

## A Matter of Extreme Indelicacy: Neo-Victorian Critical Memory in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949)

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### *Abstract*

Critical assessments of Robert Hamer's *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) more often than not aim solely at discussing a larger cultural phenomenon, to wit, the Ealing Comedies and their impact on post-war Britain. Readings outside this paradigm are scarce. The film, however, engages with several issues the recent phenomena of neo-Victorian fiction and film consistently address. These are the relationship between the past and the present (as well as the capital role memory plays in it), nostalgia as the underlining desire for the new recasting of Victoriana, the reassessment of history through marginal and/or alternative identities, as well as the blatantly post-modern continuous deferral of meaning. This article explores these issues in order to inscribe the film within neo-Victorian aesthetics, not only to update the critical discourse about the film, but also to reveal what the film has to say about neo-Victorian culture.

**Keywords:** Ealing Comedy; *Kind Hearts and Coronets*; neo-Victorian fiction; post-war cinema; history and memory

Though past its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Robert Hamer's *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) still ranks amongst the most-cherished and well-admired pieces of black comedy in the history of British cinema (MacNab 2011; Barr 1998). Critical responses to the film, mainstream and scholarly alike, seem conversely stagnant. Most readings of Hamer's ironic tale of the rise and rise of a serial killer in the late Victorian period do not seem to overcome the critical framework brought into play by the cultural phenomenon wherein the film is inscribed, to wit, 'the Ealing comedy,' short for the set of comedic films produced by Ealing Studios in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Ealing comedies have indeed become a genre in themselves, one that, like most genres, both liberates and constrains particular takes on individual texts. In the case of *Kind Hearts*, its reputation as the most singular of the Ealing comedies oddly precludes rather than encourages interpretations outside the Ealing fold,

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so much so that despite its passing—and mostly casual—association with other black comedies of the period (Barr 1998: 121),<sup>1</sup> critical accounts of the film, like Matthew Sweet's (2019), Jeffrey Richards' (1997) and, most notably, Charles Barr's (1998 [1977]) either derive from a purview of Ealing comedy as cinematic/semantic structure, or set out to nuance the said structure on the basis of the film.

This paper aims at recasting *Kind Hearts* in a new critical light, particularly the critical focus designed by neo-Victorianism 'as an academic discipline,' or rather as a critical 'project' (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2010: 3–4). For even though *Kind Hearts* exceeds the statutes of limitation most critics of contemporary Victoriana accept ever since Cora Kaplan's seminal take on the genre (2007),<sup>2</sup> the film, as this paper will show, complies with most—if not all—of the requirements the neo-Victorian project has set forth in the past twenty years, when 'processes of canonisation have not only begun to fossilise the body of works and media to be addressed under the heading of neo-Victorianism but also some critical approaches, theories and predominant concerns' (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2010: 4).

The neo-Victorian project aims at studying the 'post-war fictional reprise of the Victorian' (Kaplan 2007: 89) albeit from a particularly revisionist perspective. It eschews the limitations of historical fiction in that the 'neo-' culture informs the present subject and takes Victorian identity as a constituent of our present subjectivity. In other words, neo-Victorian criticism does not deal simply with Victorian settings, (re)enactments and/or representations of Victorian culture, but rather with how neo-Victorian aesthetics helps construe the ongoing relationship between past and present through Victoriana. The key to this matter lies herein, in the 'ongoing' trait, since the neo-Victorian project actively focuses on a sort of 'imagination,' or representation, I would argue, 'on the move,' a 'kind of conceptual nomad, not so much lost as permanently restless and unsettled' (Kaplan 2007: 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Barr quotes Frank 'Capra's *Arsenic and Old Lace*' (1944), 'Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*' (1947) and 'Sacha Guitry's *Le Roman de un Tricheur*' (1936) as the films *Kind Hearts* 'is commonly bracketed' with (1998: 121).

<sup>2</sup> Kaplan privileges texts 'written between the late 1960s and the new millennium' (2007: 88). Yet she implicitly recognizes that 'post-war fictional' Victoriana befitting the critical take on historical fiction neo-Victorian texts display does not lie exclusively within those limits (2007: 87–89).

Despite its largely apparently, not to say misleadingly, straightforward narrative and its comedic tenor, *Kind Hearts* partakes of numerous issues the neo-Victorian project addresses, to an extent wherein the film should be considered if not fully neo-Victorian, at least, a forerunner of neo-Victorian aesthetics. The film is informed by issues critical to the understanding of neo-Victorian fiction such as the relationship of the past and the present (as well as the capital role memory plays in it), nostalgia as the underlining desire for the new recasting of Victoriana, the reassessment of history through marginal and/or alternative identities, as well as the blatantly post-modern continuous deferral of meaning. I submit the film to a neo-Victorian critique in order to explore these questions, both to characterize the film within the limits of the neo-Victorian project and to disclose what the film says about this project itself. My argument does not eschew Charles Barr's analysis of the film (inscribed in a broader comment on Ealing Studios' cultural significance and value), which is by and large regarded as 'definitive' (O'Sullivan 2012: 67; Porter and Hunter 2012: 1; Medhurst 2007: 7). On the contrary, it takes it as a starting point, but only to overcome the limits set by Barr and take the film's evaluation to a new critical paradigm.

