

REVIEW ESSAYS

Victorian Literature and Film Adaptation

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“The Fashions of the Current Season”: Recent Critical Work on Victorian Sensation Fiction

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VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND FILM ADAPTATION

By Antonija Primorac

“THE BOOK WAS NOTHING LIKE the film,” complained one of my students about a week or so after the premiere of Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* (2010). Barely able to contain his disgust, he added: “I expected it to be as exciting as the film, but it turned out to be dull – and it appeared to be written for children!” Stunned with the virulence of his reaction, I thought how much his response to the book mirrored – as if through a looking glass – that most common of complaints voiced by many reviewers and overheard in book lovers’ discussions of film adaptations: “not as good as the book.” Both views reflect the hierarchical approach to adaptations traditionally employed by film studies and literature studies respectively. While adaptations of Victorian literature have been used – with more or less enthusiasm – as teaching aides as long as user-friendly video formats were made widely available, it is only recently that film adaptation started to be considered as an object of academic study in its own right and on an equal footing with works of literature (or, for that matter, films based on original screenplays). Adaptation studies came into its own in early twenty-first century on the heels of valuable work done by scholars such as Brian McFarlane (1996), Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (1999), James Naremore (2000), Robert Stam (2000), Sarah Cardwell (2002), and Kamilla Elliott (2003) which paved the way for a consideration of film adaptations beyond the fidelity debate. The field was solidified with the establishment in 2006 of the UK-based Association of Literature on Screen Association (called Association of Adaptation Studies from 2008) and the inception of its journal *Adaptation*, published by Oxford University Press, in 2008. Interdisciplinary in nature, the field primarily brought together literature and film scholars who insisted that adaptations were more than lamentably unfaithful or vulgar versions of literature mired in popular culture and market issues on the one hand, or merely derivative, impure cinema on the other. The foundational tenets of adaptation studies therefore included a non-judgemental and non-hierarchical approach to the relationship between the text and its adaptation, and a keen awareness of film production contexts. These vividly illustrate the field’s move away from discussing fidelity to the “original” which, thanks to the work of Linda Hutcheon (2006), started to be increasingly referred to simply as “adapted text.” Hutcheon’s book came out at the same time as another foundational monograph on the subject, Julie Sanders’s *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2005) which contributed to the debate through its focus on intertextual links and the palimpsestuous nature of adaptations, in which debate on fidelity was substituted with the analysis of the distance between the text and its adaptation(s).

Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* pointed out a crucial but much overlooked fact that *all* art was adaptive in principle, which helped to relativize the stress on fidelity issues on the one hand and, on the other, contributed to the widening of the field's scope in terms of genre (to include graphic novel adaptations, video games, etc.). This also led to a re-evaluation of the role of the adapters, now studied as authors in their own right, as exemplified by the 2008 collection of essays *Authorship in Film Adaptation* edited by Jack Boozer. The other key shift, echoing a similar development in translation studies, was a related move from investigating what is lost to an examination of what might be *gained* in the process of adaptation. In the introduction and the first chapter of their book *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* (2010), Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan sketch out the developments of the field in its first decade, with reference to earlier work on the subject. Subsequent chapters offer case studies centred around the issues related to particular adaptations' contexts, such as authorship, appropriation, reception, intertextuality, genre, and "genrification," and multiple adaptations, demonstrating the wealth of insights that can be gained from shifting the focus of the analysis from fidelity. Most notably, in chapters 6 and 7 they consider the changes imposed by film adaptations on classic literature (especially Shakespeare and the novels of the long nineteenth century) so often remarked upon by disappointed fans and literature scholars alike. By examining these alterations together, Cartmell and Whelehan identify an adaptation manoeuvre which they dub "genrification": a simplification of complex plots and characterisations for the purpose of making the literary texts conform to the adapters' chosen film genres.

