflexive way. For example, the marking of chapters as analyzed above is not only an intermedial reworking of literary chapters, but also a moment where the medium of film breaks the illusion of narrative immersion, by making itself visible as a medium through an extradiegetic element. Furthermore, there are nods to literature as a medium through the prominence of the act of reading and the multiple shots of Bella reading books, which symbolize Bella’s intellectual growth throughout the film. Indeed, Duncan is frustrated that Bella is “always reading now[adays]” (PT 1:11:19) and tries to dissuade her from reading by throwing her book into the ocean. After this incident, Martha von Kurtzrock, a rich woman Bella meets on the ship, hands her over another one (see Fig. 24), a symbolic encouragement of how Bella moves away from Duncan’s stifling influence thanks to reading. It is no coincidence that the film ends on a shot of Bella reading a book (see Fig. 25), a subtle nod to literature as a medium and a self-reflexive reminder of the film’s literary roots.



Fig. 24 (PT 1:11:45)



Fig. 25 (PT 2:15:37)

Moreover, *Poor Things* blends hypermediacy with postmodern self-reflexivity in its remediation of the literary medium. Andrea Kirchknopf notes that neo-Victorian novels employ the narrative structure, design and conventions of popular literary genres, while creatively transforming them through postmodern pastiche and parody (54). Applying this to neo-Victorian film, I argue that the latter similarly utilizes plot patterns and literary conventions self-reflexively, resulting in the creation of hypermediacy. In *Poor Things*, such a moment of self-reflexivity occurs when Bella and Duncan arrive penniless in Paris and Bella ponders that “many adventurers have faced these odds, [such as] Robinson Crusoe” (PT 1:24:48-53). In this case, Bella likens her and Duncan’s situation to that of the titular character of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). This is not a mere intertextual reference, but more importantly constitutes an instance of hypermediacy, since Bella self-reflexively reminds the audience of her own fictionality. Thus, Bella is thrust into the familiar narrative pattern of a hero that must survive despite the harsh external circumstances, but she breaks the suspension of disbelief by acknowledging that pattern is commonplace in classic narratives.

Apart from remediating the medium of literature, *Poor Things* also exploits intermediality to evoke the topoi of the Bildungsroman, a literary genre that focuses on a character’s journey from adolescence to adulthood and thematizes the challenges of reconciling a character’s inner aspirations with social demands (Graham 1). The birth of the Bildungsroman is associated with 18th-century German Enlightenment and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s oeuvre, but the genre quickly transcended the limits of the Germanophone world and spread across Europe and the USA in the 19th century (Graham 3; Salmon 58), to the extent that it is considered the literary genre par excellence of the 19th century (Salmon 57). Since many Victorian novels, such as those by Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, belong to the

Bildungsroman genre (57), it stands to reason that a neo-Victorian work like *Poor Things* would put its own spin on the genre. Indeed, the Bildungsroman key trademark of the passage from adolescence to adulthood is reflected in Bella, who develops from a figurative child to an adult, as reflected in the progression of her linguistic expression. In the beginning of the film, Bella speaks in an idiosyncratic way, making multiple mistakes, like a child would, but, as she grows intellectually, she gradually “los[es] some of [her] adorable way of speaking” (*PT* 1:11:21), as Duncan patronizingly notes. Therefore, language becomes a symbol for the passage to adulthood and maturity. Moreover, the structural pattern of the Victorian Bildungsroman involves spatial and temporal movement on the part of the main character which works in tandem with their spiritual growth (Salmon 64). Similarly, in *Poor Things* Bella travels throughout Europe, a spatial journey that helps her mature and expand her horizons.²³ Hence, when Bella returns to London and Godwin’s estate, her intellectual transformation is felt more deeply, when she is juxtaposed with Felicity, Godwin’s newest experiment, whom Bella first meets upon returning (*PT* 1:53:49). Felicity resembles Bella’s earlier developmental state, since she only speaks a few words, and thus functions as a double and a foil that highlights Bella’s change and transition into adulthood.

Nevertheless, as a neo-Victorian work, *Poor Things* does not merely evoke the Bildungsroman genre but also subverts it. An important aspect of the Bildungsroman is the main character’s eventual social reintegration, which is achieved through marriage or social mobility (Salmon 69). Therefore, the Bildungsroman typically includes or depicts a journey that is eventually resolved in a spatial and spiritual return to the established social order, a final signal of the character’s maturity. However, this optimistic ‘happy ending’ was already challenged by the second half of the 19th century, with novels opting for disillusionment and alienation instead of a socially integrative conclusion (71). Indeed, the foregrounding of marriage in the Victorian Bildungsroman, as well as its emphasis on social mobility and acquisition of wealth can be interpreted as promoting conservative heteronormative and classist values. This problematic side to social reintegration into Victorian society is highlighted in *Poor Things*. More specifically, Bella’s marriage to Max, which is abruptly cancelled when Bella abandons him at the altar to leave with Alfred (*PT* 2:01:14), would normally signal a

²³ Apart from a focus on the inner turmoil and development of the main character, the Bildungsroman is particularly invested in the interplay between the individual and wider societal discourses and change (Graham 2;4). Indeed, in *Poor Things*, Bella’s intellectual development is intertwined with wider philosophical concerns regarding cruelty and kindness in society, which she constantly debates with Harry. For an exploration of cruelty and kindness in the formation of Bella’s identity, cf. Chapter 3.2 of the present thesis.

social reintegration. However, *Poor Things* playfully disrupts this narrative convention by having Bella remain unmarried. Though Bella eventually returns to Godwin's estate as a master of herself, she has not achieved marriage nor social mobility, but rather her optimistic happy ending is to study to become a doctor independently of a man (*PT* 2:14:54).²⁴ In this way, *Poor Things* could be considered a subversive filmic Bildungsroman, since it retains the genre's conventions, while destabilizing and transforming them.

Poor Things evokes the Bildungsroman genre not only on a narrative level, but on a formal level as well, since it adapts literary focalization through intermediality. In this case, the older medium of literature is evoked in the film by adapting medium-specific techniques of the former to the latter. As a genre, the Bildungsroman is associated with a tight focus on the perspective and psychological state of the main character (Graham 1). In the medium of film, focalization is achieved on a visual level (ocularization) and an auditory level (auricularization) through the camera, editing and montage (Schlickers 244). Oculurazation refers to how film visually signifies perspective. Similarly to literary focalization, oculurazation can be divided to zero and internal, with the former not being tied to the perspective of any character and the latter being ascribed to the perception of a single character (248-9). *Poor Things* often employs internal ocularization, since the world is structured to reflect Bella's perception of it. In film, the camera adopts specific points of view, often tied to a character's perception, thus functioning similarly to focalization and 1st-person narration in literature (Straumann 252). Indeed, full figure tracking shots of Bella are interspersed throughout the film, being especially prominent in sequences when Bella discovers something new, such as her newfound wonder in her wandering of Lisbon (see Fig. 26) and her exploration of the ship (see Fig. 27). These shots are part of larger sequences, where the camera navigates the film space in tandem with Bella, spatially moving along with her movements. The prominence of these sequences throughout the film constitutes an example of internal ocularization, since the audience filters the world through Bella's perception, discovering new things as soon as Bella directs her gaze towards them. Bella's perspective also influences aesthetic choices on a visual level, since the color palette is softer and lighter in outdoor sequences such as the one in Lisbon to reflect a sense of coziness, whereas in the outdoor space of the ship, the colors are darker to evoke entrapment. Therefore, *Poor Things* evokes the strong character focalization which is

²⁴ Bella's journey towards feminist emancipation and identity is explored in detail in Chapter 3.1 of the present thesis.

prominent in the Bildungsroman genre by employing techniques of internal ocularization through the camera angles that privilege Bella's viewpoint.



Fig. 26 (PT 0:44:50)



Fig. 27 (PT 1:03:23)

Building on this, I posit that part of this internal ocularization is the use of color in the film in terms of cinematography, which is not realistic, as shown in Chapter 1.2, but rather is tied to Bella's perception of the world. Hutcheon notes that film/performance adaptations of print media need to transform the verbal word into audiovisual sequences (*A Theory of Adaptation* 40). Central to this media transfer is the transition from 'telling' to 'showing', in the sense that verbal-based narrative techniques must be adapted for a visual medium (*A Theory of Adaptation* 36). Cinematography, including both color saturation and lighting, is part of this process as much as framing and blocking is. More specifically, the stages of the Bildungsroman, which involve a move from adolescence to adulthood through social reintegration, are reflected in the use of color. When Bella roams Godwin's estate at the beginning of the film, the cinematography employs black and white to signal the stage of 'childhood' (see Fig. 28). As Bella leaves for her journey, the black and white color grading, a part of the film's cinematography, gives its place to a luscious and vibrant color palette that signals the transitional stage of 'adolescence' (see Fig. 29). Lastly, the final passage into 'adulthood' is reflected in the deeper and muted color palette, when Bella returns to London (see Fig. 30), which demonstrates how she has found a more balanced perspective to look at the world.



