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Neo-Victorian Oceanic Depths in Netflix's *1899*

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This article dives into the oceanic waters beneath the steamship *Kerberos* in the neo-Victorian Netflix drama, *1899.* It considers water as an elemental force, as an oceanic vastness and as a shifting surface beneath which lie unfathomable depths. It explores how water interacts with people and state-of-the art steamship technology at the close of the nineteenth century, facilitating long-distance travel and immigration to the United States. It examines the mystery and multi-dimensionality of water and its role as a metaphor for sunken memories, human displacement in time and space, and cartographic anxiety. It is about the freedom afforded by water which acts as a buffer to the conventionality of landlocked life. It is about the agoraphobia-inducing sight of seemingly endless waves and the claustrophobia of onboard existence. It positions water mutating from unthreatening conduit to aggressor, rising up to overwhelm a vessel with crashing waves or else bursting through its sides to drive out any air. It presents water as a lurking menace waiting to drown passengers in its deathly embrace. It is about lost ships and ghost ships and floating phantoms and how they play out on the television screen.

This article adopts a spatially inflected methodology influenced by Spatial Studies, the Nautical Gothic, Ocean Studies, and historically informed neo-Victorianism. It posits that *1899's* ocean constitutes more than mere scenery, and it argues that water is not limited to a function as the show's aquatic backdrop but swells to influence plot; become a leading character; and is indeed indispensable to the entire production.

1899 made its debut on Netflix in November 2022 and at the time of writing is still streaming. Its representation of the late-nineteenth century and rear-view mirror perspective on *fin-de-siècle* sea travel immediately attracted this author's attention as one specialising in Victorian and neo-Victorian scholarship with an expanding interest in Ocean Studies, Nautical Gothic, and the Blue Humanities. This article sprang from a paper delivered to the international *Haunted Shores* conference held online in March 2023. It has found the perfect harbour in *AJVS's* special issue on "Water," and it makes no assumptions that readers will have been viewers of *1899*.

The spatiotemporal setting for *1899* is the golden age of water-borne steam transport in the middle of the Atlantic. The date is important, and not because it arbitrarily exploits what Kate Flint refers to as "period fetishism" (230). What the date does is to tie the series to a specific time when there were heavy increases in the intercontinental movement of peoples and the New Woman was beginning to emerge, personified in the lead character of Maura Franklin. The show's writer, Jantje Friese, talks about the choice of year in an online interview for Netflix with Jean Bentley: "What we really liked about 1899, not 1898 or 1897, is that it's on a threshold. You're crossing into a new century, stepping from something that feels old school to something new — the future." The appeal for Friese is the tension between religion, superstition, modernism, and science, epitomised for her by that date.

Chris Louttit and Ellen Louttit introduce a special edition of *Neo-Victorian Studies* on "Screening the Victorians in the Twenty-first Century," which is particularly pertinent to *1899* in highlighting issues relating to televisual representations of the *fin de siècle*. Iris Kleinecke-Bates's *Victorians on Screen* identifies television as "the medium which has, historically, shown the most pronounced preference for the Victorian age" (3). She observes a

specific "look" to programmes created through "use of colour, camerawork and even setting" (4) which combine to evoke feelings of "anxious dislocatedness" (4). This is not the cosy and colourful nostalgia of Jane Austen's Regency period, but a darker Gothic aesthetic. It is particularly suited to a show set at the end of the century and featuring recurring themes of transition and instability, and the ushering in of modernism.

Antonija Primorac's *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* sees the adaptation and absorption of multiple aspects of "Victoriana" contributing to a "neo-Victorian *imaginarium* that enables a sensory immersion in a fantasy of the past" (12, original emphasis). The nature of that immersion is subject to familiarity with the period. Some viewers of *1899* will recognise detailed references, but most will rely on a more amorphous awareness of the late-nineteenth century generated as much by previous on-screen iterations as by knowledge of the past. A neo-Victorian series tends to work on several levels, and visual or audio clues may be given to assist navigation between them.

When the show occurs is loudly announced in its title: *1899*. Where it takes place is in the oceanic vastness of the Atlantic. This article anchors itself on the spatiotemporal theories of Robert T. Tally Jr. who argues forcefully in *Spatiality* that: "space is not merely a backdrop or setting for events, an empty container to be filled with actions or movements" (119). The ocean is far more than just aquatic scenery. Emily Alder introduces a special edition of *Gothic Studies* on the Nautical Gothic. She repeats Tally's sentiment in her essay "Through Oceans Darkly: Sea Literature and the Nautical Gothic." In it, Alder identifies scholars in the emerging field of Oceanic Studies calling for recognition that the sea is more than "the backdrop to the stage on which the real action is seen to take place" (1). She is quoting John Mack's *The Sea. A Cultural History* (19). This present analysis of oceanic depths builds upon Tally, Mack, and Alder as well as the launch into Oceanic Studies of Jimmy Packham and David Punter. It argues with them that the ocean is a special space with unique characteristics. What it newly asserts is that oceanic water is central to *1899.*

1899 opens with a prologue delivered in a woman's voice. As the camera pans over desolate, unpeopled landscapes, and a seascape containing a ship in full steam, she recites two stanzas from Emily Dickinson's poem of 1862, "The Brain."