*Kind Hearts and Coronets* (Robert Hamer 1949)—loosely based on Roy Horniman's novel *Israel Rank: The Autobiography of a Criminal* (1907)—plunges into the world of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The film recounts the story of Louis Mazzini (Dennis Price), a descendant of the old D'Ascoyne family and the dukedom of Chalfont, one of the oldest families in the country (every character of which is played by Alec Guinness). At the beginning of the film, Louis is reading his memoirs, which he has been writing in jail whilst awaiting execution. Louis' mother was cast out of the family after getting married to an Italian singer. When his mother dies, he is refused permission to bury her in the D'Ascoyne pantheon. Louis thereby develops a grudge against the D'Ascoynes. He is later forced to work as a salesperson in a shop. And his feelings towards the family become more acute when one of the D'Ascoynes antagonizes Louis in the shop. This prompts Louis to embark upon a killing spree, paradoxically brought about with elegance and gusto, in order to eliminate all eight heirs to the D'Ascoyne estate and titles. In passing, he falls in love with Edith (Valeria Hobson), the wife of one of his victims whilst having an affair with his old flame from

childhood, Sibella (Joan Greenwood). Sibella's husband, Lionel (John Penrose), Louis' old friend, finds himself in dire straits and reaches out to Louis, now working in a bank under the management of the D'Ascoyne family, for help. Louis refuses on the grounds of Lionel's irresponsible behaviour, prompting Lionel's suicide. Louis and Edith get married, and, shortly after, a spurned Sibella falsely accuses Louis of killing her husband. The police, utterly oblivious to Louis' actual killings, arrest him; he is nonetheless compliant and asks that his trial is brought up to the House of Lords. He is sentenced to death for the murder of Lionel. While in prison he is visited by Sibella. She blackmails Louis into leaving Edith and marrying her, threatening not to come forward otherwise to present the suicide note that her husband left and that she had kept secret to ensure Louis' arrest. Louis complies at first, but when he is duly released, he forsakes Sibella and goes back to Edith. The prison gate closes even as Louis remembers that he has left his memoirs, which reveal the full extent of his crimes, behind in his cell.<sup>3</sup>

'*Kind Hearts* is told in flashback. The opening is quiet and slow,' resembling a stifled—and stifling!—'little society obsessed with ritual and class distinction' (Barr 1998: 121). The first scene corresponds to the present of the story, the eve of Louis Mazzini's execution on Aug. 8<sup>th</sup> 1902 in Pentonville prison, but it is the only time the film intimates such a dull, formless present. Awaiting execution, Louis spends the night revising his memoirs, which comprise 'A brief history of the events leading' to his present ordeal (Hamer 2019: 5' 48"). The reading, in Louis' voiceover, triggers a flashback that informs the rest of the film. In contrast to the gloomy dullness which befits Pentonville Prison, 'the moment the flashback starts,' 'we are caught up in a drive, an abundance, which never lets up until the time Louis attains his object' (Barr 1998: 121). The cinematic quality of the past conflates with the suppressed shrunken life of the present, even though they are dependent on each other. The film makes a point of the past informing the cinematic present, by not just characterizing the past as an agent of the present, subject to causality, posited as an origin or an anteriority, if at all, but rather positing the past as the sign that most adequately expresses and helps to structure the present. This becomes apparent in the way the story

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<sup>3</sup> The American cut of the film has a bailiff recover the manuscript and hand it over to the Colonel in charge of the prison, who glances over it on the spot and immediately finds out the truth about the deaths of the D'Ascoynes.

unfolds cinematically. If the narrative sets out to assess the causality involved, paradoxically it upends continuity and chronological order by shifting back and forth in time, ‘both between present and past and between different layers of the past’ (Barr 1998: 121). ‘The whole film,’ Charles Barr argues, ‘is here in miniature,’ projecting its distinctive ‘style, energy and humour,’ as well as ‘Louis’s motivation, and the prominence of the spoken narration’ (1998: 122).

The voiceover here is of the essence. The interplay between the spoken word and the visuals that the former poignantly heralds works as a constant reminder of the thorough subjective vision of the film. Louis’ birth into the world is followed by the immediate death of his father (an Italian opera singer who died as soon as he laid his eyes on his child for the first time). Cut to yet another flashback (part of the first one), this time relating the moment when Louis’ parents met, the ensuing courtship, marriage and disowning of Louis’ mother by the D’Ascoyne family. Then a sequence showing different stages of Louis’ childhood and youth leads up to the pivotal moment of the death of Louis’ mother. Time-jumps and the lack of continuity, conspicuously enabled by the voiceover, feel ‘liberating’ to a great extent (Barr 1998: 122), and encode Louis’ subjectivity in the dream-like logic of free association. It is true, though, that ‘the story soon settles down into a more linear form,’ but rather than giving in to an ‘objective’ account of events, the disjointed double narrative—the spoken word and visuals, which never seem to be in sync with each other—persists in conveying the fractured nature of Louis’ subjectivity. The film, indeed, is ‘the expression of Louis himself’ (Barr 1998: 122) but it makes a virtue of displacing subjectivity to the actual interlock of words and visuals.

The disjointed narrative, the logic of free-association and the dream-like feel of the story all produce ‘new arrangements and rearrangements of temporality that’ as Elizabeth Ho puts it, ‘register primarily through the operations—and failures—of memory’ (2012: 21), a way of informing the present by reworking the past, by ‘communicat[ing] memory’ whilst ‘offer[ing] [itself] as memory’ (Mitchell 2010: 32). ‘The dead, watching, as it were, over the living [... a] constant reminder of one’s heritage’ as the Duke of Chalfont adequately, albeit unwittingly, puts it (Hamer 2019: 42’ 34”). The film not so much comprises as enacts Louis’ memoirs, actualizing the past as a particular sign of the present. This type of sign—or rather its signifier—is in turn what Gilles Deleuze

brands as an ‘artificial sign,’ namely, a code ‘which refer[s] to the past or the future as distinct dimensions of the present, dimensions on which the present might in turn depend’ (2013: 98–99). ‘A scar,’ Deleuze states, ‘is the sign not of a past wound but of “the present fact of being wounded”’ (2013: 98). The production of ‘artificial signs’ involves the ‘active faculties of reflective representation, memory and intelligence’ (2013: 99), to a point wherein representation accounts for the experience of the present. Present and past ‘differ in nature, but coexist as two different worlds’ or a ‘world with two focuses,’ that of the actual and that of the virtual, ‘both coexisting in reality’ (De Bolle 2010: 139, 142). Surely, there is nothing more ‘present’ than the dynamics and production of memory, which cannot take place in the past even though the past dwells exclusively therein.

