

BYPASSING THE LAW IN A HOMELESS VEHICLE: ALAN BENNETT'S *THE LADY IN THE VAN*

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## Bypassing the Law in a Homeless Vehicle: Alan Bennett's *The Lady in the Van*

### Abstract

In *The Lady in the Van*, British playwright Alan Bennett recounts his two-decade acquaintance with a homeless woman who ended up living in a van in his driveway for 15 years. The story has gone through several incarnations, from Bennett's diary entries (published 1989) to a stage play (1999) and a film adaptation (2015). Subverting and disabling the law and its institutions with the help of a vehicle is a key theme in all these versions of the story. Laws regulating the activities and whereabouts of the unhoused poor have notoriously criminalized poverty and excluded the poor from social and economic participation. Legislatures from the 1970s onwards abandoned former attempts to mitigate the circumstances that lead to a loss of shelter. Lawmakers instead adopted a more punitive neoliberal approach that targets homeless individuals through a plethora of new, highly specified illegalities. This essay discusses how Bennett's narrative and its adaptations expose and question the heteronormative, bourgeois-centric practices of anti-homeless laws via a disruption of dominant tropes of poverty and homelessness. Through these subversions, the texts also grapple with the very practical conflicts around invasion of personal space and the mundane inconveniences that are inevitable results of sharing one's private space with a physically and mentally unstable homeless woman. A specific focus will be on the fluidity of the division between public and private spaces that requires constant negotiation within the social microcosm of *The Lady in the Van*. The socially alien presence of a homeless woman and her unwieldy vehicle complicates the neighbors' private and professional lives and, in the process, rattles the structures dictated by different sections of the law, such as parking restrictions, property laws, income support, and traffic regulations.

Polish artist and social activist Krzysztof Wodiczko received much attention during the late 1980s and early 1990s for his "Homeless Vehicle Project."<sup>1</sup> The Homeless Vehicles were carefully engineered and constantly improved devices designed to make life for urban street dwellers easier and to afford them a form of protected visibility in the streets of the modern metropolis. Protection and visibility are also two major functions fulfilled by the 'homeless vehicle' in Alan Bennett's *The Lady in the Van*, published as a book in 1989, adapted to the stage in 1999 by the author, and brought to the screen by Nicholas Hytner in 2015.<sup>2</sup> Its protagonist, Miss Shepherd (played by Maggie Smith on stage and on screen) as well as most of the events occurring during the various versions of the story, are based on Bennett's diaries and his memory of the years between 1974 and 1989 when the real-life Miss Shepherd lived in a van parked in Bennett's driveway. This 'real' Miss Shepherd was an aging homeless woman who sometimes resisted and at other times invoked the laws that affected her and her vehicle. In

relating to these laws — in the sense of legislations and official regulations — she alternated between disregard, calculated partial concession, and finally evasion by withdrawing into (somebody else's) private space. Her van, as the title of all three incarnations of her story suggests, remained inseparably linked to Miss Shepherd through all these retellings. It surrounded her, its sheer circumference expanding her presence. Like the Homeless Vehicles, the van of *The Lady in the Van* demands attention and bespeaks incongruities inherent in the material and the symbolic structures of the city that are otherwise only obvious to the homeless who are exposed to them.

In their early version, Wodiczko's Vehicles looked like what might be described as futuristic shopping carts — a metal grid box on wheels topped by a metal capsule that tapers off in a shiny cylindrical tip reminiscent of a simplified rocket ship. It is hard to tell where the Homeless Vehicles' actual functionality ended and Wodiczko's ironic commentary on the modern subject's functionality fetish began.<sup>3</sup> In stark contrast to Miss Shepherd's van, the Homeless Vehicles were lightweight enough that a single person could push them along on the even ground of sidewalks and streets. Developed in cooperation with homeless persons, additions were made to the carts over the years to provide a sheltered sleeping space for one or two people, making it easier to securely lock away one's possessions, or include a bin or bags in which to collect empty bottles and cans to be sold to recycling centers. Some even included rudimentary washing facilities.<sup>4</sup> The van in all of Bennett's versions of *The Lady in the Van*, by contrast, is marked by malfunctions. The vehicle either needs help to start the engine or it does not start at all. For most of the time, it is not so much a vehicle as an immobile trailer home. It provides no system for waste disposal, let alone facilities for personal hygiene, and the resulting odor nuisance is a constant source of conflict. Apart from disputes with her neighbors, many of the homeless character's sorrows and hardships are triggered by legal troubles that involve her van and its (unwanted) presence. Miss Shepherd and her van clash with the law and its institutions on a regular basis.