Fig. 28 (PT 0:04:35)



Fig. 29 (PT 1:10:16)



Fig. 30 (PT 2:09:50)

Focusing on these three shots, I explore in detail how the stylistic choices in terms of color, lighting and angle reflect Bella's perspective. In the beginning of the film, the color palette is limited to black and white, as illustrated in Fig. 28, to evoke how Bella perceives the world as mundane because of her domestic confinement. It is no coincidence that the furthest point in the shot in terms of depth is a door that leads outside of the house. This part of the frame is bathed in light, in order to visualize Bella's thirst to explore the outside world, while she walks towards the tonally darker part of the frame, as she goes further into the house. In contrast to Fig. 28, in Fig. 29 the lighting is even throughout the frame, since Bella is at the center of expanding her horizons, no longer trapped in the shadows. The color palette is vibrant, and colors such as magenta and purple craft an atmosphere of fantasy. Moreover, the backdrop is the open sea, evoking a sense of freedom, which is sharply contrasted with Fig. 30, which takes place in the Blessington estate. Here, shadows dominate the frame, with lighting coming through the windows, signaling Bella's sense of entrapment. Here, the color palette includes

more natural tones, in order to reflect the lack of wonder and discovery Bella experiences in the estate. Thus, these shots exemplify how the film's cinematography, a medium-specific technique, successfully emulates the literary focalization of the Bildungsroman on film.

Bringing together the main arguments of this chapter, I posit that *Poor Things* looks back to 19th-century literature to craft its narrative, revisiting key fiction texts through intertextuality and reworking the prominent Bildungsroman genre through intermediality. Creatively transferring literary conventions and formally evoking the medium of literature, *Poor Things* self-reflexively pays homage to the literary tradition that came before it, subverting it from a neo-Victorian viewpoint. As Imelda Whelehan points out, neo-Victorian texts constitute adaptations in themselves, even when they do not refer to a specific Victorian literary text (272). This statement highlights the complex engagement between the Victorian literary tradition and its reworking in contemporary works, especially in the film medium. More specifically, the multimodal nature of film as a medium due to its combination of literature, theatre, music and the visual arts allows it to create a polyphony between image, sound and word that echoes novelistic discourse (Straumann 251). The stress on the polyphonic nature of the film medium echoes the dialogic aspect of drawing on previous texts and media. Indeed, with its self-conscious transformation of the Victorian tradition in the film medium, *Poor Things* reveals the highly dialogic nature of neo-Victorian media in relation to their literary 'forefathers'. Nevertheless, the subversive reworking of the Victorian past does not stop on the level of narrative; rather *Poor Things* also tackles past Victorian discourses regarding female identity through Bella's journey of growth, as I explore in the following chapter.

3. Patriarchal Control and Female Emancipation in *Poor Things*

3.1 Bella Baxter's Journey: The Development of the Self

Up until now, the present thesis has explored how *Poor Things* reviews the Victorian era through its narrative and formal characteristics. This approach is not only limited to these two levels, but also extends to the film's themes, particularly its treatment of control and emancipation in Bella's character arc. More specifically, this chapter focuses on how *Poor Things* upsets Victorian norms on a thematic level, by exploring the tension between male control and female emancipation through Bella's growth. In the first subchapter of the following, I explore how Bella embarks on an emancipatory journey by contesting the gender power dynamics in her relationship with Duncan, subverting Victorian discourses about decorum and femininity. In the second subchapter, I propose that the tension between control and emancipation is contested through the body, which becomes a site for control when Alfred tries to confine Bella by mutilating her body. At this point, I turn to Judith Butler's theories on the materiality of the body to illustrate how the film criticizes Victorian sexist discourses about hysteria and female sexual drive. By escaping Alfred's control, I will argue, Bella reclaims her body by thematically distancing herself from Victoria's cruelty, thus aligning the film's thematic exploration of kindness and cruelty with body violence.

Similarly to how Bildungsroman protagonists experience a development from adolescence to adulthood,²⁵ Bella goes through an emancipatory journey that sees her liberating herself from male control and defying Victorian taboos regarding proper female behavior. In Gray's original novel, Bella is constructed literally and metaphorically by the men around her, since her story is narrated by male characters who knew her in the novel, thus giving an unreliable account of her life through a 'male' lens (Tiitinen 315). Hence, the issue of who has the power to shape and control identity is central to the novel and is further explored in the film adaptation. More specifically, the theme of male control is contrasted to Bella's thirst for independence, which she manages to acquire despite the attempts of the male characters in the film to shelter and entrap her. Indeed, all the men in Bella's life occupy important positions in the public sphere, Godwin Baxter in medicine, Duncan Wedderburn in law and Alfred

²⁵ For an exploration of how *Poor Things* reworks elements from the Bildungsroman tradition, cf. Chapter 2.2 of the present thesis.

Blessington in the military, and wish to replicate that power (im)balance in the private sphere by establishing authority over Bella (Tweed 148). Their knowledge and social status are contrasted to Bella's cognitive atypicality, especially earlier in the film (148). However, Bella manages to overcome their control. For example, Bella complains to Godwin that he "hold[s] [her] too tight" (PT 0:37:19) and clearly states her intention to leave his house to flee with Duncan. This is further demonstrated through the subversion of the power dynamics in Bella's relationship with Duncan, who seeks to sexually take advantage of Bella and then leave her. Even though Duncan claims that Bella is "a prisoner and [he] aim[s] to free [her]" (PT 0:36:00) from Godwin's confinement, he wants to take advantage of Bella's ignorance. However, he gradually becomes attached to her and seeks to control and confine her by tricking her into leaving Lisbon and going on a cruise with him to keep her close. Bella realizes that Duncan "aim[s] to trap [her] at sea" (PT 1:01:38), to which Duncan replies that "it's true [Bella] will be easier to find" (PT 1:01:43) in the small space of the ship, thus asserting his dominance over her. In this way, the issue of male control becomes prevalent to the film, as both Godwin and Duncan try to control Bella through confinement.

However, Duncan's attempts at limiting Bella have little effect, since the latter manages to extract herself from him through her friendship with Martha von Kurtzrock, an elderly woman she meets on the ship. Overall, *Poor Things* subverts the audience's expectations, since Bella acquires power over the men in her life, while going against the Victorian social norms (Tweed 148). Though the male characters in *Poor Things* try to control Bella, such as Duncan who falsely promise freedom to Bella, Martha von Kurtzrock supports Bella in her emancipatory journey. As Chakraborty notes, Martha subverts the patriarchal trope of the older woman who is envious of the younger and more attractive Bella, since Martha is one of the few characters that does not want to take advantage of Bella and supplies her with books to help her become independent (n. pag.). When Bella first meets Martha and asks her whether she still has sex, the latter tells Bella that "as years have passed what's in between [her] ears is [her] big concern" (PT 1:07:02). In this way, Martha introduces Bella to the importance of growing intellectually. By embracing her autonomy and age, Martha serves as a model of empowerment for Bella (Chakraborty n. pag.). Therefore, Bella's meeting with Martha is pivotal to her emancipatory journey, as Martha encourages her to broaden her intellectual horizons by suggesting philosophers and authors, as seen in her proposal to "try and read Goethe" (PT 1:10:21). By celebrating her independence, Martha further presents a threat to the patriarchal Victorian world of *Poor Things*, which is symbolically manifested when Duncan tries to throw

her of the ship (*PT* 1:13:50). Duncan says that Martha “is the problem” (*PT* 1:13:12), since it is her influence on Bella that drives her away from Duncan’s clutches and encourages her to grow intellectually through reading. This happens because Duncan resents Bella’s growth and independence, as it goes hand in hand with her growing increasingly distant from him and escaping the clutches of his control.

Furthermore, Bella contests Victorian femininity and resists Victorian norms through humor, thus defying a form of social control to establish her identity. Since neo-Victorian media adopt an ironic approach to the 19th century, they employ humor to contest Victorian discourses (Kohlke and Gutleben, “What’s so Funny” 18). Humor creates a sense of incongruity, since laughter is produced as a result of the discrepancy between the Victorian past and the audience’s postmodern awareness (18). In Gray’s original novel, humor functions in an incongruous way, since it is often produced through Bella’s lack of awareness about socially acceptable Victorian behavior (20). This effect is replicated in the film, when Bella introduces Martha to Duncan as her “new friend who has not been fucked in twenty years” (*PT* 1:07:38), which elicits a surprised reaction from Duncan, who tells Bella that she “cannot speak like this” (*PT* 1:07:47) in polite society. The comedic effect is created precisely because Bella openly talks about Martha’s sexual life. This lack of awareness is further exhibited when Bella joins Duncan’s friends at dinner and laughter is produced by Bella’s taboo-breaking table manners and open discussion of sex, which are contrasted to the proper behavior of Duncan’s friends. More specifically, to the disgust of Duncan and his friends, Bella spits out her food, when she does not like it, asking why she should “keep it in [her] mouth if it is revolting” (*PT* 0:49:39). Kitty replies to this that she has “said that before to Gerald, if [they] catch [her] drift” (*PT* 0:49:41) making the others laugh but Bella interjects saying that she “means his penis” (*PT* 0:49:48), producing discomfort among the people around her. The difference is that Bella spells out what Kitty only implied, putting her at odds with Victorian social rules of decorum. Kitty’s joke is socially acceptable, because it relies on implication, thus not crossing a social line, whereas Bella’s open discussion of sex makes the others gasp in shock. This produces a comedic effect and, more importantly, it is through her discussion of sexuality that Bella defies Victorian norms about what constitutes ‘proper’ femininity.