> THE Brain is wider than the Sky,
> For, put them side by side,
> The one the other will contain
> With ease, and you beside.
>
> The Brain is deeper than the sea,
> For, hold them, blue to blue,
> The one the other will absorb,
> As sponges, buckets do ("The Ship," *1899,* 00:00:18 - 00:01:05).

Even before the programme proper begins, the audience is encouraged to think of what the oceanic waters might be intended to represent in terms of nineteenth-century philosophising about the powers of the mind. The camera zooms rapidly over waves then plunges viewers into a maelstrom at the bottom of which is the woman whose voice spoke Dickinson's poem.

Fig 1. Promotional Posters for *1899.* Imdb Photo Gallery. © Netflix.

Netflix's advance promotion for *1899* is shown in Fig 1. The left-hand image incorporates a downward pointing triangle, the alchemical symbol for water's desire to descend. The right-hand image reverses the triangle's orientation so that it is closer to the alchemical symbol for fire. Steam, which powers the ocean-going vessel, is the marriage of water and fire. Triangles and indeed pyramids are visually significant throughout the series, but their unrealised Egyptological associations are set aside here to concentrate on water and on the woman falling between mirrored ships into a triangular maelstrom. Since watery whirlpools do not adopt that shape, the show's creators are signalling that something unnatural will occur. The looming presence of the ocean is reinforced through stormy tones, and there is an implication that the ship(s) or passenger(s) may plummet into its watery depths, much like Alice does in (un)earthly Wonderland as she falls down the rabbit hole.

The opening credits of each episode of *1899* are accompanied by an abridged version of *White Rabbit*, best known for being written by Grace Slick of *Jefferson Airplane* and performed by the band in 1967. Eliot Sumner, channelling their father, Sting's, unusual vocal talent, covers the song. In *1899,* on board the steamship, above-deck corridors and below-deck hatches will prove to be as labyrinthine as a rabbit warren. The first episode begins with a nightgowned woman in white, forcibly restrained in a building resembling a Victorian mental asylum. Echoes of Wilkie Collins's incarcerated heroines are strong. Protesting that she is not crazy, she shouts about the disappearance of her brother whose last known location was on board the *Prometheus.* Just like Wonderland-Alice, she is subjected to mind-altering substances and tumbles into a surreal world. Just like Looking-Glass-Alice she will encounter mirroring. Indeed, her auburn hair and russet blouse are suggestive that she may even be a proto-Red Queen. She will become embroiled in a game of strategy in which she will need to prove that she is not off her head. Grace Slick's haunting rendition of *White Rabbit* closes episode one, reiterating the instruction in its lyrics to "feed your head!"

Fig. 2. The *Kerberos* observed on calm waters. Composite image ©Author. Ship and ocean *1899* screengrabs from "The Ship," © Netflix.

This woman awakens in the cabin, not of *The Prometheus*, but a different ship, rubbing her chaffed wrists. There are three books on her desk. Two are medical textbooks on the human brain, and the third is Kate Chopin's 1899 novel, *The Awakening.* She again asserts her sanity, this time by running through the usual cognitive ability checks of name, place of birth, and current date. To her reflection, she states that she is Maura Franklin and that it is 19 October 1899. The front page of a newspaper reports the loss of the *Prometheus* four months previously with over 1,400 passengers and 550 crew members presumed dead. Her oceanic experience on board the *Kerberos* is underway. The central image of Fig.2 shows the *Kerberos* full steam ahead for the United States. The ship is laden with Greco-mythological associations. *Kerberos* is the German spelling of Cerberus, the hound of Hades said to devour any cursed souls who try to escape the hellish underworld. It is no accident this ill-omened vessel is contained within an oval frame in the composite image. This is to suggest the eye which watches it, because within the enclosed narrative of the show, the ship and its occupants are under observation quite apart from being watched by viewers of the streaming service.

The co-creators of *1899* are Baran bo Odar and Jantje Friese who first met at the University of Television and Film in Munich and have been together for over twenty years. The couple are also behind Netflix's very successful *Dark* (Orich, 2021). For the eight-episode series of *1899*, they were allocated a budget of three times *Dark's* at 60 million US dollars, funding impressive special effects (McGowan, 2022). What *1899* achieves is audience immersion in an oceanic and a shipboard world at the very end of the nineteenth century when an immigrant vessel is crossing the Atlantic bound for New York. Friese comments in Carol Moreira's *YouTube* interview with creators and cast of 30 November 2022 that *1899* has a lot to do with movement. Characters, actors, and viewers are taken on a voyage that crosses the vastness of water, and the surface on which the ship sails is also in constant motion.