Much of Wodiczko's work addresses the disharmonies between uses of public space and the economic, social, and political institutions that control these uses.<sup>5</sup> An integral part of these institutions are the legal bases on which they operate and the ways in which legislations alter public space. In its aim to offer practical assistance for homeless persons' basic everyday needs, the "Homeless Vehicle Project" engages with and problematizes law's contradictions and the imperative that results for certain groups of

people to circumvent the law. “People who are homeless,” Samira Kawash points out, are “by definition residents of public space” since they are without a private home.<sup>6</sup> This leaves them particularly affected by changes made not just to the material but also to the legal fabric of cityscapes. “No one is free to perform an action unless there is somewhere he is free to perform it,” as law professor Jeremy Waldron quite simply puts it.<sup>7</sup> The increasing privatization of public spaces in metropolitan areas around the globe, for instance, has created a patchwork of semi-public, semi-private, and private spaces within many urban centers, which makes them more and more difficult for the homeless to navigate.<sup>8</sup> Privately owned semi-public spaces leave many of those areas that are accessible to the public partly under a private entity’s responsibility and control in legal terms. Manhattan’s Zucotti Park, where the Occupy Wall Street Movement began in 2011, is in private hands; so are the forecourts expanding into open spaces outside the buildings of large corporations’ headquarters. Property laws and the householder’s right to determine who shall be allowed or denied access can thus have tremendous ramifications for homeless persons and their freedom of movement. In addition, ordinances and laws that ban certain behaviors, such as panhandling or sitting down on sidewalks, create hostile environments for those who inhabit public urban spaces and whose physical integrity and economic survival depend on such (illegal) practices. By carving a protected, quasi-private space out of the cityscape, making it mobile, and equipping this capsule with technologies that fulfill basic needs, Wodiczko’s Homeless Vehicles aimed to help override some of these laws.

Subverting and disabling the law and its institutions with the help of a vehicle is a key theme of *The Lady in the Van*. This essay discusses how Bennett’s narrative and its adaptations expose and question the heteronormative, bourgeois-centric practices of anti-homeless laws via a disruption of dominant tropes of poverty and homelessness. Through these subversions, the texts also grapple with the very practical conflicts around invasion of personal space and the mundane inconveniences that are inevitable results of sharing one’s private space with a physically and mentally unstable homeless woman. A specific focus will be on the fluidity of the division between public and private spaces that requires constant negotiation within the social microcosm of *The Lady in the Van*. The Homeless Vehicle Project and its critical reception provide the context for a discussion of the various levels on which the characters in this microcosm

must operate in their attempts to integrate Miss Shepherd (and her van) into the neighborhood. The socially alien presence of a homeless woman and her unwieldy vehicle complicates the neighbors' private and professional lives and, in the process, rattles the structures dictated by different sections of the law, such as parking restrictions, property laws, income support, and traffic regulations.

### **1\_Anti-Homeless Laws**

What is nowadays referred to as homelessness combines a number of practices that have been part of the experience of destitution for centuries, such as sleeping rough, itinerant labor, making use of public shelters or almshouses, and panhandling, to name but a few characteristic practices. Homelessness and the various efforts to control it through legal means have, in short, always been “embedded within wider social, cultural and economic processes,” as David Farrugia and Jessica Gerrard point out.<sup>9</sup> “However,” they specify, “contemporary homelessness in advanced capitalist nations is inextricably enmeshed with crises in housing and homelessness in the late 1970s and 80s.”<sup>10</sup>

It was during the 1970s and 80s, while Miss Shepherd lived in Alan Bennett's driveway, that many Western states implemented specific policies to intervene into homelessness on various levels. Legal reforms that took place in Europe and the US during the 1970s also brought a shift in the laws that directly affect homeless persons. While vagrancy laws had subsumed all kinds of practices and behaviors associated with petty criminals and the poor for roughly seven centuries — such as gambling, prostitution, idling, aversion to work, disorderly conduct, drunkenness, substance abuse, and looking like a poor criminal, among others — reformist movements and the neoliberalization of poverty governance were reflected in legislations that target specific practices, and in welfare policies that rely on market rationality.<sup>11</sup> Penal reforms in Germany and Austria abolished the sections of the law that criminalize *Landstreicherei* (vagrancy) in 1969 and 1975 respectively. In a famous 1971 ruling, the US Supreme Court overthrew the convictions of eight defendants who had faced vagrancy charges. In its grounds for the judgement, the court effectively declared many of the vagrancy laws across the US unconstitutional.<sup>12</sup> Despite similar efforts in Britain during the 1970s, which “brought the whole of the Vagrancy Act into question,” some sections of the

1824 Vagrancy Act and its successors are still part of English and Welsh law today.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, England saw a marked decrease in vagrancy charges from the 1970s on.<sup>14</sup>

The aggressive politicization of neoliberalism, which British politics under Margaret Thatcher's leadership embraced particularly wholeheartedly during the 1980s, imbued global as well as local politics and legislatures in such a lasting way that by the early 2000s, it had grown from a form of "commonsense" into what Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell refer to as the "new religion of neoliberalism."<sup>15</sup> In its earlier stages throughout the 1970s and 80s, the predominance of neoliberal ideology was manifested mainly through what Peck and Tickell sum up as "roll-back neoliberalism," which includes the dismantling of the welfare state and a discursive focus on individual failure and success.<sup>16</sup> The effect of these developments on homeless populations were enhanced by processes of urban renewal and urban development, which shaped cities in the North Atlantic zone and beyond in ways that increasingly aimed to exclude the poor.