Bella eventually escapes Duncan’s control, as she gains her independence by breaking with Victorian norms about marriage. Indeed, Esser notes that though *Poor Things* leans into a gothic premise in demonstrating how male figures of authority try to restrain Bella, who as a cognitively underdeveloped woman is vulnerable to them, the film ultimately employs humor

and irony to explore how Bella escapes control contrary to the audience's expectations (140). This is illustrated when Duncan, growing increasingly jealous of Bella, proposes to marry her, expecting her to accept his proposal. However, in an ironic subversion of power dynamics, Bella declines his proposal saying that she only chose Duncan "for fun" (*PT* 1:08:58). Here, Bella behaves in a way that was not expected of women in the Victorian era and asserts her dominance in her relationship with Duncan by refusing to marry him. Indeed, Bella resists conforming to a subservient gender role, thus upsetting any efforts of the men around her to 'dominate' her (Glendening 79). In this way, Bella forms her identity independently of the men in the novel, thus claiming the right to self-determine both her identity and body (Fiorato 297). It is no coincidence that from this point on, Duncan becomes a scorned lover who pathetically begs Bella to return to him, taking on a role usually attributed to women. This newly established subversion of power dynamics is visualized when Bella becomes a sex worker, thus seemingly having a 'lower' status than a lawyer like Duncan, Duncan begs her to return to him (see Fig. 31). In this shot, Bella dominates the frame by standing at a higher level on the balcony, thus symbolically holding power over Duncan, who is small dot at the lower end of the frame. Moreover, Bella's warm-toned yellow dress makes her stand out, as the rest of the shot is dominated by cool-toned blue shades. Thus, while Duncan blurs with the background in his grey costume, Bella pops in the image, asserting her dominant subject position. Not only does this shot visualize the new power dynamics between them, but it also signals Bella's autonomy from Duncan and his control, as she is separated from him visually by the balcony's barrier. Bella scorns Duncan's attempts to control her through marriage by telling him that their "time has ended [and that she] feel[s] nothing but the lingering question of how did [she] ever want [him]" (*PT* 1:43:03). In this way, Bella overcomes Duncan's attempts to restrain her through marriage by asserting her independence from him.



Fig. 31 (*PT* 1:42:13)

In conclusion, by engaging with questions of control and freedom as part of Bella's character arc, *Poor Things* explores and subverts the construction of female identity in the Victorian era. More specifically, Bella gradually grows out of the control of the men in her life and breaks Victorian taboos regarding social decorum and proper female behavior. This is represented in a comedic way, thus reflecting the film's postmodern and ironic approach in terms of form, as explored in chapter 2, on a thematic level as well. Moreover, Bella's journey is illustrated in terms of the tension between male entrapment and female emancipation, a pattern that is related to the politics of the body and violence, as I argue in the following subchapter.

3.2 Cruel Things: The Violence of Control Through the Body

As demonstrated in the previous subchapter, the issue of control in contrast to emancipation lies at the heart of *Poor Things*' exploration of the Victorian era and its discourses. What is of interest to this chapter is how *Poor Things* navigates this thematic contrast by relating it to how control is gained and contested through the body, which becomes a space of inscribing discourses. In this subchapter, I propose that the body becomes central to how Alfred tries to control Bella by attempting to have a hysterectomy performed on her, something that brings to the forefront Victorian discourses about hysteria and female madness. The figure of the hysteric is of interest to the neo-Victorian project, since the hysteric constitutes a subject that is rendered 'other' through scientific discourse, echoing the dark and traumatizing aspects of Victorian legacies on the postmodern subject (Kohlke and Gutleben, "Introduction" 2). By using hysteria in this way, the film highlights how gender dynamics are interwoven with body politics, criticizing the sexist bias in scientific discourses through Bella and Alfred's relationship. Moreover, Alfred's treatment of Bella brings to the forefront the issue of violence, a theme that is represented in the film along the lines of kindness and cruelty. By aligning herself with kindness, Bella contests the violence of male control that she has experienced by the men in her life, which involved confinement and mutilation.

Duncan's failed entrapment of Bella echoes how Alfred, Victoria's husband, tries to confine Bella within the domestic space by mutilating her body. In their book *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler focuses on the relation between the body's materiality and the social aspect of performing gender (xi). Butler notes that material difference is often invoked as grounds to create an irreducible category of sexual difference, when in fact the materiality of

the body is discursively formed (xi). In other words, it is through materiality that gender is fixed and is thought of in terms of irreducible sexual difference. In this way, ideology uses materiality to regulate bodies and delineate separate gender roles based on material difference (xi-xii). Butler prompts us to think of materiality as the effect of discourse and power on the body (xii). Because of this focus on materiality, Butler's text is relevant to this thesis, since Bella's journey towards emancipation from male control occurs through a contestation and a renegotiation of her body. Indeed, as a female 'Frankenstein', Bella's story is interwoven with the history of her body and hence her materiality. Though the horror genre often represented the Creature as a monster, in contemporary transformations of *Frankenstein* this monstrosity is coded as a radical gender and bodily hybridity that evokes both terror and laughter (Picart 193; 195). More specifically, contemporary *Frankenstein* 'monsters' destabilize the very notion of the monstrous as resisting gender norms and overcoming patriarchal and heteronormative politics through their hybridity (192-3). Indeed, as a contemporary reworking of *Frankenstein*, *Poor Things* employs Bella's body as a metaphor for the neo-Victorian project. Intertextually assembled from previous texts and discourses, Bella is a hybrid amalgamation of various cultural texts, as reflected in her hybrid and fluid body.

Therefore, the body becomes an important space upon which history is inscribed, since control for Bella's autonomy is linked with the men wielding power over her. Indeed, Godwin reassembles her body, Duncan claims it sexually and Alfred wants to mutilate it. More specifically, Alfred tries to impose his authority over Bella by mutilating her body on the grounds that she is suffering from 'hysteria'. Though outdated as a term, hysteria in the 19th century was seen as a predominantly female disease, often related to sexual promiscuity (Tweed 145). Indeed, Alfred notes that Bella's "sexual hysteria was often out of hand" (*PT* 2:04:56), falsely relating Bella's sexual drive to hysteria. In the Victorian era, definitions of insanity and hysteria were culturally constructed and targeted women, since they were seen as emotionally volatile and ruled by their reproductive anatomy (Showalter 179-80). This idea of emotional instability and hysteria is illustrated in *Poor Things*, when Alfred tells Bella that she "left [him] in a state of some mental addlement and hysteria over [her] pregnancy" (*PT* 2:00:01), once again attributing her behavior to hysteria.

In this way, Alfred reproduces traditional Victorian discourses about hysteria and madness and is a representative of Victorian conservatism and patriarchy. During the Victorian era, a massive medicalization of life occurred, where patterns of behaviour, that were previously not conceptualized in medical terms, came under scrutiny. However, this

medicalization was not free of discrimination, since Victorian medicine zeroed in on marginalized groups such as women and poor people, pathologizing their difference as illness in need of monitoring and discipline (Rothfield 177). Moreover, Victorian discourses of morality became intertwined with disease, leading to treating illness as a symptom of lacking morality (177). Indeed, it is no coincidence that Alfred associates Bella's intense sexual drive with a lack of morality, since promiscuity deviates from the accepted moral norms expected of Victorian women. Alfred further expresses the view that "a woman's life's work is children" (*PT* 2:09:42), thus perpetuating a Victorian binary by outlining different courses for the life aims of men and women, echoing the Victorian idea of the separate spheres.²⁶ Here, Alfred's statement demonstrates Butler's argument that regulatory practices inform our conceptualization of gender by tying it to materiality as an irreducible difference (Butler xii). By telling Bella that a woman's purpose in life is to give birth and raise children, Alfred effectively starts from the material aspect of the 'female' body as giving birth and links it to the socially constructed view of women as raising children. In this way, the female body is effectively reduced to a reproductive machine, since Alfred does not see any use to Bella beyond her ability to give birth to children.