No scenes were filmed at sea. The visual portrayal of the ocean is the result of drone footage played on an extremely high-resolution panoramic screen called "Volume" that is linked to camera tracking to create the impression of being mid Atlantic ("Making *1899*," 00:14:38 -

00:18:02). It is an "ambitious sea-set project" as Emily Reigart comments in "Behind the Scenes (and Screens) of Netflix's *1899*." Some cameras are hand-held or on turntables to allow for multiple angles and the heaving of the waves. Even the platform on which the actors work is capable of tilting and full rotation. All of this combines to bring the seascape to life. Annika Orich's article, "Staying Local, Going Global: Sustaining German Culture in *Dark* Times" reveals that the series was filmed during the pandemic in a virtual-reality stage called Dark Bay, located at studio Babelsberg outside Berlin. Exploring "Immersion and Expanded Spectatorships," Victor Flores and Susanna S. Martin conclude that Volume, the huge, curved wall of LED lights bringing to life the blue-grey and sometimes black waters reinvented the visual field. It is so much more than a mere green screen, enthuses Odar in the Moreira *YouTub*e interview. He explains that Volume is very new technology: "creating reality in an unreal stage" (Moreira, 00:05:23 - 00:05:27). The watchers see what the actors see and what the characters are imagined seeing – endless, churning waves – even in their peripheral vision. "It creates such a powerful illusion," elaborates Friese in an online interview with Scott Roxborough for the *Hollywood Reporter*, "that in the beginning, the crew and actors were actually getting seasick."

On these seemingly boundless waters sails the *Kerberos* in the year of 1899 or rather that is the date that characters and viewers are led to believe is the true one. It transpires that even reliance on periodic certainty in the series is capable of being snatched away. As early as ten minutes into the show, glitches in the supposed reality occur with the synchronous raising of teacups by the entirety of the first-class passengers. However, because *1899* is a twenty-first century project ostensibly set in Victorian times, the premise that it is essentially neo-Victorian is reasonable. Overall, the series operates according to Victorian rules in terms of dress, décor, ship, and societal attitudes. Ingeborg Heinemann discusses the set design in "Making *1899*," and her comment is applicable to the creative endeavour that is neo-Victorianism:

> We had a lot of reference material, and I think this is a good thing to start with, so that you have a feeling for the period. You should know the rules. You should know what you can do and what you shouldn't do or, if you break the rules, then you should do it on purpose and not because you didn't know 1899 ("Making *1899*," 00:32:05 - 00:32:16).

1899 is set on a steamship, and it was in April 1838 that the first steamships raced to be fastest westward across the Atlantic. For the respective captains of Brunel's *SS Great Western* and the *SS Sirius*, the ocean was both a conduit and a challenge. Time was of the essence in conquering the aquatic expanse and achieving fame. The *SS Sirius* set off four days earlier than her rival and got to New York slightly sooner. The Captain, Lt. Roberts – the first ever to have navigated a steamship from Europe to America – anecdotally ordered the burning of anything combustible to be fed to the boiler to maintain maximum speed. The *SS Great Western*, a wooden-hulled, paddle-wheel steamship, arrived the following day, but was indisputably the faster vessel. Her transatlantic journey only took sixteen days. By 1888, the westward crossing had been shaved down to just over six days, and steamships were clad in iron or made of steel. In *1899*, the *Kerberos* is on a voyage which ought to take under a week.

During that time, the ship is to provide transport, employment, a temporary home, and carry the hopes of crew and passengers. It is a giant, metallic entity with a steam-driven heartbeat fuelled by coal and human labour in the cavernous, sweaty engine room down below the

plimsoll line. With its flames and slavish stokers, it is reminiscent of hell. Onboard the *Kerberos,* communication is hampered by language barriers between its multinational occupants. The series itself makes no concession to anglophone pressures and is multilingual. Communication is further complicated by a person's role as staff or passenger, each of which has its own hierarchy of rank or class. These are reflected in situatedness above or below deck. Ship-to-ship or shore-to-ship communications are dependent on a telegraph encoded first as morse code, then as triangles facing upwards or downwards. It begins repeatedly transmitting the co-ordinates of the missing *Prometheus,* a sister ship to the *Kerberos.* The Captain of the *Kerberos* feels compelled to divert from his set course despite objections from all sides, and he takes his vessel full of already displaced people in search of the lost ship.

The passengers on the *Kerberos* are unmoored from the comforting familiarity of home. They are seeking another life in another location, buoyed up by an urge to travel across the liminal zone of the ocean. They are hyper aware of their maritime and marine space, of the vessel that contains them and of the watery element that contains the vessel. "The displaced person is understandably more attuned to matters of place," (13) observes Tally in *Spatiality.* If, as Raymond Williams puts it in *The Country and the City* and elsewhere, there are "structures of feeling" associated with places and spaces, then I propose that the dominant emotion onboard ship in the middle of the Atlantic at the *fin de siècle* is, that staple of the Gothic, anxiety.