The centuries-old practices of criminalizing the poor were adapted to and integrated into neoliberal modes of governance whose politics of poverty and exclusion emphasize individual reflexivity over structural responsibility.<sup>17</sup> Many laws that effectively regulate and control the behaviors and movements of homeless persons do so without explicitly targeting the homeless. "In contemporary capitalist societies, the government of poverty takes place primarily through the subjectivities ... of those who are deemed unable or unwilling to live up to contemporary definitions of ethical personhood focusing primarily on productivity and personal rationality."<sup>18</sup> Following the wave of legal reforms in the 1970s, vagrancy laws in many European countries as well as the US have been replaced or amended by a plethora of more specified laws and ordinances that regulate certain activities in public and semi-public spaces. Among these are staying in a public place for a certain lapse of time without any discernible purpose (loitering); sitting or lying down on the sidewalk, on a subway or train platform, and other public places; remaining in areas with a high rate of street-related crime without any apparent purpose; and certain forms of begging or panhandling. In cases where a person's mere presence in a certain place can be considered an offense under the law, any assessment of the potential offense necessarily relies on the subjective impression of onlookers and law enforcement. For one thing, the length of time a person would be allowed to stay in a place before his or her presence amounts to an offense is vague;

the same is true for the question of what constitutes an acceptable purpose for remaining in a public place.

Other laws are more specific as to the practices they declare illegal. The precision with which some of them target the homeless can be revealed when seen in combination with decisions on the level of city planning that shape and alter public spaces. Not being allowed to sit down on a sidewalk or train platform escalates into a source of great physical discomfort for those who do not just pass through public places but inhabit them, especially when such an ordinance coincides with the removal of seats and benches from these places. The unhoused poor disproportionately suffer from a lack of accessible health care and are often by necessity forced to carry most of their belongings with them. Thus, the combination of these so-called sit-lie ordinances and a dearth of legal seating accommodation creates a situation that only leaves a choice between committing an offense and hazarding the consequences of severe health risks. Legislations that aim at evicting the poor from urban centers in conjunction with city planning efforts have reshaped cities in a way that has made their hostility towards the homeless more efficient than ever.

One symptom of the new urban order was a surge of residential and commercial gentrification into structurally destabilized areas.<sup>19</sup> When Alan Bennett bought a house in London's Camden Town in the late 1960s, the term "gentrification" had only just been coined by Ruth Glass<sup>20</sup> and had not yet entered common parlance. Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicles* responded to the consequences of two decades of gentrification in New York City, skyrocketing homelessness rates and concentration of extreme poverty in certain areas among these consequences. The story Bennett tells in *The Lady in the Van* begins with the early signs of gentrification and spans the two decades leading up to Wodiczko's artistic interventions.

## **2\_The Outlaw in the Van**

In 1974, during a time of legal reforms and rising tensions on the housing market, British writer Alan Bennett invited a homeless woman, who was known as Miss Shepherd throughout the neighborhood, to park the van in which she lived in his driveway. Bennett took notes detailing many of his day-to-day experiences with Miss Shepherd and her habits, with his other neighbors, and their interactions with the homeless woman. Only after Miss Shepherd's death in 1989 did he publish excerpts from his diaries and



subsequently wrote the stage play that premiered at the Queen's Theatre a decade after Miss Shepherd had passed away. For the stage, Bennett split his author-character in two so that there were two actors playing Alan Bennett on stage. The film continued this technique with only one actor representing both aspects of Bennett, "the self who does the writing" and the other half, "who does the living."<sup>21</sup> At times, the two selves discuss the option and ethical implications of writing about Miss Shepherd. The writer Bennett admits that he put words into Miss Shepherd's and her social worker's mouths that neither of their real-life versions actually spoke, while the other Bennett timidly protests this practice. The play as well as the film signal to their audiences that while the plot recounts factual events and experiences, the story it tells includes its author's interpretations, dramatizations, and embellishments.

By the time she parked in Bennett's driveway, Miss Shepherd and her battered old van had been a constant presence in his North London neighborhood for years. The houses along his street had been "among the earliest candidates for what is now called 'gentrification.'"<sup>22</sup> The liberal and progressive positions most of the neighbors prided themselves of holding clashed with the relative luxury of being the owners of Victorian villas and produced, in Bennett's words "guilt ... which today's gentrifiers are said famously not to feel." This created a niche for people like Miss Shepherd. "There was a gap," Bennett recalls, "between our social position and our social obligations. It was in this gap that Miss Shepherd (in her van) was able to live."<sup>23</sup> Miss Shepherd inhabited an in-between space, a "gap" through which she may fall at any moment if it weren't for the van that encapsulated her like the brackets in which Bennett puts it. The van expanded her presence so that she got stuck in, rather than falling through, the gap. This homeless vehicle, like Wodiczko's art project, afforded protection. Unlike the activist artist, Bennett's story also addressed how the van and her dependency on it encumbered Miss Shepherd.

While mobility was among the Homeless Vehicles' many important functions, Miss Shepherd's van hindered her mobility rather than promoting it. In their first encounter, she compelled Bennett to push the van, which refused to start, up the street.<sup>24</sup> A year later, it took three people to move the van from one parking spot to another.<sup>25</sup> The van constituted a room (or several rooms) rather than a vehicle by the time she arrived in Camden. This divested the van of an important and, according to cultural geographer Neil Smith, emancipating function of Wodiczko's Homeless Vehicles, which was to



“provide a potential means by which evictees can challenge and in part overcome the social dislocation imposed on them by homelessness.”<sup>26</sup> It was precisely their mobility that allowed the Homeless Vehicles’ users to participate in the production of a city’s geography that was otherwise “produced and reproduced in such a way as to exclude them.”<sup>27</sup> Rendered immobile, Miss Shepherd’s van stopped being a vehicle and therefore stopped being “a means of production and reproduction” that would allow her, as it did before, “to make and remake space in a way that enhances [her] means of survival.”<sup>28</sup> This left her trapped in immobility when her living space was reshaped according to the city council’s plans, precisely with the effect of excluding her.