It is no coincidence that Alfred uses that claim as an excuse to surgically mutilate Bella so as to 'fix' her body, once again anchoring the cultural understanding of gender to the body's materiality. This is illustrated when Bella overhears Alfred and a medical doctor's discussion about removing her clitoris without her consent. Alfred reveals his plan to have a clitoridectomy performed on Bella and then raping her in order to impregnate her (*PT* 2:09:44). Alfred's absurd plan can be related to Hannah Tweed's argument that the prominence of pseudo-medical discourses in Gray's original novel constitutes a satiric take on Victorian discourses about hysteria and psychosomatic illness, done so to demonstrate the fluidity of diagnosis and the biases in the 19th century's increasing medicalization (141-2). This dynamic is replicated in the film through Alfred and the doctor's discussion. The doctor says that he had his "own more precise device made" to perform the surgery (*PT* 2:08:18). Alfred says that "this time we will get it done" (*PT* 2:08:35), implying that he had tried to perform a female genital mutilation on Bella before, in order to stop her 'abnormal' sexual urges. This reflects how 'hysteria' was pathologized in the Victorian era, since many doctors and early practitioners of psychiatry

²⁶ The doctrine of the separate spheres refers to the idea that social roles and spaces were gendered along the binary lines of 'male' and 'female'. In this way, there was a binary distribution of labor, where women were confined in the domestic space whereas men were expected to occupy the social sphere of business (Vanden Bossche 90).

performed brutal surgeries of genetic mutilation such as clitoridectomy and hysterectomy on female patients who were diagnosed as ‘sexually disturbed’ (Showalter 177-8). However, these methods were later scientifically disproved, thus demonstrating how the ideological drive to control and subordinate women was validated by pseudo-medical discourses (180). Alfred similarly echoes this medical discourse, when he tells Bella that “the root of your problem is between your legs” (*PT* 2:09:27), thus relating mental instability to a supposedly ‘unhealthy’ female sexual drive, echoing Victorian ideas about proper femininity. However, Alfred brushes over how his impregnation of Victoria led her to commit suicide, instead perpetuating patriarchal discourses about the female body.

The body becomes a site of contesting and negotiating control in *Poor Things*, since it is through reclaiming her body that Bella manages to resist Alfred’s authority. Issues of control and autonomy are raised when Alfred excuses his decision to mutilate Bella’s body by stating that as a military man “[his] life is dedicated to the taking of territory” (*PT* 2:09:17), arguing that Bella is his. Alfred compares his wife to taking territory in the battlefield, thus the film uses a military discourse to show the shortcomings and the points of convergence between these two problematic discourses. Bella protests to this idea, saying that “[she is] not territory” (*PT* 2:09:22), thus declaring herself independent of a husband. Once again, a powerful weapon in Bella’s arsenal is humor. Humor is prevalent in *Poor Things*, since incongruity lies at its core, as Bella’s hybrid body defies scientific discourse as does her enjoyment of sex which stands in sharp contrast to Victorian norms about ‘proper’ femininity (Kohlke and Gutleben, “What’s so Funny” 20-1). In confronting Alfred, she adopts a polemical stance when she announces to him that she “will keep [her] new life and [her] lovely old clitoris” (*PT* 2:10:08). This tongue-in-cheek comment is more than merely a moment for the audience to laugh but rather constitutes a moment of empowerment for Bella. Indeed, neo-Victorianism often employs humor to express empowerment or resistance towards Victorian gender norms (Kohlke and Gutleben, “What’s So Funny” 12). By playfully articulating her intention to keep her ‘lovely clitoris’, Bella stands up to Alfred and shuts down his intention to genetically mutilate her, thus powerfully reclaiming her anatomy from male control. It is no coincidence that she refers ‘new life’ and her ‘old clitoris’, thus contrasting herself from how Alfred had control of her body in her ‘old life’ as Victoria. In this a way, a contrast is crafted between how Victoria’s life was regulated by Alfred through her body in contrast to how Bella becomes emancipated keeping her ‘clitoris’, which is used to denote her entire body and thus the decision to keep her clitoris is equated with preserving her bodily autonomy.

This contrast between Bella and Victoria is further used to highlight Bella's emancipatory journey. Victoria's life was regulated and controlled by Alfred to such a degree that the only escape from this was suicide. On the contrary, Bella is her own creation, as Godwin does not take credit for her development. Godwin tells Bella that he "read [her] cards and letters home and watched [her] fearlessly create Bella Baxter with wonder" (*PT* 1:55:29), revealing how Bella formed her identity by extricating herself from male control. Upon learning the truth about how she came to exist, Bella goes to the bridge from where Victoria jumped off (*PT* 1:54:44). The distinct personalities of Bella and Victoria are visualized through the camera framing: whereas in the film's opening scene we only see Victoria's back and her face is obscured from us (see Fig. 32), in the Bella's visiting of the bridge we see her face (see Fig. 33). Furthermore, though both shots are dominated by blue colors, the palette in Fig. 32 includes darker shades, reflecting the emotional turmoil Victoria experiences, whereas in Fig. 33 not only are the blue shades lighter, but also a crack of a warm-toned color in the sky signals Bella's newfound emancipation. This visualization effectively splits Victoria and Bella from each other, contrasting the former's tightly regulated life by Alfred to the latter's self-determination.



Fig. 32 (*PT* 0:01:18)



Fig. 33 (*PT* 1:54:44)

Though Bella and Victoria share the same body, they are distinct people, a difference that is thematized through the conflict between kindness and cruelty, a major theme in the film. As a Bildungsroman protagonist, Bella undergoes a transition from adolescence to adulthood. This transition is seen through the formation of her identity, since Bella chooses to see kindness in people. For instance, Bella believes that "it is the goal of all to improve, advance, progress, grow" (*PT* 1:10:37), expressing an optimism about people being kind and striving to treat others with empathy. However, Harry tells her that talk about improvement is a concealment "from the fact that we are all cruel beasts" (*PT* 1:10:55), thus introducing the conflict between Bella's optimistic belief that people can change and the cruelty she experiences around her.

Indeed, Bella strives to grow and progress and notes that she is “sure [she is] indicative of all” (*PT* 1:10:43). However, this statement is laced with humor, since not only does Bella make an overgeneralization, but as the audience later learns, in an ironic twist of fate, Victoria showed “cruelty [and she] was not a kind person” (*PT* 2:04:13). However, Bella’s progression from cruelty in her previous life as Victoria to kindness and empathy marks her own transition to adulthood and renders her independent from her previous life and able to progress and grow,

Moreover, this conflict about kindness and cruelty is not only an important part of Bella’s character arc and spiritual growth but is also used to explore how the body becomes entangled in discourse. Though Bella believes in kindness, she herself has experienced cruelty at the hands of men in her life, first by Alfred in her marriage, then by Baxter who experiments with her body and later by Duncan who wants to take advantage of her for sex. In this way, the body becomes a site of violence, where other people’s cruelty manifests. This is related to Butler’s argument that “matter itself is founded through a set of violations” (5), highlighting how sexual difference is imposed on the material body through a set of limitations and violations. In Bella’s case, her body has been marked by Victorian societal norms that impose violent restrictions upon marginalized subjects, such as women.

Indeed, the film draws a parallel between violence and marginalized subjects through Bella’s reanimated body. The disadvantage of people in pain and the cruelty others show is addressed when Harry shows Bella the poor and dying people of Alexandria, telling her that if they helped the poor people they would be treated with violence and “if they [i.e. the people] were here and [Bella and Harry] there, [Bella and Harry] would do the same to them” (*PT* 1:17:16). Here, Harry wants to demonstrate how human nature at its basest is cruel and violent. I propose that a parallel with this scene is drawn, when Bella goes to the bridge where Victoria killed herself and reflects on cruelty and pain. Bella observes some washed-off fish that struggle to survive (see Fig. 34), reminding the audience how Victoria was washed off to the shore and left in a half-dead half-alive state. The way the fish is visualized is reminiscent of the depiction of the dying people in Alexandria (see Fig. 35), since both are shot from above, looking tiny in relation to their environment. Bella is heard saying in voice-over that “it is hard to be in the position where one wants to hit someone who is already in obvious pain” (*PT* 1:54:53). In this way, a parallel is drawn between the dying people of Alexandria, the half-dead fish and the reanimated Bella, since all of them are ‘poor things’ having experienced suffering and cruelty. Cruelty was involved in Bella’s creation, since, similarly to the fish, Victoria was already in extreme pain and wanted to die. Godwin asks Bella if she “would [...] rather be a

gray slab of flesh with a fishhook in [her] nose” (*PT* 1:55:03), describing the state of pain he found Victoria’s body in. Hence, Bella was a ‘poor thing’ that was discarded and would be left to rot if Godwin had not reanimated her, thus allowing her a second chance at life. This is what differentiates Bella and makes her optimistic view triumph over the cruelty she has experienced. Even though she has experienced violence and has grown out of her naïve belief that all people are kind, she chooses to craft her own path that is characterized by kindness, especially towards marginalized subjects like herself.