1899 is aesthetically Gothic in style and mood. Visually, it employs a predominantly gloomy colour palette in shades which are, in the main, muted. The weather is inclement, or at best, neutral. The sun rarely, if ever, peeps through the cloud. Much action happens at twilight or at night. In more senses than one, it is dark. Audially, it employs unnerving, low, bass sounds like a large beast in distress. Composer of the series's soundtrack Ben Frost explains how he generated the deep metallic reverberations by playing recordings into the hull of a docked ship in Iceland. ("Making *1899,*" 00:36:30 - 00:37:26). Strategies such as this compound the disturbing affect of the aquatic, neo-Victorian psychodrama.

Not only in vision and sound is *1899* gothicised. Alder finds the Gothic to be inherent in narratives of the sea. She observes the frequency of "strikingly Gothic dimensions" (2) to written representations of seafaring, which are equally applicable to this televisual depiction of a late-Victorian oceanic voyage. Alder continues: "'The ship,' wrote one late-nineteenth-century sailor, invoking the vertigo of nightmares to describe movement through heavy seas, 'appears on occasions to be falling long distances through hideous space'"(2). She is citing the memoirs of the 1890s youth of Lt. Col. Henry Hughes. Something akin to the vertiginous falling of nightmare is invoked by Netflix in Fig 1. in which the near horizontal positioning of the woman tumbling between gravity-defying, twin steamships is suggestive of a recumbent state in which her mind is trapped in unreality. The falling woman is Maura Franklin. She and other characters trapped in nightmarish flashbacks struggle to obey the urgent instruction to "wake up!"

The sense of sleeping terrors is reinforced in a parable told by Ada, a young Danish girl from a religious family travelling in steerage. She reminds her elder sister, Tove, of the tale midway through the first episode, and it further establishes the programme's overriding sense of purgatorial insubstantiality:

> Remember the story of the ghost ship that you told me once? Where the passengers all sinned because they killed a whale? And the spirits of the sea got so angry they sent a huge storm towards the ship and caused black waves. And when they woke up the

> next morning, they had all turned to shadows. Maybe that's what happened to that other ship. Imagine there's only shadows on board ("The Ship," 00:26.31 - 00:28:56).

The *Kerberos* sets off to find the *Prometheus* and it becomes apparent that Scandinavian imagination prefigures actuality. What the Captain discovers is an untenanted, disorienting, dilapidated mirror of his own ship. Save for one young boy, the *Prometheus* is a deserted double of the *Kerberos*, or rather it looks how she would do if a destructive and unspecified time were to have passed following the disappearance of every soul on board. The *Prometheus* is effectively a ghost ship.

Julia Mix Barrington discusses "phantom barks" in her essay, "The Chronotope of the Ghost Ship in the Atlantic World." She turns her attention to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798); a tale of the Flying Dutchman published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1821); Richard Henry Dana, Jr's memoir, *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840); and Herman Melville's novella about a slave ship, *Benito Cereno* (1855). Perhaps, because she is concentrating on fictional examples of ghost ships, Barrington does not include among her "phantom barks" the real case of the unpeopled *Mary Celeste*, the merchant sailing ship found adrift in the mid-Atlantic on her way back from New York in 1872. Tales of that vessel's mysterious abandonment were well known at the end of the nineteenth century, and a mythos grew around it which Arthur Conan Doyle exploited in his short story of 1884, "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement". Doyle spelled the name as *Marie Celeste,* and his appellation has become the byword for ghost ships in the Atlantic. Residual memories of such ghost ships, possibly supplemented by Herman Melville's whaling story *Moby Dick* (1851), clearly retain some traction with the amnesiacs onboard the *Kerberos* as evidenced by Ada's parable.

As nineteenth-century naval technologies replaced sail with steam, and as science tussled with sailor superstition, tales of uncanny vessels adapted. Fears of destructive supernatural agencies vied with rational explanations for the absence of bodies. Diseases such as cholera or slow starvation and death for want of drinking water might account for multiple corpses having been disposed of overboard by those last to succumb. They, in turn, might have fled the scene in a lifeboat to leave an unpopulated vessel or, in desperation, committed suicide. Examples are found in William Clark Russell's 1895 Nautical Gothic tales, *The Phantom Death and other Stories.* To approach such ill-omened ships might be thought to invite bad luck, as if their very fate were contagious. Certainly, in *1899,* there is reluctance among crew members of the *Kerberos* to draw near the *Prometheus.*