In this sense, the film is a neo-Victorian text at heart. Re-plotting Victorian narratives engages the mode in which we (re)fashion the present out of the past. As Cora Kaplan contends, the ‘most inclusive definition’ of the neo-Victorian project should encompass ‘the self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives,’ not only ‘to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race, [...] empire,’ and the like, but also to defy ‘conventional understandings of the historical itself’ (2007: 3–4). As a result, neo-Victorian narratives exhibit a flair for ‘thinking the present historically’ (Jameson 2003: ix) whilst paradoxically setting out to deconstruct the dialectical foundations of historical grand narratives. In keeping with this spirit, neo-Victorian fiction tends to invest, albeit not exclusively,<sup>4</sup> in disjointed pasts remodelled as present, which in turn evinces ‘a neo-Victorian story of difference’ (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 15) to brace—and somewhat celebrate—marginal subjectivities, i.e., ‘the lacunae of Victorians’ attitudes to gender, race, class and empire’ (Primorac 2018: 2). At any rate, this is achieved by eschewing the historical reworking of the present—modelled after causality, more often than not—and bringing memory-work to the fore as a means to (re)structure past disjointed

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<sup>4</sup> Not exclusively indeed, for the idea is far from being unproblematic. As Heilmann and Llewellyn acknowledge, there is ‘such a thing as a *Victorian* experience that cannot always be recast into a story of neo-Victorian difference,’ but rather ‘marks a return to’ the ‘potential certainties, satisfactions and comforts’ beyond ‘narrative innovation, fragmentation and the invention of new forms’ encouraged by ‘postmodern experimentation’ (2010: 15–16).

subjectivities, namely, the margins of difference previously suppressed by received notions of Victoriana.

Deleuze here too provides the key to bringing home the neo-Victorian drive—as a ‘story of difference’—sitting at the core of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. For Deleuze, the structure of the present arises from the interplay between ‘memory’ and fracture (2013: 101, 111), a concept that might find adequate representation in trauma. As it has already been argued, memory materializes the present, but trauma relentlessly puts it ‘out of joint’ (2013: 111–112), thus arranging the present as multiple (re)enactments of disjointed subjectivities. Here, the interplay among all the different disjointed selves the film endorses collapse into Louis’ subjectivity. This creates the impression of identity—the ‘I’—as a correlative of the present. The ‘I’ is, therefore, an illusion, a mask of identity, that conceals ‘no essence, no identity [...] only difference’ (Widder 2006: 408), the reminder of the fracture that keeps coming back with every iteration of Louis.

Louis resides in this fracture, for behind his character lurks a mystery: not the mystery of his drives and motivations, but the enigma of his pervasive, vengeful duplicity, which suitably informs the differences involved in the character. Louis’ hybrid identity does not progress in dialectical terms. Admittedly, there is a negotiation between the multifarious components of his subjectivity, but this never collapses into express and unambiguous rejection or dialectical closure. Then again, the interlock between voiceover narrative and the visuals helps foreground the disjunctive nature of Louis’ identity even as it makes the fragmented nature of the present apparent. Consider, for instance, Sweet’s comment on Louis’s sartorial style:

Capital crime has a strange transformative effect on Louis Mazzini. With each killing, his clothes become more stylish and luxurious. In the first reel of the picture, he is trapped in a shapeless lounge suit. Murder puts him in a pinstriped line and blazer, then a tightly tailored housecoat with lapels like a huge iridescent butterfly, and finally—in the condemned cell—he is resplendent in a smoking jacket with quilted silk roll collar. (Sweet 2019: 6)

There is no continuity between these renditions of Louis insofar as the visuals simply hint at Louis’ social advancement, never providing the audience with a bond of causality between Louis’ outward appearance and his social status each time around. Similarly, Louis’ apparel represents his progress in society as much as it obfuscates—in truly

Willean style—but never quite disguises his inner moral corruption, thus signalling yet another type of fracture in Louis’ multifarious subjectivity. Rather, the hybrid composite that makes up for his subjectivity brings out difference as a pervasive element of both his character and the narrative.

Louis’ hybridity is foregrounded both in terms of ethnicity and class. Louis is the son of an English aristocrat and an Italian opera singer. Moreover, he is the son of an aristocrat disowned by her family, which promptly brings the character down several steps on the social ladder. Interestingly enough, this renders Louis a double outcast. Because he is deprived of his ‘birth-rights’ (Hamer 2019: 9’ 10”; 20’ 06”) he is relegated to the middle-class, and therefore is condemned to a life-sentence in suburbia; yet because his ethnic origins are diverse, the middle-class he is brought up in and inhabits never accepts him as an equal either. This is evidenced not only by Lionel’s derogatory remarks to the effect that Louis’ mother ‘married an Italian organ-grinder’ (Hamer 2019: 74’ 23”) —which brings up snobbery as a disease endemic in the middle classes—but also by the attitude Sibella manifests in connection with Louis’ national identity. Twice she raises the subject in conversation: first as an ironic quip when Louis proposes to Sibella early on in the film, and second, when she complains about her honeymoon in Italy only to taunt Louis as she recalls his origins: ‘But I was forgetting, you’re Italian,’ says Sibella, whereupon Louis tellingly remarks ‘Half’ (Hamer 2019: 48’ 30”). Louis’ response in turn evinces that his attitude towards his own personal origins is indeed ambivalent, a mixture of acceptance and rejection. His snobbery matches that of Lionel’s to a certain extent in the presence of Sibella, who is nevertheless ‘pretty enough in her suburban way’ (Hamer 2019: 44’ 55”). And even though Louis’ ties to suburban, middle-class life become increasingly embarrassing as he climbs up the social ladder, his appraisal of social responsibility compares in a positively bourgeois way with that of the corrupt and decadent privileged class he nevertheless aspires to belong to. The voiceover intimates this right after Louis proposes to Edith and she, visibly shocked, is incapable of giving him an answer right away: ‘Sibella was waiting for me when I got back. I was pleased to see her, for while I never admired Edith as much as when I was with Sibella, I never longed for Sibella as much as when I was with Edith’ (Hamer 2019: 74’ 19”–74’ 30”).

