Transcendent Lovers, Heroic Heathcliffs:
Review of Hila Shachar, *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature: Wuthering Heights and Company*

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Hila Shachar's, *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature* researches the intertextuality of screen adaptations of Emily Brontë's 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights* with regard to their canonical source text as well as amongst each other, also focusing on the specific historical moment of each reworking. As the introduction puts it, the monograph "examines what happens to classic literature when it becomes a cultural legacy through the process of screen adaptation" (p. 1). While Shachar offers a comprehensive list of more than twenty such adaptations in her appendix, her analysis mostly restricts itself to five versions in as many chapters. All of her examples stem from a Western tradition spanning about seventy years of cinematic as well as television adaptation: William Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* (USA 1939), Jacques Rivette's *Hurlevent* (France 1985), Peter Kosminsky's *Wuthering Heights* (UK/USA 1992), an MTV production directed by Suri B. Krishnamma (*Wuthering Heights*, USA 2003) and ITV's serial *Wuthering Heights* directed by Coky Giedroyc (UK 2009). This selection is to allow an enquiry into "the novel's cultural history as a primary ideological discourse in Western culture" (p. 5).

The introduction and a preliminary chapter, entitled 'Before the Afterlife', sketch several concerns and motifs of the source text, which also become central to Shachar's later analysis of each re-visitation. Firstly,

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Shachar focuses on the notion of 'home', 'belonging' and (cultural) inheritance which is dependent on and possibly denied by structures of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity and the concomitant ideologies (see pp. 6-9; 20-24). Secondly, she argues that the motif of the sublime 'hilltop lovers' has "to a large extent cemented the novel's 'meaning' in cultural terms", condensing the range of Brontë's novel to being primarily "about Cathy and Heathcliff on the moors" (p. 9). The protagonists are pictured as "transcendent, timeless and archetypal lovers" (p. 10) – a myth that seems to originate in the novel's use of discourses of Romantic love as the 'other' of conventional existence and "integration into the normal structures of society" (Patsy Stoneman, qtd. p. 33; see also pp. 32-38). In this focus on Romance, both in terms of romantic love and as a quest for meaning, individual and group identity, knowledge, freedom etc., *Wuthering Heights* and its adaptations probe central concerns shared by many neo-Victorian classics, such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990). Thirdly, Shachar explores the specific spaces of *Wuthering Heights* with their symbolical and ideological functions (e.g. Gothic excess, see pp. 20-23) as well as their narrative presentation through Lockwood's middle-class, urban perspective (see pp. 17-32). Lastly, she analyses the characterisation of Heathcliff as inscribed into a Victorian discourse of heroic masculinity that thrives on the defiance of circumstance and "construct[s] his body as a physical spectacle" (p. 29; see also pp. 28-32), an aspect which is especially relevant to the current critical debates about neo-Victorian masculinities and the role of spectacle in the reconstruction of the nineteenth century.

The second chapter begins the discussion of the adaptations proper. The "logic of spectacle" with which William Wyler's 1939 film "inaugurates the dominant screen tropes" (p. 39), by transforming the source text into an appealing love story with beautifully staged houses, bodies and landscapes, is the central topic here. The adaptation forms part of a group of 1930s and 1940s 'prestige' films drawing on British 'cultural values' in the context of the Second World War and at the moment of the establishment of English as a university subject, which came to be presented as "*the* supremely humanizing pursuit" (p. 45, original emphasis). These films have a strong tendency towards making the protagonists more appealing to their audiences in their endeavor to rally sympathy for everything British (see pp. 40-47).

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The dominant image established by Wyler's adaptation is surely that of the 'hilltop lovers' which aligns Catherine and Heathcliff with the sublimity of the moors – their love with the landscape – in a construction of Romantic oneness (see pp. 40-43). The image condenses modernist mythification of the novel's archetypal nature into a powerful visual icon: "[a] site upon which Western culture can play with self-images and negotiate the boundaries of being and belonging" (p. 49). After this introduction to the lover's discourse, Shachar turns to an analysis of Catherine's body as an object of visual pleasure framed in and contained by the luxuries of the Grange (pp. 50-55) and to Heathcliff's as a spectacle of pain, which, for the film's audience, ironically turns him into the very "hero of romance" he mocks in Isabella's projection (Brontë p. 118; also see pp. 55-60). With regard to these aspects, the monograph offers a concise overview of the extensive critical material that Wyler's adaptation and Hollywood's Golden Era 'British' films have elicited.

In contrast to the reassuring icons established by the 1939 version, Rivette's 1985 reworking sets out to "destroy myths", "disturb the audience", and "contradict all ready-made ideas", according to its director (Rivette qtd. p. 61). It has consequently been read as the popular versions' antithesis, and Shachar convincingly analyses the depiction of Catherine's existential crisis as a discourse of female limitation within patriarchal structures, which takes up the often neglected concerns so central to Brontë's novel (pp. 63-71). Shachar then turns to Rivette's Heathcliff, who has been stripped of all the Byronic trappings to become characterised by a "'peasant' demeanor" that underlines the dominant restrictions of class and regionalism faced by him (Rivette qtd. p. 71; see also pp. 71-76). Again, Rivette appears to take up a central concern that is often passed over by other screen versions, when he interrogates the fashioning of national identity in the double contexts of 1930s France (the time the film is set) and the first term of Mitterand's presidency (the time of filming) which was centrally concerned with taking control of French history (see p. 77). What is occluded by Rivette's choice of a provincial peasant and Shachar's analysis of it, however, is the problematic of race and nationalism so central to Brontë's Heathcliff. In stripping him of "all the dark romanticism" (Rivette qtd. p. 71), Rivette also edits out the enigmatic origins and exoticised appeal and/or threat of Heathcliff, the gypsy and foreign "prince in disguise" (Brontë 2003: 45), who is, after all, picked up by Earnshaw in

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the vicinity of the docks of Liverpool, a major port for the British slavery trade.[1] Of course, the 1980s are the era of the rise of the heritage film in Britain as well as in France, and the monograph briefly sketches the deconstruction that its prevalent concept of timeless greatness undergoes through Rivette's reworking, which "reveals the layers of nationality and context beneath the poetics of transcendence" (p. 82). In this respect, it is a little regrettable that the BBC versions which belong to this same tradition are never discussed, but are passed over summarily with the remark that they are strongly influenced by Wyler's mythmaking (see p. 62).