Not only persons onboard, but vessels themselves might be lost. Freakishly inclement weather might cause a ship to founder, and Edgar Allen Poe's 1841, "A Descent into the Maelström" envisages the terrifying power of strong rotational currents sucking one down. Alternately, scuttling might be responsible for a ship's wholescale disappearance beneath the waves. Scuttling is the threatened fate of the *Prometheus* when the Captain of the *Kerberos* receives the instruction to "Sink Ship!" ("The Boy," 00:16:10 - 00:16:12). He refuses to do so. He will not participate in a conspiracy to conceal evidence of the *Prometheus's* past, nor will he consign valuable clues to the fate of former occupants to the watery depths. Furthermore, he recognises in her a state-of-the art vessel: "45,000 tons of steel, fully seaworthy" ("The Boy," 00:15:56 - 00:15:58). Three episodes later, he later receives the instruction to "Sink Ship" and this time it refers to his own vessel. ("The Calling," 00:44:44 - 00:45:07). For the *Prometheus* and the *Kerberos* to be consigned to the ocean bed makes no sense morally or economically.

Both the *Kerberos* and her uncanny twin, the *Prometheus*, are four-funnelled vessels sailing only two years after the German-manufactured *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*. The *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* was the first purpose-built, four-funnelled steamship and was launched in 1897. According to Henrik Ljungstrom, the innovative quartet of smokestacks became symbolic of strength and safety for the following decade and beyond. The *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* broke the westbound transatlantic record on her maiden voyage. The steamship's design heralded in a golden era of ocean-going liners, and, for a virtually identical vessel such as the *Prometheus* to have been discovered derelict and for the command given for her to be deliberately sunk would be unthinkable in the real 1899. This is not to imply poor research on the part of the programme makers, but to strengthen the suspicion of the Captain and Netflix subscribers that something weird is going on.

In 1898, just one year before the neo-Victorian series is set, Morgan Robertson's *Futility* was published, in which a fictional vessel named *The Titan* crosses the north Atlantic. That steamer is doomed. She is of an almost identical length, tonnage, and horsepower to the *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, the *Prometheus* and the *Kerberos*. Robertson's *Titan* is the largest vessel afloat, said to be one of man's most impressive achievements. The hyperbole surrounding her description and the calamity that befalls her are eerily prophetic of an almost-identically named, real vessel. One foggy April night in the middle of the ocean, an enormous iceberg rips open the side of the *Titan*, and she sinks with the loss of all but a very few of the original three thousand lives on board. This would be the actual fate of the *Titanic* on another April night in the same marine location fourteen years later.

Fig. 3 The Sinking of the *Titanic / Untergang der Titanic.* Willy Stöwer, 1912.

The *Titanic* was the most famous four-funnelled ship, and there are strong visual echoes in the resemblance of the *Kerberos* and *Prometheus* to her. Although *1899* is set thirteen years

before the *Titanic* went down on her maiden voyage, any modern-day watcher of *1899* is unlikely to be ignorant of that awful shipping catastrophe. It lends to their televisual encounter of a similar ship sailing similar waters a retrospective prescience of disaster. It is retrospective from the standpoint of the twenty-first century, but prescient for the end of the nineteenth. In "What is Neo-Victorian Studies?" Mark Llewellyn identifies this approach as being typical of the genre:

> Neo-Victorianism […] blurs the distinctions between criticism and creativity, with each becoming a reflection on self and other, producing a sense of what I term 'critical f(r)iction' in the knowing and historicised, critical and scholarly perspective contained within the fictional text. The importance of the palimpsest lies not in its writing of new texts over old ones, but in the simultaneous existence of both narratives on the same page, occupying the same space, and speaking in odd, obscure, and different ways to one another (170).

In their joint examination of "Oceanic Studies and the Gothic Deep," Jimmy Packham and David Punter make a similar observation to Llewellyn's on this characteristic of neo-Victorianism, this time with specific reference to the ocean. They note: "the deep is a site haunted by the accumulation of history, in which past blends with present, and where spatiality and temporality become unmoored from and exceed their traditional (or terrestrial) qualities" (16). The depths of the ocean accumulate history and the *Titanic* speaks from them to the *Kerberos.* Nadia McGowan's article for *Cameraman: Cinematographic Technical Magazine* even subtitles *1899:* "the Virtual Production of a Titanic of Terror." Udo Kramer, the Production Designer of *1899*, also comments on his conception of the ship as an "ante *Titanic*" ("Making *1899*," 00:34:55). Right from the outset in *1899*, there are auditory and visual indications all will not be well with ship and passengers. Oceanic unease is reinforced by a deeply entrenched cultural history that draws on fictional and factual accounts of death and disaster on the waters of the Atlantic. These are compounded by superstitious unease firstly about the disappearance of the *Prometheus* and subsequently the discovery of her unpeopled remains. The Captain decides to tow the *Prometheus* back to Europe. The *Kerberos's* unholy twin is then attached by umbilical chains and appears to exert a baleful influence. Ada, the young girl who told the parable about the ghost ship dies inexplicably. The body count rises. Mutiny beckons.