Fig. 34 (*PT* 1:54:51)



Fig. 35 (*PT* 1:17:04)

By identifying Bella with marginalized groups that have been overlooked, the film is also indicative of neo-Victorianism’s reviewing of history through the perspective of sexually, racially and ethnically ‘othered’ subjects. Hutcheon identifies postmodernism’s elevation of traditional marginalized voices of the periphery as an important aesthetic and political movement (*Politics* 17). In line with postmodernism’s anti-essentialism and view of the subject as fragmented, historiographic metafiction treats subjectivity as anti-essentialist, complex and historically and culturally specific, shedding light to the role class, ethnicity, gender and race play in the formation of the subject (37). This focus is deeply political, as it highlights the experiences of marginalized subjects and thus restores dignity to the historical subjects it was denied to. In this vein, Carroll proposes that neo-Victorianism is a form of recognitive justice, a symbolic process that aims to restore justice and offer visibility to traditionally marginalized subjects and experiences (195).²⁷ In *Poor Things*, Bella is a subject that would have been

²⁷ Nevertheless, it is up for debate whether neo-Victorianism can meaningfully contribute to political and ideological discourses. For instance, Gutleben appears skeptical towards contemporary neo-Victorian fiction, claiming that while the parodic and metafictional aspects of early neo-Victorian fiction, such as Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, were groundbreaking, they appear less progressive and radical when utilized in later neo-Victorian fiction (*Nostalgic Postmodernism* 120). While Gutleben’s claim that contemporary neo-Victorian fiction fails to achieve the same effect of earlier neo-Victorian fiction may have some merit in the sense that any aesthetic form will lose its freshness over the course of time, this thesis argues that such an argument overlooks contemporary neo-

confined to a domestic space under her oppressive husband's control, but her second chance at life sees her triumph over the men that treated her cruelly. Carroll argues that as a form of representation, fiction can become a force of recognitive justice by telling narratives about subjects of the periphery, something that is visible in neo-Victorian fiction's engagement with women, queer subjects, criminals and colonial subjects that are vilified or erased from official history (195). Indeed, Bella's narrative constitutes an unspoken history of Victorian marginalized subjects. In reclaiming her body, Bella is given a second chance that allows her to escape male control and violence. By aligning herself with kindness, Bella highlights the excess of violence Victorian women experienced in abusive relationships and marriage.

Bringing this chapter to a close, I argue that the film engages thematically with issues of control and emancipation, cruelty and kindness, to illustrate how Bella deviates from Victorian discourses. By resisting Godwin and Duncan's control, Bella humorously forms her identity independently of them, while her final confrontation with Alfred brings to the forefront the dark aspects of male control. As Neo-Victorianism engages in working out collective traumas the Victorian era has inherited to our world (Kohlke 7; 9), Bella's journey from experiences of violence towards emancipation illustrates how the film tackles the legacies of the Victorian era and subverts them by allowing Bella to distance herself from Victorian discourses. This emancipation is signaled through her body, which Bella reclaims not only by freeing it from male control but also by celebrating her sexual drive, which is the focus of the following chapter.

Victorian fiction's potential to provide radical new perspectives that are closer to contemporary concerns.

4. The Politics of Sexuality in *Poor Things*

4.1 Fragmented Victorian Bodies: Female Sexual Pleasure and Sex Work

As I argued in the last chapter, the formation of Bella's identity goes in tandem with a contestation for the control of her body. An aspect that has not been addressed so far but is of central importance to reclaiming the body and subverting Victorian discourses, is the issue of female sexuality. *Poor Things* is preoccupied with this issue, since a significant part of the film is devoted to Bella's discovery of desire and pleasure against the backdrop of the Victorian era. In this subchapter, I argue that *Poor Things* focuses on sexuality as a way to upset the conventions of Victorian bourgeois femininity, allowing Bella to acquire bodily agency through the representation of sex in the film. More specifically, Bella reclaims her body in two ways: by joyfully exploring her sexuality without shame or link to procreation and by becoming a sex worker, both of which break Victorian taboos.

Bella's sexual liberation goes hand in hand with regaining control of her body by exploring sexual pleasure. As Helena Michie notes, contemporary feminist narratives aim to liberate the female body from the taboos and limitations imposed upon it by the Victorian era (125). In this way, it could be argued that the (in)visibility of the female body is constructed through representation. Hence, neo-Victorian works are committed to representing the sexual lives of the Victorians, often employing humor to subvert the sexual prudery and repression that is stereotypically associated with the era as one of seclusion (Pietrzak-Franger and Voigts 193). Building on this, it could be argued that the inelasticity of Victorian discourses about female sexual pleasure is upset in neo-Victorian works by contrasting them with hyper-sexually active protagonists. This is the case with Bella, who openly discusses exploring pleasure through masturbation and sex. Bella enjoys sex, wondering "why do people not just do this [i.e. sex] all the time" (*PT* 0:43:16), upsetting the stereotypes of the sexually frustrated Victorian. In the Victorian era, female promiscuity in the sense of masturbation or intense sexual drive was considered a form of deviancy and was socially unacceptable (Pineda Hernández and Romero Ruiz 6). More specifically, sexual promiscuity was so unacceptable that women were violently mutilated through medical processes (6), which is addressed in *Poor Things* and analyzed in chapter 3.2 of the present thesis. This extreme and violent reaction demonstrates how taboo it was for women to enjoy sex and express sexual desire.

By enjoying sex, Bella upsets the restrictions applied to Victorian bourgeois women and their bodies. Female bodies have been historically considered as ‘texts of culture’, in the sense that discourses apply limitations onto them (Pineda Hernández and Romero Ruiz 5). In this way, Victorian bourgeois femininity prohibited women from exploring sexual pleasure outside of marriage, something that Bella defies. Indeed, the intense regulation and policing of female sexuality stems from a wider problem in patriarchal societies, where due to the importance of producing a male heir to inherit the paternal property, women’s bodies were intensively regulated to ensure that the offspring was legitimate. Contesting this model, Bella openly announces her intention to “marry Max, as he seems right for that, but first, [she] shall adventure on Duncan Wedderburn” (*PT* 0:37:31), thus upsetting Victorian discourses which forbade the exploration of sexual drive and pleasure for women outside of marriage. By focusing on the underworld and by including explicit sexual content, neo-Victorian fiction and adaptations signal their contemporaneity (Whelehan 277), something that is found in *Poor Things*’ sex scenes. Furthermore, contrary to the perception of sexual prudery in the Victorian era, Bella discusses sex with Duncan, developing her own vocabulary for sexual acts, humorously referring to intercourse as “furious jumping” (*PT* 0:43:35). By naming sex and voicing her sexual desires, Bella acquires agency, as she refuses to conform to Victorian norms of monogamy and exclusivity of marital sex.

Another aspect of Bella’s sexual life that is depicted in the film is her time in Paris, where she becomes a sex worker. As Michie notes, for an era that was obsessed with the documentation of the subject, the sex worker was rendered absent in two ways: either through the erasure of her body or by dressing it up, in an attempt to avoid discussions about nudity and sex work (71). As a neo-Victorian work that seeks to voice marginalized experiences, *Poor Things* does not shy away from exhibiting Bella’s body. Therefore, the depiction of nudity in the film can be interpreted as a way to render visible the body of the Victorian sex worker, who was pushed to the sidelines of society and cast into invisibility. Standing outside mainstream society, the bodies of sex workers became expendable in the late Victorian era, as evidenced by the Ripper murders in 1885. However, the film goes a step further by demonstrating how even women who conformed to the dominant status quo and became wives were seen as expendable, as evidenced by Alfred’s treatment of Victoria. By having Bella both become a sex worker and escape Alfred’s confinement, the film draws a parallel between the wife and the sex worker’s body, demonstrating how patriarchy mistreats both. By becoming a sex worker, Bella explores a side of sex that was forbidden to ‘proper’ Victorian women, echoing

Madame Swiney's, the brothel's owner, sentiment that "we must experience everything" (*PT* 1:36:38) to know the world. Indeed, throughout the film, Bella gives in freely to her sexual desires, not caring that her discovery of sexual pleasure through masturbation, premarital sex and prostitution constituted a taboo for Victorian women. Therefore, by focusing on Bella's sexual experiences and representing them, the film highlights the oft-neglected aspect of female sexual pleasure in male-dominated accounts of the era.

Poor Things also disrupts the contrast of the bourgeois wife and the sex worker in the Victorian era, illustrating the taboo nature of prostitution. In Victorian literature and visual arts, the figure of the sex worker exists in a marginalized space, coming to life only through implication as the counterexample at the opposite end of the spectrum of proper Victorian femininity (Michie 70). Sex workers exist only "as warnings in whispers, implied contrasts to heroines" (72), becoming stigmatized and socially excluded through covert hints in the literature and art of the period. This presence through silence renders the sex worker a marginalized figure, representing the category of the unspeakable, as she is present through its absence. In the film, the stigmatization of female pleasure, which applied both to Victorian wives and sex workers distance, is reinforced when Bella reunites with her husband Alfred who is aware that Bella was "a whore" (*PT* 2:02:25), using the term to shame her. However, Bella acknowledges that she was a sex worker "in Paris. [though she] tired of it, but it was fascinating" (*PT* 2:02:28). Bella is very open in discussing her job as a sex worker in Paris, despite to Alfred's unrelenting attempts to shame her about it. Alfred, nevertheless, tries to restore the patriarchal and unequal gender dynamics in their relationship by telling Bella that he "will try to forgive [her] for the whoring" (*PT* 2:04:52), though Bella does not feel any shame nor has asked for any sort of forgiveness. Alfred fights to establish dominance, telling her that she should be thankful for having a "forgiving husband" (*PT* 2:05:13), who allegedly shows clemency. However, Alfred's manipulation does not move Bella, who counters that she has "not wronged [...] Alfie, as [she] do[es] not know [him]" (*PT* 2:05:17). In this way, Bella refuses to yield and once again reinforces her distance from Victorian norms surrounding proper femininity.