'Wuthering Heights in the 1990s' returns to the British heritage film with Kosminsky's 1992 version, the excessive visual politics of which, with their use of carefully authenticated settings and costumes, draw on Romantic as well as Gothic visual traditions. In a detailed analysis of a scene added by Kosminsky, in which Heathcliff predicts Catherine's future in a weather-auspice and sends her "spirit into [a] tree [to] make it talk to [them]" (qtd. p. 88), Shachar convincingly develops the way in which Ralph Fiennes as Heathcliff with his eroticised masculine body is constructed as the master of a neo-Romantic pantheist nature, thus downplaying Catherine's conflicts to privilege a preoccupation with masculinity in crisis typical of 1990s British cinema (see pp. 86-99; 108-112). The heritage space constructed by the elaborate staging of the Yorkshire moors and its architecture as authentic locations follows a museum aesthetic, which Shachar also recognises in a number of other heritage films of the decade that package the worlds of classic literature as national artefacts for consumption at home and abroad (see pp. 103-108).

Chapter 5 turns to a Young Adult adaptation by MTV (2003) which transposes the plot to a contemporary Northern California setting, while, Shachar argues, recycling nineteenth-century "discourses of gender and identity […] with ideological ends" by representing them "as essentially ahistorical […] as nature rather than history" (pp. 114-115). Consistent with this ideological import, the reworking functions in a post-feminist, neo-domestic framework where 'excessive' feminine freedom leads to dire consequences. As in earlier adaptations, the focus is laid less on Catherine's conflict than on the detrimental effects of feminist liberation on the central protagonist, Heath (see pp. 115-124), the budding rock star who is presented as a modern equivalent to the quintessentially Romantic creative genius and whose interior self the film celebrates (see pp. 124-131). In this context,

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love nostalgically "becomes a metaphor for certainty and transcendental truth, behind which stands a politics of identity, gender and the idea of home-as security, all of which are perceived to have been lost and obscured by modern life" (p. 142). The MTV adaptation thus arguably adopts a potentially reactionary position that undermines the egalitarian gender politics more commonly attributed to neo-Victorian texts. The iteration of certain images as well as the adaptation's marketing, Shachar suggests, reinforce "the notion that the novel has become a visual style that is easily recognizable" (p. 138) and can be circulated in the multiple – and perhaps also ideologically incompatible – contexts of a media-saturated culture.

The last adaptation to be discussed at some length is a 2009 ITV miniseries, which, while it can rely on a well-established market for heritage cinema, also has to rise to the experienced audience's demands of more complex and critically self-aware reworkings. Shachar here analyses a typical interplay between conflicting expectations: on the one hand the adaptation seeks to locate itself in the established representations of the dominant lover's discourse; on the other hand, Catherine's excessive desire, her precarious position and 'homelessness' are depicted in their complexity via the flashback structure – only to be reintegrated into the 'great love story' which suggests that, ultimately, these issues become irrelevant in the context of all-transcending Love (see pp. 149-155). The focus of sympathy is, again, on Heathcliff whose physical violence towards women is noticeably toned down, while his suffering is dwelt on with a "fetishistic focus" (p. 166) reminiscent of more dated versions of heroic masculinity. Such an identificatory fetishisation of Heathcliff's pain seems especially telling in the context of recent enquiries into neo-Victorian traumatophilia that runs the risk of employing historical trauma as mere "spectacle at a reassuring temporal remove" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 8). For Shachar, the images of Catherine and Heathcliff as transcendent lovers against the backdrop of the showcased Yorkshire moors remain dominant, even if Giedroyc explicitly seeks to utilise a self-reflexive and ironic stance informed by recent neo-Victorian encounters (see p. 168).

In its analyses of selected screen adaptations of *Wuthering Heights*, Shachar's monograph offers a history in flash-like installments of the transformations this complex source text has gone through under the influence of directors', writers', and audiences' diverse and developing needs. If her selection does not always seem to follow a stringent or

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exhaustive logic, it nonetheless touches upon many concerns central to scholars interested in neo-Victorian reworkings and offers multiple cross-connections to relevant contexts – even if the subtitle's formulation of *Wuthering Heights and Company* suggests a broader treatment of other examples of classical literature and their cultural afterlives than the monograph actually provides. One of the central questions raised by adaptations of Brontë's novel, and a question which Shachar discusses with regard to all her texts, remains an intriguing quandary that will certainly be worth further scrutiny. In how far do vestiges in our naturalised ideologies make all adaptations focus centrally on Heathcliff's tortured masculinity and invest considerable energy into the audience's identification with his position rather than play out Catherine's drama or allow the source text's strong focus on (domestic) violence in all its facets of class, race and gender to surface?

Notes

1. Andrea Arnold's critically acclaimed 2011 adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, which is not discussed by Shachar although it was apparently just in time to make it into her appended list of screen adaptations, is the first to fully develop this potential.

Bibliography

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