Louis is torn between two worlds, taking part in them as enthusiastically as he rejects them both. Thus, neither Louis, the would-be-aristocrat-suburban-snob, nor Louis the sneerer of nobility anchors their character to a fixed identity. On the contrary, the film enacts the ongoing de-centring of identity, by bringing to the fore, in the dynamic of social identity-work, that there is always a difference at odds with the affirmation of a given identity.

The intimation of difference as a token for the fracture of the self points to trauma as the oblique structure of memory, and, ultimately, the film it informs. As Charles Barr rightly points out, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* is

[an] Oedipal story [...]. Simply by the shock of his entry into the world, Louis kills his father; he thereafter settles down into an exclusive loving relation with his mother. Lacking a father from this point, he can't work through the Oedipal conflict: the fact that the same actor, Dennis Price, plays this cut-off father helps us to see the death in terms of what happens within Louis, as if what has died is a part of himself, of his psyche (it also, of course shows us Louis's image of himself as married to his mother). (Barr 1998: 126–127)

The 'Oedipal story' not only functions as the structure through which the story progresses. It also reveals the symbolic work that enables the neo-Victorian negotiation of the 'self' in the story. The fragmented subjectivity that *Kind Hearts* comprises emerges from the killing of the father and the unresolved love for the mother. Both Edith and Sibella, for instance, reflect qualities reminiscent of Louis' mother. On the one hand, Edith epitomizes the noble spirit of righteousness aristocracy should be an example of. She quotes Tennyson to illustrate her preference of morals and honesty over birth-rights: 'Kind hearts are more than coronets / and simple faith than Norman blood' (Tennyson 2009: 103), thus hinting at a concept of nobility which lies far from the decadent and corrupt version the film actually enacts—the D'Ascoynes depicted by Louis at some point are 'monsters of arrogance and cruelty' (Hamer 2019: 20' 05"). Yet for all of Edith's virtues, as well as the laborious lengths Louis goes to in order to secure her affections, Louis tellingly brands her as a 'prig' (Hamer 2019: 34' 29"), thus suggesting only a part of Edith's character interests him, to wit, that which reminds Louis of his own mother. Sibella, on the other hand, is evocative of Louis' upbringing. Being the daughter of a 'professional man' (a doctor), Louis' mother 'relax[es] her objection' to his 'associating with the local

children' (Hamer 2019: 10' 47"–10' 52"), so their relationship is effectively sanctioned by the mother. Even more to the point, by asking for Sibella's hand in marriage, after having sworn revenge on the D'Ascoynes, Louis would be effectively performing the fantasy of making a gentlewoman out of a suburban middle-class wife, i.e., vicariously restoring his mother to the place where she belongs.

But for all the transferences projected upon Edith and Sibella, the presence of the mother is nevertheless pervasive. For Barr, 'the mother is as important to *Kind Hearts* as to *Citizen Kane*: seen only briefly, but frequently recalled and psychologically central' (1998: 122). At various levels, Louis' mother is evocative of a past that has been wronged and calls for future restitution. The last wish of Louis' mother was to be buried in the family vault, at Chalfont castle, seat of the dukedom. Ethelred D'Ascoyne, the Duke, refused her wish, even scorning her, after her demise, on the grounds of her snobbish aspirations: 'People getting strange ideas these days. Had a fellow write to me not so long ago... wanted to bury his mother here from Tooting or somewhere. Start letting strangers in and the place will be full up. No room for us, eh?' (Hamer 2019: 42' 55"–43' 07"). Louis then 'privately promised him that he would make it my business to see there was room for him' (Hamer 2019: 43' 09"–43' 12"). Indeed, the Duke is the only D'Ascoyne who learns about Louis' drive and motivations at the time of his death, Louis explicitly making a point of Ethelred not having granted Louis' mother her dying wish.

This is in keeping too with neo-Victorian fiction, oftentimes 'preoccupied with images of ghosts and metaphors of haunting, especially positioning the fictional text as a medium of the past' (Mitchell, 2010: 35). The 'ghost,' Kate Mitchell proceeds, 'signals [...] the uncanny repetition of the past in the present' (2010: 35), for 'there is no distinction between past and present, inside and outside in a haunted subject or a haunted text' (Arias and Pulham 2009: xvii). As a result, 'haunted' neo-Victorian fictions bring home an oblique notion of 'indeterminacy and incompleteness' (Mitchell 2010: 35) which informs its internal logic as well as its metafictional drive. Ultimately, Louis' mother lies behind the 'curse' of the family D'Ascoyne, as Lord Ascoyne D'Ascoyne distinctly, albeit somewhat trivially, points out in conversation with Louis (Hamer 2019: 60' 12"). The concept of the 'curse' resonates in the murder of Ethelred D'Ascoyne, as only then is it

made apparent to the head of the family, but it becomes obliquely present again at a different point in the story. A drunken Lionel desperately begs Louis for the restoration of his credit in the bank. Louis remains calmly adamant that he will not grant Lionel his request and only loses his temper when Lionel refers to his mother in derogatory terms (Hamer 2019: 74' 23").<sup>5</sup> It is quite telling that the statement is directly derogatory of his father and only indirectly of his mother, yet Louis retorts by slapping Lionel and swearing to not 'tolerate hearing my mother's name on your coarse tongue' (Hamer 2019: 74' 35"). If Louis' mother lies at the core of the curse of the D'Ascoynes, Louis, being a D'Ascoyne himself, paradoxically endures a peculiar strain of what is to all intents and purposes the same haunting, this time in the form of an obsessively unresolved Oedipal complex, which might be read in turn as the eternally recurring past, laden with intimations of 'indeterminacy and incompleteness' (Mitchell 2010: 35).