On the one hand, the attempts at shaming Bella are indicative of the marginalization and abuse sex workers experience, but, on the other hand, Bella is critical of the exploitative aspects of prostitution. Similarly to Alfred, Duncan angrily spits at Bella that she "fucked for money" (*PT* 1:29:06), calling her "a whore and a monster" (*PT* 1:29:21), publicly shunning and shaming her. Duncan's angry reaction contrasts Bella's casual reporting of her time in the

brothel, creating a humorous effect due to Bella's ignorance of the social intolerance towards prostitution. Bella is perplexed regarding Duncan's reaction, telling him that they should not marry, since she "a flawed experimenting person [who] [...] will need a husband with a more forgiving disposition" (*PT* 1:30:08). By establishing herself as 'a flawed experimenting person', Bella transgresses Victorian norms, dictating the terms of what she expects from her husband. Nevertheless, Bella is not silent regarding the exploitative and problematic aspects of prostitution. For example, she questions how the male clients pick the women, who do not have a say in the decision. Bella asks a client whether he would "not prefer it if the women chose, as it would be a sign of enthusiasm toward [him]" (*PT* 1:1:34:16), opening up the possibility that men might enjoy sex precisely because the sex workers do not get to choose. Once again, Bella brings to the forefront the issue of female agency and choice, which was denied to Victorian women, no matter if they were wives or sex workers, as men took decisions for them. Furthermore, though Madame Swiney offers Bella the chance to earn money, Bella points out that Swiney exploits sex workers to profit financially from them, telling her that sex workers "are a machine [Swiney] feed[s] with chocolate and compliments" (*PT* 1:45:44). Bella uses the word 'machine' to express metaphorically how Swiney uses affection to obscure how coldly she profits from having sex workers work for her.

Despite the patriarchal and problematic working conditions Bella experiences as a sex worker, the brothel becomes a space where Bella can paradoxically find freedom and reclaim control of her body and identity. Michel Foucault notes that though discourses about sexuality never ceased during the Victorian era, talking about sexual activities and pleasure was confined to designated spaces outside the mainstream, such as brothels (*The History of Sexuality* 4). In this way, prostitution in *Poor Things* is transformed from a stigmatized activity on the margins of society to a way for Bella to explore sexual pleasure as well as find her independence, as she "need[s] sex and money" (*PT* 1:30:55). By becoming a sex worker, Bella finds the freedom to earn money independently of a husband as well as regulate her time, since she has to devote "twenty minutes at a time and [have] the rest of [her] day [...] free to study on the world" (*PT* 1:31:03). Indeed, Bella uses her free time to expand her intellectual horizons and though there are no explicit references as to what she reads as during the ship scenes that are analysed in Chapter 2.1, there is a hint that Bella engages with reading Marxist philosophy, when she starts getting involved in socialist meetings, as will be explored in the next paragraph. Hence, *Poor Things* subverts the taboo nature of prostitution in the Victorian era by representing as a feasible avenue for Bella to flourish and discover herself away from the restraints of Victorian morality

and patriarchy. The relation between independence and prostitution is highlighted by Madame Swiney, who views Bella as “a woman plotting her way to freedom” (*PT* 1:31:16). Therefore, financial independence allows Bella to acquire the freedom to determine herself away from Victorian restrictions.

The freedom Bella experiences is not only intellectual, but also financial, since she does not have to rely on a husband’s money, which was often the case for Victorian married women. Foucault points out that historically tolerance towards sex in brothels has been associated with the rise of capitalism, in the sense that sexual discourse could take place there, as it was profitable (*The History of Sexuality* 4). Here, Foucault draws a link between capitalism’s tendency to commodify anything to turn profit and the exploitation of sex in spaces where it was acceptable. Bella subverts this trope by finding liberation in prostitution. For example, when Duncan shames Bella and her friend Toinette for being sex workers, Bella retorts that “we [i.e. she and Toinette] are our means of production” (*PT* 1:43:17), a quote that points to philosopher Karl Marx. In this way, she contrasts the ability to make money using her body with relying on a husband’s fortune. Moreover, this line is a play on the means of production, a term dominant in Marxist discourses, as she and Toinette start attending socialist meetings, thus becoming acquainted with a discourse that opposes Victorian capitalism. Thus, paradoxically by becoming a sex worker Bella takes control of her own body and her life, as she is able to become financially independent.

Bringing this chapter to a close, it can be argued that *Poor Things*’ reimagining of female sexuality in the Victorian era performs the neo-Victorian function of reworking the past. Indeed, neo-Victorianism avoids past nostalgia by interpreting history and reworking it to engage critically with its politics in relation to their present-day relevance (Kohlke and Gutleben, “Introduction” 22). By representing Bella’s exploration of sexual pleasure and by highlighting the marginalized experiences of sex workers, *Poor Things* subverts stereotypes surrounding Victorian female sexuality. Thus, by ‘freeing’ Bella from the restraints imposed on bourgeois Victorian women, *Poor Things* revises the past by reference to the present, celebrating female sexuality and pleasure in spite of a society that refuses to give visibility to this issue. *Poor Things*’ depiction of female sexuality is relevant to contemporary discourses regarding female representation and sexual desire, an issue which is the focus of the following subchapter.

4.2 “We, Other (Neo-) Victorians”: The Reception of *Poor Things*

I have already illustrated how *Poor Things* attempts to subvert stereotypes surrounding Victorian sexuality by representing Bella’s sexual experimentation and experiences. Throughout my discussion, I argued that the depiction of female nudity and sexuality constitutes a neo-Victorian attempt to destigmatize female sexual pleasure, which was silenced in the Victorian era. Nevertheless, the film’s treatment of female sexuality and its representation of nudity constitute a point of dissension amongst critics and audiences. More specifically, there is a split in the film’s reception, either being hailed as a feminist work that celebrates female sexuality or being condemned as a film that despite its surface-level attempts conforms to a male-centered perspective in its depiction of female nudity and sex. Since this thesis would be incomplete without examining this aspect, I now turn to the film’s reception, reviewing the criticisms levelled against the film and pointing out potential shortcomings in terms of representation. Then, I propose that this polarized reception is indicative of how the legacies of the Victorian era are still relevant, despite the postmodern subject’s attempts to distance themselves from it. Here, I build on Michel Foucault’s views on how Victorians have been othered through the ‘repressive hypothesis’, and I argue that the fact that the representation of female desire onscreen causes so much outrage might point to a lack of progress regarding feminist issues. Examining this reception from a feminist perspective, I suggest that a latent conservatism persists in relation to discourses about female sexual pleasure and desire.

Though neo-Victorianism represents female nudity and sex from a sex-positive and feminist angle, it can still fall into the pitfalls of sexualized representations of female bodies that cater to the male gaze. Monika Pietrzak-Franger and Eckart Voigts astutely note the tension between the reproduction of stereotypical representations of nudity and the resignification of such representation by the audiences as liberating and subversive (193-4). This raises the question of audience reception in determining whether the representation in question is stereotypical or subversive. In the case of *Poor Things*, the audience is split on this point. There has been no shortage of responses to the film, with critics disagreeing as to whether the depiction of female nudity and sexual exploration cater to the male gaze, and hence are exploitative, or if they are used to celebrate female sexuality in defiance of a society that constantly shames female desire (Ahmed et al. n. pag.). Indeed, the film’s depiction of female sexuality has sparked outrage in audiences and critics alike, with many questioning the film’s feminist credentials (Ahmed et al. n. pag; Esser 139; Lutkin n. pag.). More specifically, the

film has been criticized as using nudity and sex as a crutch to evade substantially engaging with feminist issues (Ahmed n.pag.). Moreover, critics accuse the film of using sex as a superficial form of empowerment for Bella, glossing over the exploitative aspects of prostitution and (often unwittingly) conforming to male-centered depictions of female nudity (n.pag.). Although this thesis holds that *Poor Things* outlines a feminist vision of female sexuality, as it does not shame Bella's body nor desires, it can be argued that the film demonstrates an overreliance on sex scenes, which take up a large portion of the film's runtime.