The agreement between Bennett and Miss Shepherd was triggered by the homeless woman’s increasingly futile strategies to avoid violating the sharpened parking restrictions in Camden Town. Attempts on the city council’s part to get rid of the van began with an obstruction order under its windshield wipers. Miss Shepherd responded to this first official attack on her presence by trying to beat bureaucracy at its own game, with bewildering language and convoluted legal rhetoric. The obstruction order, she reasoned, was to be understood as a “statutory order” and therefore, etymologically speaking, could only refer to the van’s current location. As soon as the van stood someplace else, according to her argument, the order was automatically invalidated.<sup>29</sup>

Miss Shepherd tried a similar approach to the removal order that was served on her van as a result of new parking restrictions a few years later. Bennett recounts in his book how at first “the workmen are very understanding, painting the yellow lines as far as the van, then beginning again on the other side so that technically it is still legally parked.”<sup>30</sup> Another “gap” was created for Miss Shepherd, this time by the in-between space between the yellow lines that indicate parking prohibition. This interspace resulted from the worker’s generous interpretation of their orders and the parking regulations they were supposed to implement. Miss Shepherd had her own interpretations of these regulations, as she demonstrated when an official removal order was finally served on her van. She added her own note to it, “declaring the council’s actions illegal,” and demanded “the Freedom of the Land” for herself.<sup>31</sup>

This incident is only partially related in Bennett’s book publication; it neither features in the play nor in the film version. Both adaptations instead take a closer look at the ways in which the law infringes on Miss Shepherd’s daily life and dispense with her playful responses that target verbal representations of the law. Film and stage play

accordingly omit both Miss Shepherd's verbal protests against the obstruction order and the removal order respectively. Particularly the film emphasizes the homeless woman's exposure to and helplessness before the law. In the film version, she is unable to speak after reading the removal order and only stammers in shocked disbelief, waving to her neighbors for help with the document in hand.<sup>32</sup> The notes of protest penned by the Miss Shepherd in Bennett's book were eloquent dismissals of a long-established stereotype that expects the poor to prove themselves deserving through humility and silent acceptance of higher authority. Hytner's film instead foregrounds how the character's physical and mental health suffer under her eviction from mainstream society and how this informs her resistance against exclusion. Sickness and disability make up a much bigger part of Miss Shepherd's self-representation on screen. She still insists on her right to a living space, refuses to ever thank anybody for their acts of charity, and vociferously demands help. However, the Miss Shepherd in the film does so much more explicitly with regard to her bad health. "I'm a sick woman!" is one of her frequent lines in the movie adaptation of *The Lady in the Van* when she requests additional assistance from those who take pity on her. In this, the incarnation of Miss Shepherd in Hytner's film undermines two dominant strategies of stereotyping the poor at the same time. First, her emphatic noncompliance with commonly expected gestures of humility or gratefulness is coupled with her simultaneous demands for consideration of her state of health: this stance repudiates the division of the poor into deserving victims and vilified, undeserving parasites. And secondly, the film represents the character's emotional response to legal actions taken against her rather than Miss Shepherd's intellectual protest which Bennett foregrounds in the book. The screen adaptation therefore voices a more subject-oriented critique of how the centuries-old tradition of criminalizing poverty affects those marginalized by the culturally persistent equation of destitution with delinquency.<sup>33</sup>

To summarize, Bennett reluctantly allowed Miss Shepherd to move her van onto his property. What was supposed to be a temporary arrangement for a few months turned into a 15-year cohabitation arrangement that provided material for one of Bennett's most widely successful series of works across various media (apart from the novella-style excerpts from his notebooks, the stage play, and its film adaptation, the BBC broadcast a radio play based on the stage play in 2009). In his early written account, first published in the *London Review of Books*, Bennett frames the years Miss Shepherd

spends living in her van outside his doorstep through two incidents that led to her going out of her way to avoid an altercation with the law. The first one was the two characters' mutual attempt to circumvent tightened parking regulations by moving Miss Shepherd, her van, and — with them — a multitude of unpleasant smells onto Bennett's property. Getting Miss Shepherd out of the law's way was the motivation for their fifteen-year cohabitation and it provided, among other things, the raw material for Bennett's writings.

The second incident, as the reader learns in an analepsis only after Miss Shepherd's death, occurred before the beginning of Bennett's story. In the book version of *The Lady in the Van*, Bennett's alter-ego narrator finds out that Miss Shepherd had been in a serious car accident when a motorcyclist crashed into her van and died from his injuries. Due to lack of car insurance, as Bennett surmises, Miss Shepherd, even though she was not at fault for the accident, nevertheless left the scene without calling the police and thereby broke the law. She thereupon stopped using her given name, Margaret Fairchild, and called herself Mary Shepherd. Bennett suspects that her sense of guilt contributed considerably to the deterioration of her living situation as well as her mental health. Miss Shepherd, it turns out, had been running from the law for quite some time.