Increasingly, adaptive processes are also analysed with special attention paid to their transmedia potential and the growing role of fans as *prosumers* (rather than as passive consumers) in today's "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2006).¹ The latter approach, to an extent, echoes the ways in which many Victorian serial novels, especially those by Dickens, were published and the ways in which the Victorian reading public participated in the novel's production as it was being written. Thanks to adaptation studies' interdisciplinary engagement with media and cultural studies, attention has recently been paid to the ways in which adaptations depend not only on the social and cultural contexts in which they are produced,² but also on the cultural legacy of the previous adaptations of the same work.³ The latter approach finds its major articulation in Christine Geraghty's study *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama* (2007). Geraghty notably theorises adaptation by attempting to break the perceived binary between an adaptation and its adapted text by focusing on film's material characteristic as just that: a transparent film. For Geraghty adaptations can thus be compared to accretions of layered transparencies, in which "features from two or three genres layer one over another in an attempt to tell a story" and, as a consequence, haunt the final product (11). Karen E. Laird's excellent 2015 monograph *The Art of Adapting Victorian Literature, 1848–1920: Dramatizing Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, and The Woman in White* adopts Geraghty's notion of adaptive layers to show how the habitually overlooked *theatre* adaptations of Victorian literature in Britain and the States (sometimes, as was the case with William Thomas Moncrieff's adaptations of *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, written and performed before the final instalments of the serialized novel were even written!) present the missing link between the literary works and their silent film adaptations. By analysing the ways in which melodramatic conventions employed by Victorian theatre adaptations were used by British and American silent films in order to meet their own audiences' concerns about gender, class, and nation, Laird shows that

the early adapters were hardly ever limited by concerns over fidelity. Fidelity, she suggests, may in fact be a twentieth century obsession derived from the period's own understanding of the author as *auteur*. Moreover, in her conclusion she suggests that "[o]ur current privileging of originality in film adaptation is not so much a breaking away from a twentieth-century tradition, but rather parallels a Victorian cycle of adaptation when the practice of transforming literature into drama was elevated to a highly skilled branch of creative art" (205). Laird's valuable study recovers the story of the Victorian theatre adapters – usually dismissed by theatre historians as mere hacks (and memorably – if vengefully – immortalised by Dickens's portrait of Moncrieff in the final instalment of *Nicholas Nickleby* as the despicable "literary gentleman"). Through a careful examination of the historical context and generic conventions the study reveals a dynamic relationship between the literary market and stage productions. It is not surprising, then, that the monograph ends with a call for more attention to historical specificity in adaptation studies.

Laird's plea strikes a note similar to Greg M. Colón Semenza and Bob Hasenfratz's emphasis in their ambitious *The History of British Literature on Film, 1895–2015* (2015). Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz openly reject transhistorical theorisation and argue for a "historical approach to adaptation" (9), highlighting the limitations brought to the field by a proliferation (and domination) of case studies. Furthermore, the authors point out that the idea of a "national literature" is far more stable and coherent than the idea of a "national cinema" (11) – thanks, primarily, to the ever more increasing globalisation of film production. Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz focus on the shared interest in adapting "Brit-Lit" in Britain and the US, examining these two national cinemas' literary adaptation traditions by paying special attention to the historical contexts in which they flourished. In each chapter dedicated to a particular period, the authors supplement their comparative analyses with some select examples of other world cinemas' adaptations of British literature, mostly from France, Germany, Italy, Scandinavian countries, and Japan. The strength of Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz's book is in its thoughtful reconstruction and evaluation of film productions' historical contexts in Britain and the US and their relevance for the adaptation trends identified. Their analyses of the relationship between Victorian book illustrations and the earliest theatrical and film adaptations in chapter 1 ("Attractions, tricks, and fairy tales: Visual and theatrical culture in Brit-Lit film, 1896–1907") – especially *tableaux vivants* and short Victorian films that focus on chosen scenes from popular Victorian classics – are particularly valuable. Read alongside Laird's study, this book provides a much needed and well-rounded picture of Victorian adaptation trends and their continuation in subsequent periods.

Published some seven years before Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz's book, Liora Brosh's *Screening Novel Women: From British Domestic Fiction to Film* (2008) focuses on an issue somewhat side-lined in their history of "Brit-Lit's" adaptation: gender. Brosh reminds the reader that novels "participated in nineteenth-century controversies about women, marriage, and the home in complex and contradictory ways," which is the reason why "film adaptations were able to construct very dissimilar domestic ideals from the same group of novels" merely by highlighting or omitting certain aspects at different times, creating in turn, "comforting films that stabilize gender identities, define marriage, and fix the parameters of the domestic sphere" (4-5). Brosh focuses on three high points in the production of British nineteenth-century domestic novels on film: American adaptations of the 1930s and the 1940s and their British counterparts in the same decades, and Anglophone adaptations in the postfeminist 1990s.