As cinema has often utilized the 'male gaze' to depict female sexuality,²⁸ it is important to note that *Poor Things* can often fall into the pitfalls of problematic representations of female nudity, even if its general direction points towards a feminist review of Victorian female sexuality. Pietrzak-Franger and Voigts raise the question of whether the humorous representation of female sexual enjoyment is enough to address the violent and restraining aspects of Victorian patriarchy, even if comedy is a powerful weapon in postmodernism's arsenal (209). In other words, in an era where the commodification of sex is omnipresent, if neo-Victorianism "can only offer pleasurable consumption as antidote to consumer patriarchy, then its [...] serious engagement with properly historicized gender issues risks falling short of its target" (209). This taps into the larger issue of how neo-liberal structures appropriate feminism by stressing inclusion without questioning how wider capitalistic structures are entangled with perpetuating patriarchy (Banet-Weiser et al. 8). Indeed, it is important to consider the limits of subversive representation and pose the question of whether *Poor Things*' sex-positive depiction of sexual pleasure runs deeper or is complicit with dominant depictions of female nudity. As a postmodern text, I argue that *Poor Things* manages to subvert our expectations of the Victorian era's attitude towards sexuality, even if its depiction of sexual nudity can be interpreted as stereotypically catering to the male gaze. The shortcomings of *Poor Things* in terms of representing female sexuality are further evidenced by the film's split reception on the matter of whether its depiction of sexuality is exploitative or progressive. Thus, *Poor Things* is not fully able to evade stereotypical representations of female nudity, even if its

²⁸ The term male gaze was coined by Laura Mulvey, to describe how Hollywood cinema relies on heavily male-centered perspective to create narratives that often relegate women to a spectacle (Mulvey 11). Though Mulvey's theory has been criticized as outdated and having a binary view of gender as 'male' or 'female' (Arya 196), the term 'male gaze' has nevertheless entered pop culture and is used to navigate gender dynamics in filmmaking. This aspect is important in order to understand how the historically gender-biased norms of Hollywood filmmaking influence how *Poor Things* depicts female nudity and sexuality, and more specifically explain the criticism the film has received about commodifying the female body.

intent is to subvert them. This is in line with Helena Michie's argument that patriarchy has fragmented the female body and to reclaim, it is necessary to represent it, while acknowledging that representation is an imperfect and incomplete process (149-50). In a similar vein, *Poor Things*' representation of female desire is imperfect, but it nevertheless constitutes an important step to depict an issue that has often been relegated to the sidelines or only seen through an exclusively male viewpoint.

More importantly so, *Poor Things*' split reception opens a fruitful discussion regarding sexist exploitation and feminist liberation in relation to the representation of the female body onscreen. This leads me to another aspect that I have not addressed yet and is closely related to neo-Victorianism's project to reinterpret the Victorian past: the issue of othering in relation to the Victorian era. Here, I turn to Michel Foucault's seminal work *The History of Sexuality*, where Foucault puts forth the radical 'repressive hypothesis'. According to the repressive hypothesis, contrary to the popular conception of Victorians as sexually prudish and conservative, sexual discourses proliferated during the Victorian era (*The History of Sexuality* 10-11). In other words, Foucault maintains that the Victorian era was a period where sexuality was shaped by power dynamics, since "who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak" (*The History of Sexuality* 11) determine how gender discourses treat subjects. This leads Foucault to become preoccupied with the question of why the view of Victorians as sexually prudish persists, despite their preoccupation with discourses regarding sexuality (9).²⁹ He argues that this occurs because by arguing that sex was repressed in the Victorian era, talking about it in postmodernity lends an air of radicality and the illusion of progress, when in fact little has changed (6). This point is crucial in navigating why audiences might be so resistant to the depiction of female sexuality, since despite talks of progress, postmodern subjects remain the "other Victorians" (1). Hence, for all the talk of sexual freedom, postmodern subjects share more with the Victorians than they would like to admit.

²⁹ Foucault clarifies that the 'repressive hypothesis' does not mean that discourses about sex were not prohibited or suppressed during the Victorian era (*The History of Sexuality* 12). In fact, Foucault notes that, even though sexual discourses were active during the Victorian era, discussions of sex from the 17th century onwards become highly codified and socially regulated, thus applying a restrictive economy in the proliferation of such discourses (17-8). Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that sexuality was often treated as a taboo subject that remained unspoken, as demonstrated in Chapter 4.1 of the present thesis. Rather, the importance of Foucault's work lies in his efforts to uncover the role of discourse and power in creating narratives of sexuality as well as explore the role of othering the Victorians in relation to our present-day experiences.

This distancing from the Victorians might be illusionary, but nevertheless explain why conservatism persists in postmodernity, despite attempts to ‘other’ the Victorians. More specifically, the postmodern era has often cast the Victorians in the role of the sexual prude and morally conservative forefathers (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 3; 5-6). This creates a binary contrast between the Victorian and the postmodern subject, putting the latter in a positive light by pure virtue of contrasting. Here, Foucault notes a hypocrisy on the part of the postmodern subject, as it protests towards the silence it has imposed upon themselves when approaching discussions of sexuality (8). In other words, by othering the Victorians as repressive, the postmodern subject is cast in the role of the enlightened and sexually liberated subject, when in fact they can still harbor conservative positions regarding sexuality. Bringing this thought to bear on the reception of *Poor Things*, I argue that the split responses regarding the film’s nudity are indicative of how the perception of the Victorians as repressed is misguided; in fact, it is the audience who is more conservative than Bella, clutching its pearls at her discovery of sexual pleasure. The fact that the film attracted so much attention for its representation of nudity demonstrates how female sexual desire remains a taboo topic for postmodern subjects.

The tension between the postmodern subject and the Victorian era can be further explained by turning to neo-Victorian theory. Indeed, neo-Victorianism traces the tension arising from the difficulty of reconciling the Victorian past with our present failures. Despite the temporal proximity to the Victorians, postmodern subjects characterize the era and its culture in absolute terms of otherness to establish a distance from the Victorians (Mitchell 39). However, this desire to depict the Victorians as ‘others’ stems from a discomfort at confronting that the negative aftermath of the Victorian era still lingers on the present. It is indicative of this discomfort that the term ‘Victorian’ has acquired connotations of conservatism, as a way to reject the era as other to modernity (42). Instead of acknowledging how postmodernity is still not free of sexism and conservatism, postmodern subjects choose to view the Victorians as caricatures to laugh at. As Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben posit, neo-Victorian humor targeted at the Victorians’ outdated beliefs is undercut by an othering that position ‘us’ as postmodern subjects in a place of moral superiority in contrast to the Victorians (“What’s So Funny” 8). This crafts a problematic binary, since the postmodern subject reassures their progressiveness by laughing at the conservatism of the Victorians in relation to racial, gender, sexual and class discourses. However, neo-Victorian humor does not merely aim to entertain, but also to produce discomfort. More specifically, the aim is for the audience to simultaneously

laugh at the Victorians but also see themselves in the Victorians, in order to confront the problematic legacies of the Victorian era (40). Indeed, *Poor Things* imbues its sexual scenes with humor, but at the same time the controversy surrounding their inclusion in the film reveals that despite laughing at the Victorians, we are more similar to their conservatism as we would like to.³⁰ A scene in the film that illustrates how humor is used in relation to sex is the dinner Bella attends with Duncan's friends, which has already been discussed in Chapter 3.1.

Therefore, *Poor Things* proves the relevance of the neo-Victorian project and its political extensions, as it utilizes the Victorian era to point out the postmodern subject's latent conservatism, pushing for political change. Esser points out that the outrage directed towards the film's sex scenes, which were shaped by Emma Stone who served as a producer to the film, demonstrates the lack of a proper discursive framework to approach the female body and sexuality (Esser 140-1). Therefore, the film used the Victorian era to highlight a wider issue that persists in the present day, a key feature of neo-Victorianism. The continued engagement with the Victorian era stems from a yearning to return to a time which ushered in modernity and thus continues to shape our present historical moment (Heilmann and Llewellyn 3). In this way, returning to the past is not mere nostalgic escape from our contemporary moment, but rather a harsh confrontation with past trauma as directly mirroring present-day trauma, thus highlighting the political and cultural legacies of the Victorians upon our present moment (Kohlke and Gutleben, "Introduction" 13). In the case of *Poor Things*, the representation of sex from a female perspective aims to destabilize dominant cultural representations of female nudity in the present day. Hence, instead of sexualizing the female body to appeal to the male gaze, *Poor Things*' unabashed depiction of sex and pleasure onscreen urges us to rethink the interrelation of sex and power politics in relation not merely to the Victorian past, but more crucially so to the present historical moment (Esser 140). In this way, the film's depiction of Bella's sexual adventures in the Victorian era is utilized to question the power politics involved in questions of representation in the 21st century.

In conclusion, *Poor Things* explores female sexuality from a feminist perspective, subverting Victorian discourses as well as popular stereotypes about the Victorian era. This is achieved through the representation of Bella's body, which she celebrates during her sexual adventures, even if such representations can be complacent to stereotypical male-centered depictions of female nudity onscreen. Nevertheless, the polarizing responses to *Poor Things*'

³⁰ Verbal humor about sex is utilized in the film, as discussed in Chapter 3.1 of this thesis, especially the analysis of the dinner scene.

handling of female sexuality might be more indicative of the postmodern subject's attempt to distance themselves from the Victorians through othering, even if they demonstrate a conservatism regarding depictions of female sexual pleasure. In this way, though the film explores gender and sexual discourses in the context of the Victorian era, it covertly highlights present-day reservations and shortcomings regarding the representation of the female subject as finding sexual pleasure.