The film version from 2015 alters this narrative structure and begins with the accident. Its first frame, after the on-screen billing and before the credit sequence, shows a black screen accompanied by the sound of motor vehicles and then of a scream and a crash.<sup>34</sup> In the exposition that follows, the audience sees a neatly dressed and clean-looking Miss Shepherd behind the wheel of her grey van with a cracked and blood-stained windshield, and a police car in pursuit. The exasperated Miss Shepherd manages to hide in a farm lane and escape her pursuer. This, the expository scene conveys, is how the story begins. Long before Bennett bought a house in the rapidly gentrifying area of Camden, Miss Shepherd had steered herself and her van onto the course that led away from criminal prosecution and towards Bennett's driveway.

### **3\_Welfare via Subversive Parking**

Miss Shepherd's relationship with the law remains ambivalent throughout Bennett's various treatments of her story, an issue that the film addresses much more frequently and explicitly than the book. On the one hand, she is afraid of the police. In her and

Bennett's first on-screen encounter, she ducks and hides under the steering wheel when a police car passes by.<sup>35</sup> When Bennett checks on her after he has chased away a group of men shaking and kicking her van, her first question is whether it was the police trying to get into the van.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, she disregards certain laws and confidently holds her ground against the police. On one of her outings to Kent, Miss Shepherd justifies her attire to a concerned policeman who, as the audience can deduce from the dialogue, had suggested she was wearing a night gown and may be in need of assistance. After lecturing him on fashion sense ("This style can't have got to Broadstairs yet"), she adds, "And I know the law. You can't be arrested for wearing a nighty!" Asked what she is doing in Broadstairs, she raises her voice to state, "I am minding my own business" and storms off.<sup>37</sup> Notably, this confident rebuke of a representative of the law occurs after she has arrived in Kent by bus. It is only with her van present that Miss Shepherd fears the police. The van offers protection and private living space, but it also burdens her as it is linked to the accident that led to her living in such dire circumstances in the first place.

In the film version, Miss Shepherd's obstinacy when it comes to parking her van is directed at her neighbors instead of, as narrated in the book, at the city's orders. Accordingly, the film shows how her resistance begins to falter when the official parking regulations change. In the film this coincides with one of Miss Shepherd's rare moments of bliss, while she is painting her van.<sup>38</sup> A city official wordlessly places the removal order under her windshield wipers and is briskly chased away by Miss Shepherd, paint-covered pan-brush in raised fist. The scene cuts over to workmen painting yellow lines on the curb, slowly moving towards the van. The lines indicating restricted parking divide the public space of the road into additional sections with specific functions. Where before there was just the road with free parking by the sides, the curbs are now divided into no-parking zones and parking spots reserved for residents with parking permits, thus excluding Miss Shepherd who, even though she inhabits the same neighborhood, is not considered a legal resident. The shift from tolerating Miss Shepherd and her van to declaring an end to the solidarity by way of a removal order reflects the conflictual nature of spaces that are defined by legally assigned functionality rather than the social practices and needs that produced them in the first place.

The streets of Bennett's and Miss Shepherd's neighborhood, like those in any residential area, had several functions. One of these functions pertained to the curbs, which

were supposed to fulfill the residents' and/or anybody else's need for parking. Rezoning the parking areas of Camden meant a redefinition of the curbs according to a need for privileged parking exclusively for legal residents. The instrumental function of the curbs was thus altered: the yellow lines signified privilege for homeowners and leaseholders on the one hand, and the exclusion of Miss Shepherd and non-residents on the other. Bennet's written account foregrounds the wordless solidarity with which the workers interrupted the exclusionary lines in an earlier effort to restrict parking. The film, however, eclipses this act of class alliance and instead dramatizes the escalation of the conflict over parking space. In this one scene, a city official serves the removal order, workers paint the road markings, and Miss Shepherd paints her van on a street busy with neighbors passing by, watching the spectacle, and stopping for a chat. By linking municipal administration, practical implementation, and social reality, the film draws attention to an often obscured dimension of the functionality of public space, namely that "the organization, shaping, and attribution of meaning to space is a social process," as Rosalyn Deutsche puts it.<sup>39</sup> One of the functions that gave meaning to the curbs in Bennet's street was providing a space for Miss Shepherd's van and therefore, within the social practice of the neighborhood, allocating a place to the "gap" in which she could live. The change in function assigned to this space uncouples the process of giving meaning from such social practices. Space, like the laws that help shape it, then "appears to exercise control over the very people who produce and use it."<sup>40</sup>

The simultaneity that the film scene creates between Miss Shepherd painting her van, the removal order being served, and the road markings being put down constitutes a dramatization of what the book more soberly mentions as a series of events spanning several weeks' time. The consolidation of events allows the film to emphasize Miss Shepherd and her van's subversive potential as well as her helplessness when faced with the removal order. The restricted parking areas are marked off with lines that incidentally are a similar shade of yellow as the one Miss Shepherd uses to paint her van. Mocking the neat yellow lines that signal its soon-to-be illegal status on the curb, the van thus becomes a site of visual transgression, a large yellow blob unevenly covered in a coat of paint with crumbs of madeira cake mixed in, and a generous splatter of the same substance on the asphalt around it. The messy paint job of the van finds its match in the road-marking machine that approaches it. Much smaller in size, this vehicle, too, is covered in spilled yellow paint. The large difference in scale — between the vehicles

as well as the circumference of paint splatters — makes obvious that the larger yellow mass in front of the road-marking machine will for the moment delay its progress and, while not stopping the implementation of new regulations, will impede the process considerably. The van itself is now an instrument of resistance.