In this context, the symbolic recurrence of the past acquires metafictional overtones. The 'incompletion and indeterminacy' are brought out in Louis' negotiation of his Oedipal complex, which Charles Barr links to the actual murders,

The same principle applies, less speculatively, to the D'Ascoyne relatives, all eight being incarnated by Alec Guinness, like a monstrous father-figure whose power is belatedly encountered as Louis emerges, mother-dominated, into manhood and who recurs with the same face, time after time, Hydra-like as if in his nightmare. (Barr 1998: 126–127)

Metafictionally, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* is a 'story of difference' told from a point of view of the hybrid identity taking over received notions of the Victorian self. This 'self' epitomizes the normative identity informed by traditional Victorianism and emblemized by the decadent D'Ascoyne family.<sup>6</sup> On a topical level, the revenge against the

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<sup>5</sup> See above p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> See also, below, pp. 66–67. The type of 'self' or Victorian identity the film represents agrees, by and large, with the over-orderly, oppressive conception—and reception—of Victorianism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this way, *Kind Hearts* works somewhat akin to many costume dramas of the 1980s and 1990s, the 'success' of which, as Antonija Primorac points out, 'depends heavily on certain presumptions about the period becoming cultural memories that the audiences are expected to share and believe in.' These 'presumptions,' however, 'often

‘monstrous father figure’ might be read as a token of the despondent classes raging against ‘entrenched aristocratic privilege’ (Richards 1997: 135). This is in keeping with the spirit of the studios. As Jeffrey Richards points out, ‘given Ealing filmmakers’ admitted allegiance to Labour, it is arguable that the early Ealing films (1947–1951) constitute a programmatic attack on the evils that Labour wished to eradicate’ (1997: 135). However, Tim O’Sullivan contends

there is a way in which the films also appear to refuse or evacuate any (party) political dimensions, presenting themselves by contrast as a reiteration of timeless comic struggles between the old and the new and of deferential conformity pitted against resistance. (2012: 70)

In other words, on a more profound level, the film also sets the present self in negotiation with the ‘old self,’ or received notions of Victorian identity which

[consist] not so much of relics and ruins as of pervasive embodied/incarnate material traces structuring today’s cultural institutions, political and socio-economic frameworks, and the landscapes, cityscapes and global spaces we inhabit—an integral part of the lived/living fabric of the present. (Kohlke 2010: 29)

Moral (‘Kind Hearts’) and ethical (‘Coronets’) issues are, too, part of the ‘material traces’ of Victorianism in the present context. And these particular traces are quite telling of the negotiation between Victorian past and (post-)modern present. The moral issue at the core of *Kind Hearts and Coronets* is that the punishment of crime paradoxically leads to moral confusion, as will be explained further below. The only figure resembling a moral centre in the film, as it has been suggested, is the character of Edith (Valerie Hobson). She sympathizes with Louis when he informs her about his mother’s predicament with the D’Ascoyne family. Edith believes that ‘the attitude of [her] husband’s family has failed to move with the times’ since ‘they think too much of the rights of nobility and too little of its duties’ (Hamer 2019: 35’ 42”) and, as mentioned previously, recalls Tennyson to characterize Louis’ ‘honesty’ in disclosing his dislike of her husband’s family. Edith’s sympathetic tone contrasts with Sibella’s opportunistic manoeuvres, marrying Lionel

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rely on unquestioned tropes and stereotypes about the past which come to constitute cultural memories’ and ‘are taken as immutable, even when they invariably shift with time’ (2018: 7).

to secure a comfortable future whilst having an affair with Louis to satisfy her sexual desires. Ultimately, she blackmails Louis into getting married to her after Lionel's demise. Even more to the point, Edith's virtue is so poorly rewarded for her marriage with Louis that the union could very well pass for a punishment. Indeed, not only does she marry the murderer of her husband—oblivious as she is of Louis' crimes—but she does it in the honest belief that he, Louis, is the most righteous man she has ever come across:

I wanted to publish irrevocably before the whole world my faith in his innocence. I wanted to show by my marriage that though he was led astray, as I believe, by that innate kindness and courtesy of his which made it so hard for him to rebuff the advances of a woman, I nevertheless regard him as a man to whom I can happily entrust the remainder of my life. I am not alone in these opinions of him. My late husband, Henry, and his late uncle Ethelred, the 8th Duke, both unfortunately unable to testify today. These and other members of the D'Ascoyne family, had they been alive, would, I know, have echoed every word that I have said. (Hamer 2019: 93' 47''–94' 30'')

Ealing comedies in the late 1940s and 1950s made a point of working in morally-charted territory. The studios' comedy blueprint very rarely—if at all—sustained fictions lacking in moral restitution. Stanley Holloway in *Passport to Pimlico* (1949), for instance, epitomizes the type of committed self-sacrifice aimed at promoting communal work for the reconstruction of post-war Britain. Joan Greenwood and Alec Guinness himself in *The Man in the White Suit* (1951) bespeak the same type of altruism, and staunchly stand by it despite political interests of both right and left. In *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), the crime is punished *deus-ex-machina*, but punished nonetheless, whereas Mrs Wilberforce's (Katie Johnson) moral resilience in *The Ladykillers* (1955) is such that it renders any attempt at breaking the law—divine or human—actually impossible.

*Kind Hearts and Coronets*, conversely, leaves much room for moral improvement. In the film, 'we move from the death cell to suburban Clapham,' Matthew Sweet expounds, 'to the country estate and the Riverside hotel without encountering anybody who will speak for decency or affirm the consensus values of post-war Britain' (2019: 8). The moral turpitude is so pervasive at every level of the social spectrum that it is hard to believe it works as an end in itself and not as yet another way to defer undisclosed levels of meaning. Indeed, reading *Kind Hearts*

with the moral blueprint of the Ealing comedy, the film ends quite unsatisfactorily. The ambiguous ending opens the possibility, on the one hand, of leaving Louis' crimes unpunished, and the moral beacon of the story punished for her own gullibility. On the other, Louis might, after all, be punished for the murders he committed, but if he does, it will be at the social cost of perpetuating the moral wrongdoings of the D'Ascoynes.<sup>7</sup> Either way, the bleak scenario at the end of the film is quite at odds with the moral drive that characterizes many Ealing comedies.<sup>8</sup>

The moral wrongdoings of the D'Ascoynes epitomize several received notions of Victorianism. And it is through these notions that the 'living fabric of the present' (Kohlke 2010: 29) can be rendered apparent. Re-writing Victoriana in the present context can hardly circumvent the way in which the Victorian period has been formerly received in the past, which is usually along two axes. On the one hand, the Victorian century can be formulated as an over-orderly social project designed to challenge the modern subject, who nevertheless manages to transcend the oppressive conditions of the 1800s and rebels against the said project at the turn of the century (Matthews 2010: 175–176). On the other, the Victorian century can be envisaged as a golden age of cosy political certainties that lead into a state of gloomy despair characterised by war, corruption and dehumanization (Matthews 2010: 177–179). Both visions have cropped up prominently at different points in the 20th century. Yet, however dystopian or utopian these ideas might be, whether they aim at setting the foundations of unstable modern and/or postmodern identities or at challenging them, the reception of Victorian culture has been consistent in construing Victorian ideology as a narrative of order, civilization (coded in the Empire), stability and dependability (Matthews 2010: 272–285; Valls Oyarzun 2017: 11).