What comes to the *Kerberos* and those who travel on board her are navigation failures, dense fog, fuel concerns, and raging storms. Any of those difficulties might be experienced on a land voyage, but the watery element surrounding the ship increases its vulnerability. What is key – deliberately to employ a tautology – is the ocean's fluidity. Barring earthquakes or landslides or avalanches, the assumption is that land is fixed. In contrast, the ocean is always moving. It is always shifting, and never static. It appears in many guises and can change from one to another with unpredictability and rapidity. When flat, it may be a calm surface to float upon or it may be a flatness that is stultifying for a sailing ship if the wind dies, or for a steamship if the fuel runs out. The ocean may appear a monotonous infinity that barely ripples or it may rise as a heaving instability wielding monstrous waves to lash the ship and capsize her. It may voraciously shape itself into a maelstrom to suck a ship downwards or it may, in its chilly, salty depths, maliciously conceal an iceberg to pierce a liner's heart.

The ocean is a trackless space in which to become lost if a ship's instruments malfunction and there are no stars by which to navigate. It leaves no trace on its surface of past passages

or happenings, like a memory that has been wiped. Standing on deck and surveying the ocean, the Captain of the *Kerberos* speaks of its depths with awe:

> Right down here the ocean has a depth of 4,000 metres. Man has mapped out every corner of the world, been to the farthest deserts, top of the highest mountains. But what's down here is still a mystery, a hidden world in the shadows ("The Ship," 00:37:13 - 00:37:40).

He is addressing Maura, the convention-defying woman doctor, who cannot fathom how fully to access her own recollections. The implication is that the vast body of water and the mind of Maura are alike in being undecipherable texts. Both are unmapped and mysterious.

The ocean extends down to unknown and unknowable depths, and its surface is bereft of any identifying contours. Cartographers impose criss-crossed lines of longitude and latitude, and navigators use co-ordinates to establish location, but in *1899,* the ocean epitomises a deep spatial anxiety at the uncertainty of one's place in the untameable aqueous space. Dana's nautical memoir associates the ocean with existential dread.

> There is something in the first grey streaks stretching along the eastern horizon and throwing an indistinct light upon the face of the deep, which combines with the boundlessness and unknown depth of the sea around, and gives one a feeling of loneliness, of dread, and of melancholy foreboding, which nothing else in nature can (10).

Such language, Alder finds, evokes the elemental nature of the ocean and its Gothic potential: "as a thing of nature, its unknowable ambiguity, unsoundable deeps, and ominous affect are clearly signalled, and so are its inherent contradictions: the ocean space is boundless yet oppressive, illuminated yet indiscernible, all surface, yet all depth" (2).

The stills in Fig. 4 are taken from the show's third episode, "The Fog". The upper image shows the Captain, crew members, and Maura. The lower image shows the *Kerberos* and the *Prometheus*. In that shot, it is impossible to determine which ship is which. The camera's point of view is not from either one of them. It is, furthermore, too elevated to emanate from a rowing boat. This enhances the suspicion of voyeurism. Who is doing the looking and where are they looking from? These questions will be answered by the series and indeed this article in due course. For the time being, viewers share the characters' sense of uncertainty. In the fog it is hard to tell which way to go. The fog induces sensory deprivation. The fog limits vision. The fog deadens noise. What is dimly seen is the sister ship. The outlines of fellow travellers have blurred edges. What is heard are the waves beating against the hull. Water is beneath. Water is all around. Water is even suspended in the air. Through the fog, the people absorb water into their hair and into their lungs, and there is the constant threat that the water of the ocean may absorb them in turn.

Fig. 4. Stills from *1899* Episode 3, “The Fog”.

Accidentally to fall overboard, or to throw oneself over the side as part of the massed suicidal action of the fifth episode, “The Calling,” is to drown. But for a strong swimmer voluntarily to enter the liquid space between the solidity of the *Kerberos* and the *Prometheus,* is to use the water as a conduit to pass unseen from one vessel to the other. Fig. 5 shows Daniel Solace, having hoisted himself dripping wet up and out of the water to board the *Kerberos* unobserved by night at the end of the first episode. Odar, the Director of *1899* appears to be parodying a Mr Darcy moment from the BBC’s adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* or Netflix’s reprisal of it in the second series of *Bridgerton.* Both are shown in the adjacent stills. Simmering sexual chemistry with the female lead tends to follow on from the emergence of the dark male from the depths, and *1899* is no exception. Daniel is, however, emerging from water far more dangerous than an ornamental lake at an English country house imagined by Jane Austen, or a pretty river thronged with pleasure boats as in *Bridgerton.* The Atlantic of *1899* is colder and far more dangerous water than either of those. Daniel, at risk of hypothermia, wisely keeps his greatcoat on.

Fig 5. Stills from *1899,* BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* and Netflix's *Bridgerton,* Season 2.