Like Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicles*, Miss Shepherd's van — in all its messiness and brightness — becomes "an impertinent intervention that empowers the evicted to erase their own erasure."<sup>41</sup> Within the van, Shepherd may be immobile and unable to participate in the production and reproduction of space for now, but she can demand visibility in her trapped state. Where parking restrictions threaten to remove the van from the street and thereby evict Miss Shepherd from her living space, she retaliates against this erasure by marking her van and the street on which it stands with her own means. Her choice of material for this protest — simple gloss paint made lumpy with cake crumbs and applied with a pan brush — does not only replace the 'proper' equipment of car enamel and spray gun with cheap, more domestic material. The traces of cake, a playfully comic reference to the proverbial crumbs with which the poor must content themselves, diminish the paint's intended purpose. Miss Shepherd's paint job thus further ironizes the insistence on functionality with which the segmentation of public space obscures its political dimension. In Deutsche's words, "the ideology of function obscures the conflictual manner in which cities are actually defined and used, repudiating the very existence of those groups who counter dominant uses of space."<sup>42</sup> Miss Shepherd's improper use of paint ridicules the ideology of functionality, while her sheer presence among her bourgeois neighbors opposes dominant uses of space.

In the scenes that follow in the film, Miss Shepherd remains covered in yellow paint, thus becoming an extension of her van, while she discusses her situation with Bennett in his kitchen and later in front of his house. Leaning against the wall in exasperation, she leaves a smudge of paint at the entrance to Bennett's driveway, marking it as her parking space, as it were.<sup>43</sup> Bennett's sigh when he regards the smear of paint signals not just his annoyance over a stain on his wall, but also a foreboding that Miss Shepherd has just conducted her own rezoning. Like the road workers who implemented the city's regulations by visualizing the transformation from free to reserved parking, Miss Shepherd used the same, if not officially authorized, method to transform the driveway into her reserved spot.

Parking her van on the private ground in front of Bennett's house solves several legal as well as practical problems for Miss Shepherd. First, she eludes the parking prohibitions while being able to stay in her chosen neighborhood. Again, a niche has been found in which she can continue to live. Because of the increasing limitations of the public space available to her, this niche has to be carved out of private space. Second, it gives her the status of a legal resident, which enables her — quite ironically — to obtain a resident's parking permit, which she no longer needs for the van but uses instead for the small car she owns. And third, she is now eligible for welfare payments because she can give a legal address. The film makes this causal relation much more explicit than the earlier texts, mainly through the interventions of the social worker who warns Bennett of the legal implications of allowing Miss Shepherd access to his bathroom. Routine use of Bennett's private home may, according to the social worker, "give her squatters' rights."<sup>44</sup> Miss Shepherd's visits to Bennett's lavatory are a direct violation of his request for her to find another option. The social worker's warning (unfounded as it may be regarding the law of adverse possession) places these actions in a larger legal context that widens the scope of what, to the author-character Bennett, is but a personal inconvenience. As the representative of the institutions responsible for the structural and economic support of the poor, the social worker also informs Miss Shepherd that in order to qualify for financial welfare benefits, she needs a proper address.

All these improvements to Miss Shepherd's circumstances — avoiding the parking restrictions, being able to stay in the area, and gaining the privileges of a legal resident — are inextricably tied to privileged uses of space and the laws that grant and regulate these privileges. On stage, *The Lady in the Van* negotiates these issues through the constant transgression and blurring of the boundaries between private and public space. The very few stage directions leave room for dividing the stage set into different rooms and spaces. Necessarily limited by the circumference of the stage itself, Bennett also deliberately keeps stage directions to a minimum and allows for characters to appear in spaces they could not physically be in or to communicate across architectural and geographical boundaries. Instead of blurring or obliterating these visual boundaries, the film emphasizes, complicates, and contests them.

These formal differences are in part owed to medium-specific conditions. A stage setting that must allow for simultaneous action inside a house, on the street outside the



house, and inside a vehicle is constrained by questions of practicability and therefore likely to improvise with spatial boundaries. Whereas a film production can shoot its scenes in various locations and edit them to appear simultaneous, a stage play is bound by each performance's immediacy. Bennett's creative approach to spatial representation in his stage adaptation foregrounds the constant negotiation and violation of private spheres and the personal struggles this entails for the two author-characters he created for the stage. The play focuses on Alan Bennett's private conflicts — coming to terms with his homosexuality and his troubled relationship with his aging mother taking center stage — and how they develop during his fifteen years with Miss Shepherd. Regarding the functional role of the law in the text, the stage adaptation thus deals with codes of conduct rather than codes of law.

#### **4\_Inside the Van, Outside the Law**

The significance of the law and its subversion increases from one version of *The Lady in the Van* to the next, from the book in 1989, to the play a decade later (1999), and the film in 2015. The book places a violation of the law at the beginning and the end of the narrative. It does not reflect much on the specific effects that this has on the character. The play contains more direct references to the laws that influence the homeless woman's decisions and her state of mind. It allows for a more advanced representation of the transgressions between private and public space through stage set-up and its lack of stage directions. Finally, the film addresses how the law dictates the division of space not just into private and public but into several areas of increasing restrictions that are aimed at excluding Miss Shepherd. The law becomes something to be afraid of for those who are excluded from mainstream society.