Brosh's monograph convincingly demonstrates how adaptations invariably use and highlight only those aspects of complex Victorian narratives and characterisation which conform to the ideology of their own time. This is especially the case with the adaptations made in the 1930s and 1940s, the subject of the book's first part, when anxiety over the (re)entry of women into the labour force and the changing nature of working women's gender roles (especially regarding their attitudes to marriage and motherhood) was prominent in public discourse both in the US and the UK. Brosh carefully unearths the ideology at work in the adaptive strategies which more often than not erase the critical nature of the Victorian novels' depictions of women's social roles, showing how the various "updates" in fact boil down the complex nineteenth-century musings on women's agency and limited educational career choices to simplistic stories about women's self-sacrifice or vanity. In the second part of the book Brosh shows how the adaptations made in the 1990s introduce a problematic equation between heroines' liberation and sexual liberation. By and large they are shown to offer a refuge from the increasingly sexualized media by promoting images of romantic and personal fulfilment through marriage in a utopian past populated by anachronistically liberated, passionate yet respectful, heroes. The book closes with an examination of *The Piano*, a film that is not an adaptation of any one nineteenth-century text but is best understood as a reworking of a number of Victorian tropes. Unlike other 1990s adaptations which offer idyllic happy endings to her heroines, *The Piano*, in Brosh's words, "emphasizes that within unequal power structures, art and love, free expression and romance, cannot co-exist. . . the film refuses an optimistic closure in which women can have it all" (151). Brosh therefore reads *The Piano* as a counter-text to 1990s adaptations that offer postfeminist narratives of *having it all*.

Incidentally, Campion's *The Piano* (1993) diachronically stands at the beginning of what is still a powerful trend in contemporary Anglophone media: neo-Victorianism, or a continuous production of adaptations and appropriations of Victorian literature and culture that is the subject of the newly established field of neo-Victorian studies reviewed by Margaret Stetz in Volume 40, Number 1 of this journal in 2012. Even though neo-Victorianism has been convincingly defined as an adaptive phenomenon in the seminal study by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2010), with a few notable exceptions the work of neo-Victorian studies scholars has prioritised literary re-workings of the Victorian world.⁴ This tendency is evident in the recent essay collection *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations* (2014) edited by Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss. Even though the editors, in their introduction, convincingly argue for a broader, adaptation based, definition of neo-Victorianism as a project that includes all (meaning not just self-reflexive and critical) evocations of the Victorian era across all genres, conceptualised as "immersive strategies" (7), out of the volume's twelve essays only two deal with non-literary, screen adaptations. *Sherlock Holmes and Conan Doyle: Multi-Media Afterlives*, edited by Sabine Vanacker and Catherine Wynne (2013), therefore presents a welcome exception in its attention to non-literary afterlives of Victorians. Its editors introduce essays on various uses of Sherlock Holmes and A. C. Doyle in different media, such as advertising campaigns, video games, as well as TV, film, and literary adaptations. The twelve essays thus give an excellent overview of the many Anglophone afterlives of Sherlock Holmes and A. C. Doyle across media, with some hints at their global popularity thanks to the inclusion of an essay about Italian pastiches of Holmes stories.

The sheer number and variety of Holmes and Doyle's many media afterlives analysed in Vanacker and Wynne's volume reminds the reader of the curious, Darwinian, nature of

adaptations as mutations. Robert Stam summed up this evolutionary aspect of adaptation and its relevance to adaptation studies in the following words:

If mutation is the means by which the evolutionary process advances, then we can also see filmic adaptations as ‘mutations’ that help their source novel ‘survive’. Do not adaptations ‘adapt to’ changing environments and changing tastes, as well as to a new medium, with its distinct industrial demands, commercial pressures, censorship taboos, and aesthetic norms? (3)

What this means is that adaptations generate other adaptations, which in turn fuel more adaptations. For this reason, in his 2011 essay on the many interconnected adaptations of Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Thomas Leitch – one of the key polemical voices in adaptation theory⁵ – suggests that the notion of adaptation be altogether abandoned. In its stead he proposes the term *generation* – since “generation looks both backward, in terms of genealogy, and forward, in terms of production” (44). Leitch’s essay questions and offers revisions to the theoretical models employed in the study of adaptation, concluding that the existing ones do not adequately describe the varied relations that inhere among inter-connected adaptations and adapted texts. Leitch puts forward a strong case for a rethinking of the concept of adaptation as “generation” especially as this reconceptualization promises to open up, *inter alia*, productive ways of thinking about the cultural legacy of adaptations across time and across genres.

