Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature

Wuthering Heights and Company
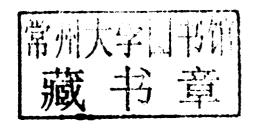
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For my parents, Arie and Orna Shachar, and my brother,
Harel Shachar. With respect, gratitude and love

Acknowledgements

image for this book. The cover image and all the other images from this adaptation are reproduced courtesy of ITV.

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Introduction

The Screen Afterlife of *Wuthering Heights*

> She loved second-hand bookshops for their presump-
> tion that any tatty volume mattered. . . . Inherited
> books. Books as gifts. Books as objects flung across
> the room in a lover's argument. Books (this most of
> all) taken into the warm sexual space of the bed, held
> upon the lap, entered like another body, companion-
> able, close, interconnecting with innermost things.
>
> Gail Jones (2006, pp. 136–7)

This book examines what happens to classic literature when it becomes
a cultural legacy through the process of screen adaptation. The pri-
mary focus of this examination is Emily Brontë's famous 1847 novel,
Wuthering Heights (Brontë, 1998).[1] Brontë's novel is bound-up with
personal, cultural and national histories as a continually reproduced
entity. In much the same way as individuals hold certain texts close to
their hearts as remnants of childhood, lovers and the past, societies and
cultures continually rework certain texts as a collective inheritance. Yet,
the construction of *Wuthering Heights* as a cultural legacy and collective
inheritance through its screen adaptations has rarely been examined as
closely as it deserves. The intimacy with which many people respond
to *Wuthering Heights* speaks of its presence not only in their individual
lives, but also, within culture.

   This work explores a 'Victorian afterlife', a phrase I borrow from
the aptly titled collection of critical essays edited by John Kucich and
Dianne F. Sadoff (2000b). Like the many other classic novels discussed in
Kucich and Sadoff's collection, *Wuthering Heights* has a prolific cultural
'afterlife'. The novel has been a constant source of adaptation into film,
for television, theatre, song, opera and ballet, and has elicited numerous

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novelistic derivatives. It is this vast afterlife that Patsy Stoneman catalogues and analyses in what is arguably the most comprehensive work on Brontë adaptations, *Brontë Transformations* (Stoneman, 1996a).

As perhaps the only critic to fully tackle the afterlife of the novel, Stoneman's research is foundational. Stoneman's work shares obvious similarities with my own and I am indebted to *Brontë Transformations* for providing a starting point for this book. However, the type of exploration I undertake here is different from Stoneman's. My work is not informed by the task of providing a cataloguing investigation of Brontë adaptations. Rather, mine is a text-specific cultural analysis of adaptations in particular media: film and television.

This book also differs from Stoneman's *Brontë Transformations* by locating the analysis of *Wuthering Heights* adaptations in relation to other adaptations of classic literature made in different historical contexts. As the title suggest, the focus is on *Wuthering Heights* and its 'company' of fellow films and classic literature. Screen adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* made from the 1930s to the present age have been influenced by cinematic, television and cultural trends that are evident in other adaptations of well-known novels. And yet, despite the similarities which can be drawn between the adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* and other classic literature, this work nevertheless contends that each literary work has its own logic and breeds its own unique form of cultural legacy through the process of adaptation. It is hoped, therefore, that this specific focus on *Wuthering Heights* will complement other similar studies on the adaptation of individual literary works and authors.

Part of the logic of this book stems from the concept that the adaptation and cultural legacy of specific literary works need to be examined on an individual basis, rather than assuming that all screen adaptations of classic literature essentially do the same thing. Within Adaptation Studies, there is a tendency to clump adaptations of famous novels together, often ignoring how a specific work or an individual author is used to create a particular type of cultural legacy. Exploring the particular cultural legacy of *Wuthering Heights* in the company of other adaptations however, raises important issues about how to approach such adaptations in the first place. If the cultural legacy of a particular literary work is being examined, should discussion of the source novel feature alongside the analysis of its adaptations? Or, should the adaptations be allowed to speak for themselves as independent cultural productions? These are questions that are best answered through an explication of the methodology of adaptation utilised throughout this book.

A question of methodology: Adaptation and cultural critique

Any work that focuses on screen adaptations inevitably has to contend with the large amount of film and adaptation theory that has been produced since the publication of George Bluestone's foundational study on adaptation, *Novels into Film* (Bluestone, 1957).[2] Perhaps the most widely-known approach to the analysis of adaptations is the notion of fidelity. It is standard for most books on screen adaptations to begin with this widely debated issue (see Cartmell and Whelehan, 2007a, pp. 2–4; Cahir, 2006, pp. 13–17; McFarlane, 1996, pp. 8–11; Whelehan, 1999, pp. 3–4; Geraghty, 2008, pp. 1–3; Welsh, 2007, pp. xiv–xv). Such debates however, often over-emphasise the very concept that Adaptation Studies seeks to move beyond: the notion that an adaptation must be 'faithful' to its source text. If, as Christine Geraghty notes, it 'is widely recognized that it is time to move on' from these debates (Geraghty, 2008, p. 1), the manner in which more recent critics in Adaptation Studies have 'moved on' also presents a certain set of issues.