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<sup>7</sup> The film ends with a shot of Louis' memoirs resting on the table of his cell. He forgot to take the manuscript with him. The open ending of the film refuses to settle a particular moral stance, as opposed to the clear-cut morals of the American version of the film (see above, n. 3).

<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the moral ambiguity, which is key to the de-centralization of meaning in the film, characterizes other prominent Ealing films—the comedy *Whisky Galore* (1949) and the horror anthology *Dead of Night* (1945) are notable cases in point.

The actual murders Louis commits foreground the Victorian indulgence or the decadence pertaining this narrative, i.e., the cultural discontent that pervades the late Victorian period (Valls Oyarzun 2017: 203–221), even as the D’Ascoyne family enforces ideas of normative Victorian identities. Mr Ascoyne D’Ascoyne dies with his mistress during a romantic sojourn in the countryside—Louis feeling ‘sorry about the girl’ but finding consolation in that ‘she had presumably, during the weekend, already undergone a fate worse than death’ (Hamer 2019: 26’ 15”–26’ 25”). Henry D’Ascoyne dies while visiting the shed where he drinks in secret. The Reverend D’Ascoyne, an out-and-out oaf, dies by poison, but the doctor assumes he died naturally from a heart-attack caused by his excessive drinking. The murders of Lady Agatha, Admiral D’Ascoyne and General D’Ascoyne are made out to look like the outcome of their incompetent ways of going about their business, thus debunking their public personas.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the murder of Ethelred D’Ascoyne—the Duke—as has been posited, brings out the cruelty and arrogance pertaining to both the family in general and the Duke in particular. By and large, the D’Ascoynes ‘are not merely cruel fathers to this one individual, but caricatures of a whole patriarchal culture, of an aristocratic English arrogance’ (Barr 1998: 128). The D’Ascoynes somehow epitomize a class that, paraphrasing the Reverend D’Ascoyne, ‘has all the exuberance’ of Victorianism but pretends to lack ‘any of the concomitant crudities of [their] period’ (Hamer 2019: 52’ 19”–52’ 28”) even as they perform these almost to the letter. They are a class that have ‘failed to move with the times’ as Edith so eloquently puts it (Hamer 2019: 35’ 45”), exhibiting an integrity that does not work outwards, towards the social body, but inwards, to sustain the family privileges, no matter the cost. However, Louis shares, at least in part, some of the arrogant and socially disruptive beliefs ingrained in the family—Barr, for instance, points out their common disdain for ‘trade’ (1998: 129). If the D’Ascoynes are then symbols of the oppressive, decadent condition of

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<sup>9</sup> The Admiral actually dies from his own ineptitude, not knowing the difference between port and starboard. Lady Agatha sets out on a reckless balloon trip, without learning how to navigate. The voiceover dismisses the murder comically with a couplet, ‘shot an arrow in the air / she fell to earth in Berkeley square’ (Hamer 2019: 57’ 39”–57’ 42”). The General, who was torturing his last victim with the umpteenth rendition of his accomplishments in the colonial wars, dies from the explosion of a bomb Louis prepares in a jar of caviar.

the privileged classes and morals of the 1800s (i.e., the Victorian self), so is Louis as a token of the present torn subjectivity,<sup>10</sup> proving right the actualization of Victoriana, metafictionally, as, again, ‘an integral part of the lived/living fabric of the present’ (Kohlke 2010: 29).

The moral subtext of the film thereby enforces a new level of meaning, as a token for the negotiation between present subjectivity and Victorian identity. The murders effectively bring about, from a metafictional viewpoint, the complex interplay between the modern—or postmodern—broken subject and an identity that relentlessly refuses to admit the impossibility of its purported integrity, that is, its completeness, stability and dependability. The (black) comedic flair of the film naturally highlights this interplay. Neo-Victorian ‘humorous’ negotiations between past and present subjectivities, Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben argue, rely ‘on both superiority and incongruity’ (2017: 8). The film enacts the said superiority, as well as the incongruity this superiority brings about, to the letter, for whilst the viewer experiences a first-hand ‘positive, liberating and ethical reading’ that eschews ‘outmoded attitudes and now unacceptable prejudices’ (2017: 3, 12), Louis’ stance serves as a constant reminder that the modern subject is liable, and oftentimes guilty of making the same cultural misjudgements the Victorians were capable of. Indeed, ‘in passing humorous judgment on the period,’ Kohlke and Gutleben affirm, ‘neo-Victorian artists and audiences risk adopting a comparable arrogant attitude of “we are better/we know better.” Neo-Victorian humour thus lays itself open to the charge of what Matthew Sweet terms a strategic dismissive “misreading” of the Victorians’ (2012: 8). The film becomes self-reflective on this issue, since it emblemizes a stance which renders the superior modern subject (Louis) as both acceptable and objectionable. In other words, even as Louis, as embodiment of the present self, attempts to literally efface the Victorian forefathers, he too affirms that part of his own subjectivity is still informed by the same purportedly affixed subject he rages against. All in all, the rewriting of

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<sup>10</sup> In the character of Louis, the film boasts a torn subject, impossible to pin down in terms of transcendence, essence, fixed identity or clear-cut, well-defined moral, ethical or political values. This constitutes the idea of the (post-)modern subject in the discussion. The emphasis the film puts on the ongoing, constant rewrite of the subject underpins the prefix ‘post-’ before ‘modern’. See also, below, n. 14.

the Victorian self manages, paradoxically, to actualize, in part, the said self.