The ocean is cold and secretive, betraying few hints of the history of human affairs that have occurred upon it or within it, unless it be in random items of flotsam that bob on its surface or the craft that sail upon it occupying a space on its upper level, but these are never fixed and always temporary. The ocean differs from the sea in its larger scale. For those crossing the ocean compared to the sea, the distance to safe harbour is further, and the wait for relief from the motion of its rocking waves is longer. The ocean gives the impression of endlessness and timelessness. The *Kerberos* sailing upon it is a strictly circumscribed, determinedly late-Victorian space. Robert Foulke makes a general observation on this contrast between vessel and ocean in his essay on "The Literature of Voyaging":

> The thoughtful seafarer is enclosed irrevocably within the finite world of the ship with time on his hands. […] His world demands keen senses because he lives on an unstable element that keeps his home in constant motion, sometimes soothing him with a false sense of security, sometimes threatening to destroy him. Although his vision is bounded by a horizon and contains a seascape of monotonous regularity, what he sees can change rapidly and unpredictably. His sense of space suggests infinity and solitude, on the one hand, and prison-like confinement in small compartments, on the other (4).

Confinement on the *Kerberos* occurs in the inability to walk anywhere else but about the ship. It also occurs in the restriction of the steerage passengers to inferior quarters below deck and behind a locked grille. This is where pregnant Tove is trapped and in desperate need of medical attention. Maura intervenes to save her. She is a female doctor operating in an unofficial capacity onboard. The first female ship's doctor was Elizabeth MacBean Ross (1878-1915), who served on the *SS Glenlogan* in 1913. Maritime historian, Jo Stanley in *Gender and the Sea* explains that it was the fortunate happenstance of Ross already holding the necessary qualifications, being available, and the shipping company's desperation, which led to her pioneering appointment. Stanley cites a contemporaneous article from the *Telegraph* of 10 July 1913 heralding the breakthrough:

> Heretofore it has not been considered that the steamship offers much scope for lady doctors. […] A Glen line ship taking immigrants to Australia was waiting at the tail of the bank, [Upper Clyde] but the Board of Trade Official couldn't allow the ship to sail because there was no surgeon aboard.

The shipping company took whomever they could get at short notice, even if it was a woman.

1899, with historical accuracy, does not make the mistake of Maura being employed as the ship's doctor. She is a medically trained passenger. Mid Atlantic, where the Captain's rule is law, she has a greater freedom to practice her skill under the radar than might have been the case on land. The self-contained shipboard community develops its own modus operandi. Michel Foucault finds the ship – not specifically the steamship – to be "the heterotopia par excellence." He describes it as "a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea." For Maura, this floating space closed in on itself is dissociated from customary constraints, and this is a benefit conferred by its situatedness in the middle of the ocean. Maura is a neurologist trying to make sense of her own brain in this space of limitless possibilities. Chopin's book in her cabin is laden with sea symbolism and resonates: "The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (34). This is Maura, trying to find herself and free her mind.

The ocean enforces confinement, but simultaneously promises intellectual and psychological liberation. It embodies contradictions. Packham and Punter point to Hester Blum's critical framework for Oceanic Studies which focuses on its "material attributes," "nonhuman scale" and "multi-dimensional flux". The ocean of *1899* works laterally: its undulating waves radiate sideways to a 360-degree horizon. The ocean works vertically: its depths are mysterious, and its unnatural maelstrom sucks down the *Kerberos* and identical predecessors. The ocean works temporally: it stretches forward to an uncharted future in the new world and back to forgotten pasts in the old one. The ocean also works metaphorically: it is the repository of the memories of key players in the drama, of traumas that begin to re-surface. The ocean is the *imaginarium* and the nightmare.

Tally's online article: "On Literary Cartography" sees ocean travel as metaphorical of the human condition:

> The experience of being in the world is one of constant navigation, of locating oneself in relation to others, of orientation in space and in time, of charting a course, of placement and displacement, and of movements through an array of geographical and historical phenomena. The human condition is one of being "at sea"—both launched into the world and somewhat lost in it.

Packham and Punter likewise find the ocean to be destabilising physically and psychologically:

> the sea is a space of unease not simply because its own fluid multi-dimensionality is itself unstable and unfixed, thereby rendering one's own physical position precarious, but because the ocean prompts modes of thought that are also unstable and unfixed, rendering one's mental processes precarious too (18).

It is in this aqueous space of unease that Maura finds her mental processes tested, as a doctor of the human brain, who has already sought to prove to herself and others that she is not mad.

The most fruitful way to assess the complex role of the ocean in *1899* is to ask what it would mean if, instead of the action unfolding on a steamship, events played out on a train or on an airship or even on a spaceship. The bright green scarab, which acts as a passe-partout opening

every lock onboard the *Kerberos*, is kept in a metal box. Like the bug, the steamship passengers are also contained in a metal box. But what if like David Bowie's Major Tom in *Space Oddity*, the passengers were to be "sitting in a tin can far above the world," instead of being sited in a tin can far beyond the shores? This article suggests that an entirely different tale would need to be told because the element in which the metal container floats is crucial. The ocean is more than a two-dimensional backdrop – albeit a technologically advanced one – it is multi-dimensional with changeable moods. In Fig. 6, taken from Moreira's *YouTube* interview with the cast, the water occupies more screen space than the three lead actors put together. Perhaps it is even the star of the show!

