

Lady Macbeth—a bored, unhappy young wife “ready to go through fire”—and *Mali Blues*

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This is an edited version of comments included in coverage of the 2016 Toronto film festival. Both Lady Macbeth and Mali Blues recently opened in the US.

British theater director William Oldroyd has made his directorial film debut with an adaptation of the well-known novella by Russian writer Nikolai Leskov (1831-1895), *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (the basis for Dmitri Shostakovich’s 1932 opera of the same title). It is the tale of a bored, suffocated young woman imprisoned in a wretched marriage, a theme treated in some of the greatest novels and plays of the mid- and late-nineteenth century: *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *A Doll’s House* (and *Hedda Gabler*), *Effie Briest* and others.

Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy described Leskov as a “truthful writer”—which was high praise from him. Literary critic Walter Benjamin wrote a lengthy essay, *The Story-Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov* (published in 1936), in which he commented, speaking of the Russian writer’s works, that there was nothing “that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis.”

Indeed, Leskov’s *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* demonstrates the writer’s “chaste compactness,” a quality that Oldroyd largely carries over into his film version of *Lady Macbeth*. He has changed the location from a provincial estate in Tsarist Russia to the desolate countryside of Northumberland, in northeast England.

In 1865, teenager Katherine (Florence Pugh) is the new bride of the much older Alexander (Paul Hilton), a mine operator. She has been more or less purchased by Alexander’s father Boris (Christopher Fairbank) and like all acquisitions is expected to perform a function: providing Alexander with offspring.

Imprisoned in the sepulcher-like manor, Katherine is

forbidden to walk the moors that are as wild as her temperament. And while Alexander is stern and brittle, his father Boris, the grasping colliery overlord, barely registers a pulse.

(Leskov: “Exceeding boredom in the merchant’s locked-up tower, with its high walls and watchdog running loose, had more than once filled the merchant’s young wife with pining, to the point of stupefaction. ...”)

Katherine forms a strong attachment to her maid Anna (Naomi Ackie), a young woman of approximately the same age and perhaps even social background. Anna routinely gets dragged into Katherine’s schemes to alleviate her restlessness.

When Boris and Alexander go off to tend to a disaster at their mine, Katherine allows herself to be seduced by the insubordinate groom Sebastian (Cosmo Jarvis). Her fiery passions unleashed (“uncontrolled lust” is Benjamin’s phrase), she mandates her bewildered, suspicious staff to share in her independence: “No more bowing and not being who you deserve to be.” Katherine no longer feels constricted by the social mores of the time, and momentarily enters into a kind of utopian moral-emotional space, making her a nineteenth-century heroine like no other.

(Leskov: “Katerina Lvovna was now ready, for the sake of Sergei, to go through fire, through water, to prison, to the cross. He made her fall so in love with him that her devotion to him knew no measure. She was out of her mind with happiness; her blood boiled, and she could no longer listen to anything. ... She suddenly unfolded the whole breadth of her awakened nature and became so resolute that there was no stopping her.”)

Brazen and remorseless, Katherine will not only “go through fire” and the rest for her love and freedom, but

murderously defend them. All those, friend and foe alike, who stand in her way, face the ferocity of this “Lady Macbeth.” Given the nature of the society, her *individual* happiness requires and depends on horribly anti-social behavior.

Director Oldroyd has done a fine job distilling the essence of Leskov’s novella. His *Lady Macbeth* is an intense, conscientious, well-constructed piece. Pugh stands out as the explosive protagonist capable of any emotion and deed. The supporting cast are all remarkable.

The cinematography eerily accentuates Katherine’s monastic manor-prison, allowing her vibrant blue dress to serve as contrast. During a question-and-answer session after a public screening of his film at the 2016 Toronto film festival, Oldroyd explained that the camera remained static until Katherine “awakens.” Ackie (Anna), who is black, expressed pleasure at being able to work on a project that was “color-blind.”

Leskov was a remarkable writer. “What a good time you and I had, sitting together of a long autumn evening, sending people out of this world by a cruel death,” muses his Katerina in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*.

Mali Blues

German director Lutz Gregor offers a glimpse of Mali’s musical scene in *Mali Blues*. Making the claim that the West African nation is the cradle of jazz and blues, the documentary follows the radiant Fatoumata Diawara—who fled the country to escape an arranged marriage—as she prepares for her first solo appearance in Mali at the Festival of the Niger in 2015. Mali’s deeply rooted musical traditions are threatened by Islamists in the country’s north, who have outlawed any form of musical expression.

The film’s other featured musicians include famed *ngoni* (Malian string instrument) player and traditional *griot* (storyteller-singer) Bassekou Kouyaté, street rapper Master Soumy and Tuareg band leader Ahmed Ag Kaedi. Soumy provides the sharpest criticism of Mali’s government and social conditions.

One of the film’s most moving sequences occurs

when Fatoumata visits her home village—very rural and very poor—and sings a song to the female members of the community about genital mutilation.

Director Gregor does not make much of the current political situation, in which Mali is increasingly a target for new imperialist intervention, or point the finger at the miserable social conditions and various forces responsible for the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism in the north of the country. One cannot perhaps expect Mali’s musicians, who create some of the world’s most exquisite sounds, to speak knowingly about complex geopolitics. But the filmmakers have a greater responsibility.



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