The collection in which this essay features, *Victorian Literature and Film Adaptation*, edited by Abigail Burnham Bloom and Mary Sanders Pollock and with an introduction by Thomas Leitch himself, offers eleven essays grouped into three thematic parts. It contains a medley of approaches to nineteenth-century classics on screen, most of them rooted in literature studies. Furthermore, like many other books that deal with adaptations of Victorians, such as Dianne F. Sadoff’s *Victorian Vogue: British Novels on Screen* (2010),⁶ it includes not one but two texts that deal with Jane Austen, confirming her status as an honorary Victorian. Leitch’s theory-based text is followed by two more essays that deal with the *techne* of adaptation: Jean-Marie Lecomte’s analysis of Ernst Lubitch’s visual style in his silent movie adaptation of Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1925) and Natalie Neill’s essay on the many adaptations of Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*. The last and the most arresting section of the collection deals with the complex issues that arise when classic novels are taught through their screen adaptations in university classrooms. The essay on teaching *Persuasion* (by Carroll, Palmer, Thomas, and Waese) argues for the necessity of introducing third texts into the classroom in order to, *qua* Andre Bazin, create a pyramidal, rather than linear, approach to adaptation as a form (228). Sarah J. Heidt’s essay describes the experience of teaching Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* alongside its many film adaptations and appropriations, and gives interesting insights into her students’ reactions as well as offering practical suggestions for approaches to the Victorian text, its context, and its many subsequent screen afterlives. Tamara S. Wagner’s essay deals with the ways in which teaching Sherlock Holmes stories alongside their loose screen adaptations in an undergraduate course on film and literature can also serve as a vehicle for “illuminating cultural formations” (205), helping to expose the shifting ideologies at work in the process of adaptation.

Stam’s aforementioned definition of adaptation highlights a very much ignored contextual aspect to which adaptations respond: censorship taboos. Rather provocatively,

in *Better Left Unsaid: Victorian Novels, Hays Code, and the Benefits of Censorship* (2013) Nora Gilbert puts forward a case for the creative potential of censorship. By contrasting and comparing prominent examples of Victorian novels to notable examples of Hollywood classics made during the Hays Code era, Gilbert suggests that the shared strategies employed by the authors in order to circumvent censorship often proved not only productive, but also subversive. Like Brosh, Burnham Bloom and Sanders Pollock, Gilbert includes Jane Austen in her analysis of Victorian classics; however, Gilbert's reason is based in Joseph Litvak's proposition that "[i]f the history of modern sophistication in some sense begins with the Victorian novel... then Jane Austen is the first 'Victorian' novelist" (qtd. in Gilbert 50). Moreover, sophistication is one of the five strategies Gilbert rather ingeniously singles out as shared by Victorian novelists and Hays Code era directors by comparing its use in Austen's *Emma* (1815) to George Cukor's in *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). Gilbert notes how the infamous Production Code Administration guidelines put forward by Colonel Jason Joy in 1930 (and followed through with zeal by his more (in)famous successor, Joseph Breen, from 1934 on) demanded from

the producers, writers, and directors under his domain to speak in a specific cinematic language, 'from which', as he himself put it, 'conclusions might be drawn by the sophisticated mind, but which would mean nothing to the unsophisticated and inexperienced.' In other words, Joy worked hard over the course of his SRC reign to set up a system of representation in which *ambiguity and innuendo would be valorized rather than demonized* – in which controversial content would be bifurcated rather than eliminated. (Gilbert 46, added emphasis).

Gilbert focuses on the creative, productive nature of such a bifurcated approach to narrative development, offering an interpretation of Austen and Cukor's works that goes against the conventional romantic comedy readings: instead of the assumption that the heroines win the love of a good man only after they had been chastened and "improved" by the men themselves in line with the contemporary ideas about moral perfection, Gilbert suggests they in fact are rewarded by the love of the men who can appreciate them as they are, moral flaws and all.