The interplay between past and present informs the neo-Victorian spirit *avant-la-lettre* of the film. '*Kind Hearts and Coronets*' is, indeed, 'the vehicle for a much more conflicted attitude to the past' (Sweet 2019: 13). Re-plotting the Victorian past as a new memory, as a 'process' of recollection informing the present, involves killing a part of the said Victorian past and tearing it up in the context of trauma.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as Matthew Sweet suggests, the film seems caught 'between yearning and disgust for the lost world of frock coats, aspidistras, and ladies' hats piled with roses, daffodils, mimosa, narcissi, grapes, cherries, corn, butterflies and stuffed birds' (2019: 13–14). Sweet cannot quite pin down the precise tenet outlining the space in-between that 'yearning and disgust' (2019: 13) other than linking the Victorian and Edwardian past with post-war Britain and its revamp of Britishness. Unwittingly though, he points out the signposts charting the neo-Victorian territory the film brazenly inhabits.

The aforementioned 'yearning' refers to nostalgia, which the neo-Victorian project acknowledges as a truly 'affective mode of memory which' in effect 'constitutes a cultural force in its own right' (Enderwitz and Feldmann, 52). For Rosa Karl, it is the propellant of 'our identity work' (2010: 47). Nostalgia in this context, Karl argues, 'attempts to possess a revised version of history and/or literature via a narration that transforms it into personal experience' (2010: 47). This is particularly true when considering Ealing Studios' capitalization of nostalgia as a

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<sup>11</sup> This means not so much the recovery of memories rather than the *production* of memories in themselves, particularly when the rewriting of Victoriana occurs on screen, as is the case with *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. Antonija Primorac, for instance, looks 'at neo-Victorianism on screen as a generative phenomenon that adapts and absorbs aspects of what is understood as Victoriana, creating along the way a neo-Victorian imaginarium that enables a sensory immersion in a fantasy of the past' (2018: 12). This 'imaginarium' involves 'a dynamic and generative (creative) process that builds on preceding adaptations [...] as an evolving compendium of the said generated images' (2018: 12). On a metacultural level, this accounts for trauma in the form of a constant and unavoidable rewrite of the images pertaining to the said 'imaginarium.' Or, in other words, the rewriting of Victoriana, much like the way in which Louis' torn subjectivity unfolds, implies both affirming and effacing the signs which informs it [i.e., Victoriana].

driving narrative force. Ealing comedies are nostalgic discourses about long-gone British identities recast in the present. They actualized a commodified fantasy of what George Eliot aptly called, in *Silas Marner*, ‘merry England’ (2017: 4), or, in its 1950s version, ‘idealised’ communities ‘where small-timers invariably thwart big, bad bureaucrats’ (representative of corrupt, largely urban, depersonalized societies) ‘and where tolerance, humour and benevolence rule [...]. Their celebration of community, consensus and mild but loveable eccentricity’ (Macnab 2011) points both backwards, to a golden age of collective certainties, largely informed by Victorian ethics, as well as forwards, by becoming a recurring re-enactment of the said certainties. The comedic output of Ealing Studios, even at its most biting—as is the case in *Kind Hearts*—consistently positions nostalgia centre-stage in the cinematic discourse, up to a point at which virtually every comedy Ealing Studios made accounts for either trusting affirmation or critical re-assessment of nostalgia in the context of our ‘identity work.’<sup>12</sup>

*Kind Hearts and Coronets* belongs to the second type. Nostalgia in *Kind Hearts* conveys a staunch longing for an orderly world, a place ripe for moral certainties, social hierarchy and clear-cut ethical values the present, private ‘self’ pines for, if only to subvert it. Yet *Kind Hearts and Coronets* not so much upends nostalgia, as articulates its repressive side while affirming its life-enhancing values. The film sits somewhere between Edith’s worship of her husband after his death and Louis’ pragmatic—albeit mischievously sycophantic—attitude toward the D’Ascoyne widow.

EDITH: [Henry’s chair] hasn’t been used since that day. Nothing of his. Everything is just as he left it, his writing desk, his clothes. I cannot bear that it should be otherwise.

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<sup>12</sup> The nostalgic trait in *Kind Hearts* cannot be undermined on the basis of Louis’ destructive attitude towards the past. In cultural terms, Louis’ murderous feat falls into the category of what Janelle L. Wilson labels as ‘negative nostalgia’ (2005: 27). This is not nostalgia *per se*, but a set of ‘negative events’ which triggers a nostalgic feeling for the positive features these events eventually spawned, such as the sense of ‘community’ engendered by the Great Depression (Wilson 2005: 27) or, as is the case in *Kind Hearts*, the affirmation of personal identity embedded in Louis’ desire for the restitution of his mother’s family rights.

LOUIS: You want this house to be a shrine. You're wrong. Shrines are not meant to house the living. I have always respected you—your principles, your courage—above any woman I've ever met. It is your duty to yourself and to Henry even—to live again in the present, in the future. (Hamer 2019: 62' 34"-63' 12")

For Louis, a nostalgia-fed present is destructive in itself. The house is not meant to be a 'shrine,' a Miss Havisham-like, frozen-dead memento of the past, but a present, living and organic space. This does not mean, however, the house should be demolished altogether, but rather remodelled and refurbished, with him in it! Carrying the metaphor to its natural conclusion, the past houses the present even as the story of difference enforced in neo-Victorian fiction takes care of recasting its interior.<sup>13</sup> Typically, the process of refurbishing involves some tearing down, some violence, a critical engagement that is made present through