The film version of *The Lady in the Van* visualizes Miss Shepherd's exclusion from certain spaces and links her attempts to subvert her eviction to her mental state. In addition, the film script echoes the book's spatial metaphors of exclusion and inclusion, such as the 'gap' in which Miss Shepherd lives, especially when it seeks to supply an explanation for the character's mental health issues. At her funeral, the police officer who followed Miss Shepherd after the accident in the film's opening sequence, explains how she had "put herself on the wrong side of the law" when she left the scene of the accident without calling the police.<sup>45</sup> The metaphor in which there are two opposite sides of the law, a wrong one and, by implication, a right one, is meant to represent

Miss Shepherd's escape from the police as a deliberate crossing of that metaphorical border: if she were the sole agent of this move to the wrong side, as the policeman puts it, then it would be up to her to return to the right side of the law. The film undermines this assessment, however, as it has introduced the officer as a cruel and corrupt character who has been harassing and extorting money from Miss Shepherd for many years. The audience therefore has ample reason to dismiss his estimation of Miss Shepherd's offense. Moreover, by staging the policeman as an unambiguously vile and unethical character whose criminal activities go unpunished, the film comments on how social status co-determines the way a person is treated by and relates to the law. Class habitus allows the policeman's behavior to go unnoticed even by the character Alan Bennett, who surprises the retired policeman during one of his blackmailing visits to the van. The law consequently does not separate those who obey it from those who do not, but rather divides according to the harshness or mildness with which it prosecutes and punishes violations of its codes. It does not, as the police officer's very clear-cut division claims, remain passive while people position themselves on either side of and in relation to it. Instead, the film suggests, the law also constitutes a form of practice in which its representatives decide where to 'draw the line' and they do so, among other determinants, along class lines.

In Bennett's reformulation of this divide, the law is more actively involved in zoning and rezoning social space in a way that corresponds to a hierarchy of spatial zones. In his voice-over narration, the author-character relates a binary inside-outside metaphor of the law to the various zones of increasing privacy between the street and the inside of his house: "All these years [that she] stood on my doorstep, she was outside the law!"<sup>46</sup> As the parenthesis indicates, Miss Shepherd was not just metaphorically "outside the law" but also actually outside the house. These two variations of a being outside, however, constitute a more complicated separation than the two clearly opposite sides that were signified by the police officer's metaphor of the law as that which has a right side and a wrong one. While not residing inside the house, Miss Shepherd's location on the doorstep places her within the protected area of a private residence which is nonetheless distanced from its center, the house itself. In this half-outside yet partly included position, Bennett's concluding remark, "she was outside the law," recognizes the law as the final determinant of who is included and who is not. "Outside," in the end, means outside the law. No matter how close Miss Shepherd and her van

may have come to the house, no matter how often she may have trespassed across the threshold or how much she seemed to be part of the neighborhood, her stance “outside the law” is what continues to determine her status.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> “Krzysztof Wodiczko: Homeless Vehicle Project,” Muzeum sztuki nowoczesnej w warszawie, accessed January 28, 2017, <<http://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/wodiczko-krzysztof-homeless-vehicle-project>>.
- <sup>2</sup> Alan Bennett, *The Lady in the Van* (London: Profile, 1999 [1989]); Alan Bennett, *The Lady in the Van*, Faber Plays, (London: Faber & Faber, 2001 [1999]); *The Lady in the Van*, dir. Nicholas Hytner (2015; London: BBC Films).
- <sup>3</sup> Baudrillard famously analyzes “the fetishism of gadgets” in which one finds combined “pure gratuitousness under a cover of functionality [and] pure waste under a cover of practicality.” Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981 [1972]), 89, 32. For a discussion of Baudrillard’s critique and development of the fetish concept with regard to its social dimensions, see Tim Dant, *Material Culture in the Social World: Values, Activities, Lifestyles*, (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open UP, 1999), 40–58. For an introduction to notions of fetishism in urban studies and cultural geography, consult Maria Kaika and Eric Swyngedouw, “Fetishizing the Modern City: The Phantasmagoria of Urban Technological Networks,” in *The Urban Geography Reader*, eds. Nicholas R. Fyfe and Judith T. Kenny (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 343–352.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. Dick Hebdidge, “The Machine Is Unheimlich: Krzysztof Wodiczko’s Homeless Vehicle Project,” in *Walker Magazine*, August 30, 2012, accessed February 5, 2017, <<http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/2012/krzysztof-wodiczkos-homeless-vehicle-project>>.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Lois Ascher, “Krzysztof Wodiczko: Public Space: Commodity or Culture,” *Urban Feel* (Special Issue Streetnotes) 20 (2010), n.pg., accessed February 2, 2017, <<http://people.lib.ucdavis.edu/%7EEdavidm/xcpUrbanFeel/ascher.html>>.
- <sup>6</sup> Samira Kawash, “The Homeless Body,” in *Public Culture* 10.2 (1998), 319–339, here: 320.
- <sup>7</sup> Jeremy Waldron, “Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom,” in *UCLA Law Review* 39 (1995), 295–324, here: 296.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Waldron, “Homelessness” (cf. note 7), 300–301.
- <sup>9</sup> David Farrugia and Jessica Gerrard, “Academic Knowledge and Contemporary Poverty: The Politics of Homelessness Research,” in *Sociology* 50.2 (2016), 267–284, here: 269.
- <sup>10</sup> Farrugia and Gerrard, “Academic Knowledge” (cf. note 9), 269.
- <sup>11</sup> For an overview over the history of vagrancy laws in Europe and North America, see Paul Ocobock, “Introduction: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective,” in *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective*, eds. A.L. Beier and Paul Ocobock (Athens: Ohio UP, 2008), 1–34. A summary of the shift in public perceptions of poverty and homelessness during the 1980s and the specific policies that followed from it can be found in Laura Huey and Thomas Kemple, “‘Let the streets take care of themselves’: Making Sociological and Common Sense of ‘Skid Row,’” in *Urban Studies* 44.12 (2007), 2305–2319. It should be added that the above summary of reformist endeavors across several nation states as well as the causal relation suggested between public discourse and jurisdiction are of course a simplification that fails to convey the many different currents in local politics, academic and public discourse, and legal