Some critics have tried to steer the focus away from fidelity to intertextuality. One such notable critic is Robert Stam, who argues that adaptations are merely the most obvious examples of what is essentially at work in any film, arguing that 'all films, not only adaptations, remakes, and sequels, are mediated through intertextuality' (Stam, 2005a, p. 45). As Geraghty points out, such an open approach to adaptations is useful, however 'Stam runs the risk of underplaying the particular features of adaptations' (Geraghty, 2008, p. 4). After all, an adaptation deliberately announces itself as a reworking of a particular text, while other forms of intertextuality can be less direct. In the effort to steer away from fidelity comparisons between adaptations and their source texts, it is important not to downplay the extent to which adaptations have a strong relationship with a particular text above others. This book works under the assumption that adaptations should be studied alongside their source text, because they are, in Linda Hutcheon's apt words, 'deliberate, announced, and extended revisitations of prior works' (Hutcheon, 2006, p. xiv).

In their respective works, Hutcheon and Geraghty utilise particular metaphors to elaborate on their own approach to adaptations. Hutcheon argues that it is useful to think of adaptations as:

inherently 'palimpsestuous' works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts . . . When we call a work an adaptation, we openly

announce its overt relationship to another work or works . . . Although adaptations are also aesthetic objects in their own right, it is only as inherently double or multilaminated works that they can be theorized *as adaptations*. (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 6)

Geraghty employs a similar metaphor when talking about adaptations, using the word 'film' as both 'a textual work and as a layer itself' (Geraghty, 2008, p. 195). She writes that:

thinking about adaptations in terms of layering at least allows for the possibility of seeing through one film (in both senses) to another and acknowledges that the effect of simultaneity might draw on understandings built up through time and knowledge. The layering process involves an accretion of deposits over time, a recognition of ghostly presences, and a shadowing or doubling of what is on the surface by what is glimpsed behind. (Geraghty, 2008, p. 195)

The idea of approaching an adaptation as a type of palimpsest which accrues meaning over time through the adding and altering of a previous text or texts, or, as Geraghty puts it, through an array of 'films', is highly productive. This approach does not limit a given adaptation to direct comparisons with its source text, but allows us to examine it in relation to the many layers of meaning that accrue over time, such as previous adaptations and differing contexts. However, a palimpsest, no matter how many layers and alterations it displays, and no matter how far it travels through the hands of different 'authors', has a starting point: the parchment begins with a decided source. An adaptation is not simply an obvious example of intertextuality, it is also a decided engagement with a particular text and its ongoing cultural history.

This book is not concerned with formulating a general theoretical model of adaptation. Rather, it examines certain adaptations as part of the cultural phenomenon of a particular text and expands the analysis of adaptations in an area which is sorely lacking in Adaptation Studies: historical context and cultural critique. The analysis of film adaptations – whether in general terms or in close textual analyses – has often relied on an aesthetic approach that bypasses the influences of society, culture, context and history. Thomas Leitch cites the ongoing prevalence of such an aesthetic approach in adaptation criticism (Leitch, 2007, pp. 2–5), even in more recent studies such as Stam's *Literature Through Film* (Stam, 2005b) and Kamilla Elliott's *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (Elliott, 2003).

Leitch argues that Elliott's book is based on the:

> assumption that adaptation study is and should be essentially aesthetic. . . . This inquiry is remote from the central inquiry of academic film studies, which from its beginnings had stacked its insurgent disciplinary claims by rejecting the aesthetic appreciation of literature and developing a competing methodology of cultural critique. (Leitch, 2007, pp. 4–5)

Indeed, why assume that the study of adaptations must be rooted in aesthetic appreciation rather than their wider contexts of society, culture and history? Adaptations, just like any other work, do not come to fruition in a social, cultural or historical vacuum. To analyse them as self-contained entities made up of certain aesthetic and formal aspects alone, is to ignore a large aspect of their meaning as products of a specific context and time. Conversely, *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature* is grounded in a methodology of cultural critique and historical contextualisation, which seeks to move the analysis of adaptations away from aesthetic comparisons between the screen and the novel.