Fig 6. Aneurin Barnard, Emily Beecham, and Andreas Pietschmann who respectively play Daniel Solace, Maura Franklin, and the Captain. Screen grab. Moreira Cast Interview, *YouTube.*

The first series of *1899* was nominated for three awards, but a second series in which the aquatic environment of the Atlantic Ocean was to be replaced by the vacuum of outer space failed to be commissioned by the network. The end of the final episode sees Maura waking from suspended animation with cropped hair, wearing futuristic clothing. By this point, we have been made aware that the *Kerberos* and a fleet of other identical decommissioned ships are part of a string of computer simulations in which participants are exposed to a relentlessly repetitive psychological experiment. Memories are erased and again and again they find themselves all at sea in the same steamship with a different name. The shot when the camera pans out to reveal a whole host of identical scrapped vessels is genuinely shocking. The former absent occupants of every one of these ghost ships are those from the *Kerberos* in numerous previous iterations. They have been observed by Maura's scientist father on sepia-toned cathode ray tubes. His is the watching eye in a parallel pseudo-Steampunk universe. From his Gothic mansion in a desolate landscape, he has been monitoring and directing the *Kerberos*, the *Prometheus*, the storms, and the sea.

But even behind this apparent reality is another layer, in which it is revealed that Maura is the creator of the original simulation with the assistance of Daniel, who is, in fact, her husband. Their motivation was to prevent or else blank out the death of their son, the boy hiding in a cabinet in the *Prometheus.* In 1843, Ada Lovelace translated an article on Charles Babbage's Analytic Engine, and her extensive notes published in *Scientific Memoirs* recognised the

potential of binary code. She effectively wrote the first computer algorithm, and Maura's binary cabin number on board the *Kerberos* and the number on the asylum door is "1011," which is a binary clue to her own programming expertise as Ada Lovelace's scientific heiress. Ada is also the name of the Danish girl who speaks about ghost ships. Such hints or Easter Eggs, as Friese calls them, are given throughout the series and include teacup-lifting glitches, Maura's *Matrix*-like ability to operate in frozen time and stop bullets, and the very name "*Kerberos."* With the identical Germanic spelling, *Kerberos* is not only the hound of Hades, but a computer network authentication protocol.

Lurking in the oceanic depths is Maura's brother who had allegedly gone missing at sea, and who was the ostensible reason for her having travelled on board the *Kerberos.* Maybe it is he who is the arch puppeteer and controller of special effects. The ocean in *1899* appears to be only a drop in the imagination of an obsessive experimental neurologist, a prop in a high-tech, theatrical reinvention of the late-Victorian era by a software engineer. Daniel is a steampunk hacker, and this explains his unorthodox entry to the programme and the ship. Of the 1,612 passengers and crew originally aboard the *Kerberos,* just a handful remain at the end. Death comes when computer files are deleted. In that experimental vessel, they were only ever but shadowy forms.

Water is the dominant element of the first series of *1899*. The implication is that air would have been the dominant element of the second series. It seems probable that earth was to have been the dominant element of the third. Teasers are secreted all about the *Kerberos* in the logo of the shipping company, and in the creators' overall promotional material. They all contain the alchemical symbol for the earth: a downward pointed triangle bisected by a line in its lower third. Due to the abrupt and unexpected termination of the show, the predicted substitutions of air and then earth for water can only ever be loosely speculative. Odar and Friese are tight lipped about it.

The closing shots of *1899* replace a Victorian ocean world where water must be kept out, with a futuristic universe where air must be kept in. Maura awakens to free herself from a stasis pod and discovers the Captain and other familiar characters from the *Kerberos* held in the metallic straightjackets of similar pods. On a tv monitor, a message from her brother informs her that she is part of "Project Prometheus," and that the date is 19 October 2099. It is exactly two hundred years since she had awoken on board the *Kerberos* in the first episode. But this time, through the porthole, she sees not waves, but stars. David Bowie's *Starman* plays over the final wide-angled shot of outer space in which the ship's name comes into view. It is *Prometheus.* Had it been called *Kerberos,* there would have been a more pleasing series circularity.

The dramatic spatiotemporal elemental shift from the ocean to outer space channels not so much the programme-makers' anticipated big bang as the network commissioner's damp squib. The inevitable conclusion is that neo-Victorian water is indispensable to the success of the show and without it, the ship goes down. Without neo-Victorian water, for *1899,* there is only the void.

Fig. 7. Screen grab Episode 1, “The Ship,”*1899.* © Netflix.

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