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<sup>13</sup> The neo-Victorian re-negotiation of the past with the actual present is somewhat reinforced, albeit obliquely, in the flashback that informs the narrative. Matthew Sweet makes a point of the film longing to kill something 'in the Edwardian past' (2019: 15). Not that it matters in terms of time-frame for the purposes of this essay, but neo-Victorian studies consistently include the Edwardian decade. More often than not, critics in the neo-Victorian fold advocate for a 'flexible definition of the neo-Victorian,' and/or somewhat argue for 'the historical reference point of the *long nineteenth century*, which includes Jane Austen' and, one should add, the Edwardian decade in full (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2010: 16, my emphasis; see also Karl 2010). This is even more pertinent in the case of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, since the Edwardian decade plays out as a manifestation of the pivotal change to cultural modernity—that is, cultural present—in Britain in connection to the Victorian past. (Interestingly enough, the source novel of the film, *Israel Rank: The Autobiography of a Criminal* (1907) was indeed a product of the Edwardian decade). The present in the film is Edwardian (the execution is set for 3 August 1902), yet the distinction between late-Victorian and Edwardian fades away in the subjective time-line that encompasses Louis' predicaments: A portrait of Queen Victoria hangs prominently, high above on the wall of Louis' classroom, when he was a child, the death of the old Queen possibly taking place sometime between Louis' last murder and Lionel's suicide—as befitting the somewhat dream-like time of the film, it is never specified. Discussing whether the film is (neo-)Edwardian or neo-Victorian is truly absurd, since it plays both periods against each other for maximum effect: the Edwardian present rages against the Victorian past even as it takes control of the said-past. This of course mirrors, to great lengths, the philosophy underlying the neo-Victorian project.

a conduit informed by nostalgia as a blueprint of cultural memory. Thus the film prefigures—and already articulates!—the neo-Victorian debate on the ‘dichotomisation of nostalgia and critical engagement’ (Mitchell 2010: 5)—i.e., self-reflexivity—as possible different drives behind the rewriting of Victoriana:

Undoubtedly, individual texts engage the nostalgic moment in their process of reaching back to the past, in the sense that they invoke affect as a means toward historical recollection. However, this does not preclude sustained, critical engagement with the past. Moreover, nostalgia might be productive, giving voice to the desire for cultural memory to which [neo-Victorian texts] bear witness. (Mitchell 2010: 5)

Accordingly, the film does not shy away from the consequences of negotiating nostalgia and memory. The torn subjectivity the film enforces seeks retribution from the Victorians, even as it aspires to become one itself. It also asserts the impossibility of doing so, not only in terms of duty and morals, but also to the extent wherein the self cannot overcome its torn nature. This of course reflects, in its own way, the cultural embodiment of trauma the film hints at. The interaction with Victoriana involves de-structuring a substantial part of its discourse in order to re-write the historical mode and recast it as personal disjointed memory, which nevertheless contributes the individual and differential story the Victorian narrative lacks memory of.

The interplay between Grand History or Grand Narrative and personal memoir, between the D’Ascoynes and Louis, accounts for the nature of the film as ‘critical memory,’ as it were:

What we’re left with, the shot Hamer signs off with, is simply matching the final words, the image of [Louis’] memoirs: in effect, the image of the film itself, since these memoirs, prologue and epilogue apart, constitute the film. To the question of how we finally take it all, what we make of it, the answer we are left with is this: the memoirs, the film, the total artifact. The memoir is the message, the meaning *is* the film. (Barr 1998: 130)

The self-reflective nature of the ending—and retrospectively of the entire film—foregrounds the elusiveness of meaning in connection with memory. Just as ‘Louis’ final ‘stance’ (Barr 1998: 130) at the end of the film is virtually impossible to pin down, just as his torn subjectivity remains a ‘set’ of unresolved ‘tensions’ (Barr 1998: 130), the film allocates meaning in its nature as a process of re-writing Victoriana.

Metafictionally, *Kind Hearts* defers its meaning from Victorian closure to an ongoing and insoluble negotiation of the affixed certainties, values (and their representation) that the subject pines for but actively undermines through memory.<sup>14</sup> Much as Louis murders the D'Ascoynes in almost surreal, dream-like time and fashion, neo-Victorian memory unavoidably helps kill Victorian certitudes by constantly making them present and, in so doing, debunking their nature as certitudes. Memory thus turns critical, insofar as it underlies its own structure of transformative process, a sort of endless 'differentiator' (Deleuze 2013: 143) that both affirms the Victorian past as part of our present and negates it as either moral, ethical or dialectical closure (or combinations of the three). The interpretation of the 'message'—to use Barr's phrasing—does not finish, nor is completed in any way whatsoever. Rather it ceases once the film has presented itself, not so much as 'meaning' but as a critical negotiation of meaning, bound to play upon the elusiveness of the process over and over again.

Ultimately, 'critical memory' is *Kind Hearts and Coronets*' major contribution to neo-Victorian culture as well as its calling card as a neo-Victorian film *avant-la-lettre*. The critical element in neo-Victorian fiction focuses on reading the desire underpinning a variety of texts that 'offer themselves as memory' (Mitchell 2010: 32), 'not simply communicat[ing] or transmit[ing], but actively shap[ing] it' (Mitchell 2010: 34). Neo-Victorian fiction, in other words, encompasses texts that self-reflectively—or by way of 'immersion,' as Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss argue (2010: 5)—ponder the 'neo-' element in neo-Victorian aesthetics, for a text to play out as neo-Victorian arguably must 'be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians' (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4). *Kind Hearts and Coronets*' self-reflective, open-ended narrative not only sets out to 'communicate memory' (Mitchell 2010: 32) but also to actively rewrite both the Victorian self and the way to constitute it. It informs the neo-Victorian project as a critical, selective

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<sup>14</sup> This alone would qualify *Kind Hearts and Coronets* as an early example of postmodern text. The film asserts a modern torn subjectivity, but rather than affirming it as the essence or identity of modernity—as opposed to the stable Victorian self—it continually defers the possibility of meaning. It is the process of rewriting, not the object of the rewrite that the film seems to privilege overall. See also, above, n. 10.

ongoing revaluation of Victoriana, the constantly deferred meaning of which eschews dialectical closure (i.e., identity certitudes) and allows the individual story of difference to take centre-stage. It recasts the project as a critical conduit to actualize the Victorian self, both through transformative killing and the celebration thereof.

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