Conclusion: Lost Bodies and Second Chances

This thesis explored how Yorgos Lanthimos's film *Poor Things* (2023) subverts traditional representations of the Victorian era on an aesthetic, narrative, thematic and discursive level. Examining *Poor Things*' representation of the Victorian past, literature and discourses from a neo-Victorian perspective, I argued that the film employs postmodern formal and narrative techniques to frame a feminist narrative that questions Victorian discourses about identity and sexuality through Bella's journey. To explore these questions, I utilized a neo-Victorian framework, while employing postmodern and feminist theoretical approaches to outline how *Poor Things* engages with the Victorian era.

More specifically, I first focused on how *Poor Things* reimagines the Victorian era from a postmodern perspective, according to which our knowledge of the past is fragmented and shaped by dominant discourses. I posited that *Poor Things* reflects this understanding of history on a formal level through the fragmentary reconstruction of Bella and Victoria's stories, demonstrating the discursive formation of history from a present viewpoint. This contemporary aspect involved in retelling the past is further exhibited by the film's disruption of verisimilitude on the level of aesthetics, as special effects and a non-realistic approach to cinematography and costume/production design are employed. In this way, *Poor Things* signals its questioning attitude towards established narratives about history, demonstrating that knowledge of the past is distorted and incomplete.

The neo-Victorian tendency to review radically the past and signal the contemporary nature of neo-Victorian works through postmodern formal techniques is also found in the narrative structure of *Poor Things*. Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva on intertextuality, I suggested that *Poor Things* includes both specific nods to 19th-century texts as well as narrative techniques associated with the Bildungsroman genre, a popular form of 19th century literary production. Drawing on the concept of intermediality, I further demonstrated that *Poor Things* radically reworks specific texts and the topoi of the Bildungsroman, thereby engaging critically with the Victorian past, something that renders a truly neo-Victorian work. Therefore, the film draws attention to its literary ancestors, while subverting well-known tropes and archetypes such as the monster from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have referred to as madwoman in the attic in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

The film's engagement with the Victorian era extends to its themes, since its narrative and formal aspects frame an equally subversive take on the issue of female identity in the Victorian era. At this point, I proposed that the film explores the tension between male control and female emancipation through Bella's character arc, which sees her breaking from Victorian norms. This results in Bella evading the control of both her lover Duncan by seeking financial independence from him and her former husband Alfred, who tries to restrain her by mutilating her body. Building on Butler's theory on gender as well as Victorian medical discourses, I argued that *Poor Things* maps out the body as a space where power dynamics are played out, drawing attention to the cruelty and violence women suffered under Victorian patriarchy. Being critical of the era's patriarchal politics, the film shows Bella gaining her independence through another thematic tension between kindness and cruelty in relation to the issue of control and emancipation.

Moving on to the issue of female sexuality and its representation in the film, I argued that *Poor Things* puts Bella's exploration of sexual pleasure as an emancipatory experience to center stage. In the meantime, the film comments on Victorian discourses about bourgeois femininity through Bella's time as a sex worker in Paris, which allows her to further escape male control. Nevertheless, the film's representation of sexuality elicited mixed responses, which led me to focus on the relation of the Victorian past to the present, thus bringing my analysis back to the relevance of neo-Victorian media. I argued that the critical views surrounding the depiction of sex in the film might reveal a neo-conservatism on the part of the postmodern subject, who views the Victorian as 'other', when in fact problematic discourses of the era still linger.

This connects my thesis to one of neo-Victorianism's main tenets, namely the unresolved tension between the Victorian past and the postmodern present. As I demonstrated in my analysis of *Poor Things*, though the film is set in the Victorian past, it engages with contemporary issues and comments on the perseverance of problematic Victorian discourses in the present. Indeed, when engaging with Victorian literature, "the traumatized subject of modernity pre/rediscovers itself in its manifold nineteenth-century others" (Kohlke and Gutleben, "Introduction" 14). In other words, the strong reactions towards neo-Victorian media stem from the difficulty of reconciling the vision of ourselves as progressive postmodern subjects with the fact the inadequate progress that has been made in relation to feminist emancipation and control of the female body. Under its layers of humor, *Poor Things* reveals the cruelty and violence of Victorian discourses on marginalized subjects, questioning whether

enough progress has been made to move beyond harmful stereotypes and ideas about equality, agency and identity. As I noted in my introduction, a prominent theme in Neo-Victorianism is viewing the 19th century as the origin point for contemporary issues, such as discourses on poverty, disease, criminality and colonialism (Kohlke 7). Therefore, neo-Victorian fiction often locates the 19th century as the source of contemporary trauma, tracing how the impact of Victorian history has not been fully processed and still influences and shapes our world (Kohlke 7). Bella's (re-)birth is a perfect symbol of how the Victorian past lingers in the present: trapped in a dead Victorian body, Bella's mind develops, and she resembles an empowered 21st-century woman with her emancipation, even if her Victorian past comes back to haunt her in the form of her previous husband.

Therefore, a question arises regarding the function of offering an illusionary resolution to these discourses through Bella's emancipation, crafting a sort of 'fabricated history' that has little to no fidelity to how women were treated in the Victorian era. To answer this question, it is useful to refer to the political extensions of the neo-Victorian project, particularly its potential to restore justice. Carroll proposes that neo-Victorianism is a form of recognitive justice, a symbolic process that aims to restore justice and offer visibility to traditionally marginalized subjects and experiences (195). Kohlke similarly argues that neo-Victorianism destabilizes the official narratives of history by imagining alternative histories and archives about the past, inspiring the reader to question how the past is constructed through discourse (Kohlke 10). Bringing this to bear on *Poor Things*, neo-Victorianism as a form of recognitive justice, in the sense of symbolically restoring dignity to marginalized subjects, becomes particularly poignant: by telling alternative stories about subjects of the periphery like Bella, we try to compensate for past injustice by putting marginalized experiences at the center.

Bringing my MA thesis to a close, I suggest that exploring the reception of *Poor Things* and neo-Victorian media in general constitutes a fruitful area for future research. If *Poor Things*' financial and critical success proves anything is that narratives about the Victorian past are relevant for contemporary audiences. Neo-Victorian media spark discussions about equality and agency, using the Victorian era as a façade while covertly criticizing our present historical moment. In revisiting and playfully re-writing the past, marginalized experiences of the past and the present merge, becoming reanimated by being given a voice of an alternative history we need to listen to.

Word Count: 31,498

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Abstract

Abstract in German

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht, wie Yorgos Lanthimos' Film *Poor Things* (2023) traditionelle Darstellungen des viktorianischen Zeitalters auf ästhetischer, narrativer, thematischer und diskursiver Ebene untergräbt. Um die Auseinandersetzung von *Poor Things* mit dem viktorianischen Zeitalter zu analysieren, verwende ich einen neoviktorianischen Rahmen und beziehe postmoderne und feministische theoretische Ansätze mit ein. Ich argumentiere, dass der Film die viktorianische Epoche durch Fantasieästhetik und Intertextualität neu interpretiert und so eine Darstellung der Epoche schafft, die gängige Vorstellungen über die viktorianische Vergangenheit untergräbt. Dadurch legt der Film die diskursive Geschichtskonstruktion offen, indem er realistische Ästhetik ablehnt und intertextuell auf literarische Texte des 19. Jahrhunderts Bezug nimmt. Diese Destabilisierung auf ästhetischer und narrativer Ebene ermöglicht es *Poor Things*, viktorianische Diskurse auch auf thematischer Ebene infrage zu stellen. Aus einer postmodernen Perspektive destabilisiert *Poor Things* viktorianische Diskurse über das weibliche Subjekt, Identität und Sexualität, um eine Geschichte über feministische Selbstermächtigung zu illustrieren. Gleichzeitig zeigt die geteilte Rezeption des Films, wie viktorianische Ideen die zeitgenössische Kulturlandschaft immer noch prägen und offenbart einen Konservatismus in unserem Umgang mit Körperpolitik.

Abstract in English

This master's thesis explores how Yorgos Lanthimos's film *Poor Things* (2023) subverts traditional representations of the Victorian era on an aesthetic, narrative, thematic and discursive level. To outline how *Poor Things* engages with the Victorian era, I utilize a neo-Victorian framework, while employing postmodern and feminist theoretical approaches. I propose that the film reimagines the Victorian era through fantasy aesthetics and intertextuality, crafting a representation of the era that subverts preconceptions about the Victorian past. Thus, the film reveals the discursive formation of history by eschewing realist aesthetics and by intertextually engaging with 19th-century literary texts. This destabilization on the levels of aesthetics and narrative allows *Poor Things* to contest Victorian discourses on a thematic level as well. Reviewing the era from a postmodern viewpoint, *Poor Things* undermines Victorian discourses on the female subject, identity and sexuality to illustrate a story about feminist empowerment, while the film's split reception demonstrates how Victorian ideas still inform

the contemporary cultural landscape, revealing a conservatism in our approach towards body politics.