- reformist movements within different areas, states, and cultural structures. Regarding the specific ramifications of such movements and reforms for the urban poor, Wacquant provides a sociological analysis of the different experiences of marginalization produced within the structural and political preconditions in the urban environments of different capitalist countries: Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. Tim Cresswell, “The Vagrant/Vagabond: The Curious Career of a Mobile Subject,” in *Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects*, eds. Tim Cresswell and Peter Merriman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 239–254, here: 242.
- <sup>13</sup> Lionel Rose, *‘Rogues and Vagabonds’: Vagrant Underworld in Britain 1815 – 1985* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 201. For a detailed history of British welfare until the 1970s, see Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State: A History of Social Policy Since the Industrial Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1973).
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Rose, *‘Rogues and Vagabonds’* (cf. note 13), 201–202.
- <sup>15</sup> Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, “Neoliberalizing Space,” *Antipode* 34.3 (2002), 380–404, here: 381.
- <sup>16</sup> Peck and Tickell, “Neoliberalizing” (cf. note 15), 384.
- <sup>17</sup> Cf. Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2009).
- <sup>18</sup> Farrugia and Gerrard, “Academic Knowledge” (cf. note 9), 269.
- <sup>19</sup> Among the many works that investigate the metropolis under capitalism and its global interrelatedness, Saskia Sassen’s groundbreaking 1991 study (updated a decade later) provides one of the most thorough analyses of gentrification’s scope as well as its causes and ramifications all across the spectrum from the structures of corporate capitalism to the personal disasters of displacement and homelessness: Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, revised edition (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001 [1991]). See also Saskia Sassen, *A Sociology of Globalization*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).
- <sup>20</sup> Ruth Glass, “Introduction: Aspects of Change,” in *London: Aspects of Change*, ed. Centre for Urban Studies (London: MacKibbon and Kee, 1964), xiii–xlii.
- <sup>21</sup> Hytner, *Lady* (cf. note 2), 0:04:25–0:04:29.
- <sup>22</sup> Bennett 1989 (cf. note 2), 5.
- <sup>23</sup> Bennett 1989 (cf. note 2), 6.
- <sup>24</sup> Bennett 1989 (cf. note 2), 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Bennett 1989 (cf. note 2), 9.
- <sup>26</sup> Neil Smith, “Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale,” *Social Text* 33 (1992), 54–81, here: 58.
- <sup>27</sup> Smith, “Contours” (cf. note 26), 58.
- <sup>28</sup> Smith, “Contours” (cf. note 26), 58. The political dimension of mobility is a widely-discussed issue, specifically as far as the mobility of the poor is concerned. Sennett sees the paramount expression of freedom in Western cultures in “the ability to move anywhere, to move without obstruction:” Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: Norton, 1994), 310. In this context, Massey emphasizes the close interrelation between power structures and “control over mobility:” Doreen B. Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 251. Mitchell addresses the subversive potential of mobility when poor and marginalized populations exercise it, e.g. in Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and Don

Mitchell, *Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> Bennett 1989 (cf. note 2), 9.

<sup>30</sup> Bennett 1989 (cf. note 2), 18.

<sup>31</sup> Bennett 1989 (cf. note 2), 18.

<sup>32</sup> Hytner, *Lady* (cf. note 2), 0:29:24–0:29:30.

<sup>33</sup> A particularly enduring trope in Western cultures in this context is the comparison of criminals to animals, which often intersects with equating the cultural Other and, even more prominently, the poor with criminals. Cf. Greta Olson, *Criminals as Animals from Shakespeare to Lombroso* (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Hytner, *Lady* (cf. note 2), 0:00:45.

<sup>35</sup> Hytner, *Lady* (cf. note 2), 0:06:55.

<sup>36</sup> Hytner, *Lady* (cf. note 2), 0:33:55–0:34:10.

<sup>37</sup> Hytner, *Lady* (cf. note 2), 0:21:16–0:21:35.

<sup>38</sup> Hytner, *Lady* (cf. note 2), 0:29:08.

<sup>39</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, “Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City,” in *October* 47 (1988), 3–52, here: 6.

<sup>40</sup> Deutsche, “Uneven” (cf. note 39), 6.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, “Contours” (cf. note 26), 58.

<sup>42</sup> Deutsche, “Uneven” (cf. note 39), 6.

<sup>43</sup> Hytner, *Lady* (cf. note 2), 0:31:33.

<sup>44</sup> Hytner, *Lady* (cf. note 2), 0:18:28.

<sup>45</sup> Hytner, *Lady* (cf. note 2), 1:33:12.

<sup>46</sup> Hytner, *Lady* (cf. note 2), 1:33:36.