A similarly bifurcated style of storytelling is analysed in the chapter that looks at William Makepeace Thackeray's use of "the logic of scandal" (22) in *Vanity Fair* (1848) and compares it to Preston Sturges's *The Lady Eve* (1941). Furthermore, in her analysis of Charles Dickens's *The Christmas Carol* (1843) and Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), Gilbert examines the role of censorship in texts that are seemingly beyond censure, created by authors keen on popular appeal and concerned about the financial success of their work. The last chapter analyses the strategy of restraint as it is used in Charlotte Brontë's last novel, *Villette* (1853) and Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). Gilbert focuses on the parallels between repression and (self-)censorship, drawing attention to the fact that in her last novel Brontë represses the passion for which she had become known (as well as for which she was reproached) in her own time. *Villette* is, in many ways, about repression and restraint of the author in the face of her imagined critics and audience, similar to the way in which *Streetcar* is about Kazan's restraint and suppression of the more sexually explicit lines from his own screenplay before it reached the censor's office. As such, both works end up relying on the reader/viewer to interpret the ambiguous lines or controversial omissions that the authors refused to spell out. Finally, in her "Postscript: Oscar Wilde and Mae West,"

Gilbert reiterates her conviction “that censored works of art are better, more enjoyable works of art,” claiming that “[f]or whatever ‘moral of the story’ the censor *or* the artist may wish for a given text to impart, it is always the reader or viewer who takes from the story what he or she will, unpredictably and ahistorically” (145).

Somewhat poignantly, Gilbert’s argument implies an unsurmountable chasm between the realities of literature and film’s production and consumption on the one hand, and scholarly work on these on the other. However, the other books on adaptations of Victorian literature under consideration in this essay – especially those informed by adaptation studies and which share its attention to historical and production contexts – suggest that instead of a chasm one finds a fairly dynamic interactive field in which adaptors increasingly find themselves in dialogue with their intended audiences as well as scholars. Furthermore, adaptation studies scholars contribute to Victorian studies not only through recoveries of forgotten Victorian adaptations and their creators but also by linking them to contemporary trends, drawing parallels between today’s prosumers, participatory culture and convergence media, and the Victorians’ voracious production and consumption of adaptations. In this way, amongst others, adaptation studies’ contribution to Victorian studies can best be tested in the university classroom where adaptations of Victorian literature are often used to stimulate debate. Namely, adaptation studies can help develop the class discussion beyond issues of fidelity towards considerations about the extent to which each adaptation is as much about the adapted text and its historical context as it is about the adaptation’s *own* period and its ideas about the past on the one hand, and its anxieties about class, gender, and race on the other. The very fact that adaptations inevitably reflect their own period’s concerns is the reason why they generally do not have a long shelf life and why they are continuously supplanted by ever-evolving, newer, adaptations. However, it is this continuous generation of adaptations which proves – as much as it ensures – that the Victorian texts remain relevant and alive.

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NOTES

1. See the 2013 special issue of *Adaptation* (6.2) edited by Voigts and Nicklas entitled *Adaptation, Transmedia Storytelling and Participatory Culture* which contains several articles on adaptations of Victorian literature.
2. See, for example, the collection of essays *The Politics of Adaptation: Media Convergence and Ideology* edited by Hassler-Forest and Nicklas.
3. For an example of a study that examines the complex interrelations between different adaptations of the same novel, see Shachar’s *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature: Wuthering Heights and Company* (2012).
4. Full-length monographs that approach contemporary screen adaptations of Victorians as an aspect of neo-Victorianism are still rare, and to date include Kleinecke-Bates’s *Victorians on Screen* (2014) focused on British TV adaptations alone, and the forthcoming study *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* by the author of this article. The *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* has advertised a 2017 special issue entitled *Screening the Victorians in the Twenty-First Century* (guest editors: Chris Louttit and Erin Louttit), the first one to be devoted to screen adaptations alone since the journal’s inception in 2008.
5. See, e.g., his monograph *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2007.

6. Another notable example is Kuchich and Sadoff's collection of essays *Victorian Afterlife* (2000). A discussion about the tone of Jane Austen adaptations is used as the foil against which Victorian TV adaptations are discussed by Kleinecke-Bates in her monograph *Victorians on Screen: The Nineteenth-Century on British Television, 1994–2005* (2014).

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