Contextual issues: Home, heritage and gender

Wuthering Heights has been the subject of adaptation in many different countries and cultures, particularly in the media of film and television.[3] These adaptations have numerous geographical origins, however the most prolific adaptations are from a decidedly Western context. This book focuses on screen adaptations from the United Kingdom, United States and France, which are shaped by such a context. This focus is not intended to downplay the extent to which *Wuthering Heights* has been adapted in other countries and other cultures. Rather, it highlights the unique approach that is evident in the British, American and French adaptations and how such an approach has come to define the novel's cultural history as a primary ideological discourse in Western culture.

With these issues in mind, I want to explore the concept of 'home' as both a guiding metaphor for and extended line of inquiry within *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature*. In one of the most memorable adaptations of the novel, Kate Bush's well-known pop song, 'Wuthering Heights', 'home' features as a continual refrain in the chorus: 'Heathcliff, it's me, Cathy come home' (Bush, 1978). Bush's song is a metaphor for the manner in which *Wuthering Heights* retains

its cultural presence in Western culture as a love story that refers not simply to the love between a man and a woman, but also the love of 'home' as a sense of belonging, identity and cultural inheritance. Bush has famously noted that she had not read the novel when she wrote the song, but rather was inspired to write it after watching a screen adaptation of it (Blake, 1978, n.p.). The types of screen adaptations that *Wuthering Heights* has elicited in the specific contexts of Britain, America and France have implicated the novel with various discourses of 'home' and 'non-home'. It is therefore necessary to expand on the notion of 'home' as an ideological discourse.

Rosemary Marangoly George writes that the word 'home', as it is understood in Western culture, 'immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection . . . "home" moves along several axes, and yet it is usually represented as fixed, rooted, stable – the very antithesis of travel' (George, 1999, pp. 1–2). This definition of home provides an analysis that not only accounts for home as a place and a space, but also, an ideological discourse. The notion of home as a fixed and intimate site is also merged with more public definitions of home that refer to national identity, highlighting the extent to which, in George's words, 'homes are not neutral places' (George, 1999, p. 6). Rather, they are confrontations with difference, with the foreign and with what is considered 'distant', forming exclusionary and inclusionary boundaries around nations, countries, cultures, societies and individuals (George, 1999, pp. 2–6). The word 'home' has always had a distinct reference to a sense of belonging, and such a 'belonging' is predicated on personal, social, cultural and national processes of inclusion and exclusion. George also argues that discourses of 'home' form a type of 'cultural center' around which definitions of self and society are often formulated (George, 1999, p. 13). Such definitions include the concept of a shared 'heritage'.

In his investigation of heritage cinema, Andrew Higson notes that the 'standard definition of heritage is that which is received or inherited, that which is handed down to the present by previous generations' (Higson, 2003, p. 50). While such a definition of 'heritage' is correct, it also assigns an all-too-passive role to the receiver(s) of such an 'inheritance'. Higson instead argues that it is perhaps more productive to think of heritage 'as often invented or revised as it is conserved – hence the insistence on agency on the part of those who mobilize the past as heritage' (Higson, 2003, p. 50). Discourses of home in Western culture often involve a relationship with the past as an inheritance.

On one level, this is an individual relationship in which the inheritance of the past is based on the mobilisation of childhood memories. In what is arguably one of the most well-known books on the home, Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, the realm of childhood memories as they conflate with the childhood home forms a central discourse of personal subjectivity:

> the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless in the way all Immemorial things are . . . Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost. (Bachelard, 1994, pp. 5–6)

Although Bachelard is here speaking in universal terms, his description of memory, childhood and the home, is a distinct variation of Western subjectivity, created by means of the home as a terrain of fixed childhood memories and a reservoir of an individual 'essence'.

Bachelard's conflation of the home with a fixed childhood past is not historical in nature but rather 'motionless' and emotive. It supports George's argument that the home in Western culture has come to represent 'an ahistoric, metaphoric and often sentimental' entity or concept (George, 1999, p. 11). Similarly, it signals the manner in which personal subjectivity and identity are associated with the home and the way that a relationship with the past is inescapably tied to the metaphoric image of an ideal home. It is also striking that home is imagined as an idealised image of what once was and what perhaps never was. As we shall see in the following chapters, the notion of home being predicated on loss is particularly significant to the manner in which *Wuthering Heights* has been adapted.

Yet, it is not only individual narratives of heritage that are associated with the concept of home in Western culture. A large aspect of what constitutes home is not simply the realm of the familial house, but also the terrain of the nation, the metaphoric realm of culture and the notion of shared traditions, values, beliefs and the past. Part of the manner in which collective discourses of home are constructed is by the mobilisation of the past as a 'heritage' of distinct narratives that provide a cohesive image of 'us' and 'our stories'. Higson has pointed