I have read this book from beginning to end, and I expect to be in a minority of one in that respect. Maverick at last? I shall return to why it has been such a slog.

The writing on adaptation is now very prolific but I can’t feel sure that it is making much progress. It is casting its net wider and wider but the catch is starting to smell stale. Just as you feel that the idea of ‘fidelity’ to the precursor text as providing any sort of evaluative criterion is surely utterly laid to rest, the issue goes on raising its tedious head. Adaptation scholarship seems now to be grabbing at any batch of texts without actually honing the dialectic, without coming up with much that’s new in the way of cogent theoretical frameworks, and endlessly canvassing and warning against the possibility of being ‘faithful’. Here for instance is Dianne Sadoff on the subject of Austen adaptations: “These films’ riffs on fidelity aesthetics, then, demonstrate that a film may never be fully faithful to its source material”. (p. 98) Oh, go on! Not be “fully faithful” when you’ve moved from one semiotic system to another, across a gap of nearly two hundred years, from an individually conceived and practised art form to a wildly collaborative one? She goes on to say “In addition, conditions within the film industry, national economic exigencies, changing sexual mores, or a director’s commitment to genre conventions and cinematic styles, may affect his or her dedication to fidelity aesthetics” (p. 98). True enough, but hardly new.

Sadoff takes in a huge field of enquiry. She spreads her net far too widely to be able to do justice to any of her findings, and like those matters listed in the previous sentence almost none of them sounds new. British fictions of the nineteenth century (mainly novels, a few plays) and how they have responded to adaptors for screens large and small is her starting-point. Her aim seems to be - I stress ‘seems’ because in so cluttered a book it is hard to be sure - to show how the resulting film texts are “measured against memories of the novels”. Followed by another disclaimer about fidelity: “Yet adaptations are never wholly faithful to their literary sources...” (p. 150). The other part of her aim is to persuade us, unnecessarily, that we must take into account production circumstances, the changing socio-political climate, the particular proclivities of any given filmmaker, and so on. Does anyone now seriously consider that the film version of a famous novel need only be interpreted in the light of its relationship to its antecedent? Surely it is now a truism that the novel is but one, albeit important, element in the film’s intertextuality - and perhaps not even an important one for those who may not even have read, say, Pride and Prejudice but do know Keira Knightley when they see her. Does anyone still doubt that films set in the past nevertheless bear the cultural imprints of their time of production? For instance, could we now think of The Searchers (USA 1956), set in post-Civil War Texas, without having in mind US attitudes to race in the 1950s? By chance I was reading, around the same time, Buzz Buzz!, a collection of interviews with some of London’s National Theatre playwrights, one of whom said: “there’s no point in plundering the past unless you intend to illuminate the present”. I was struck by the contrasting simplicity of expression on a similar matter.

The numbing approach of this study, overloaded with heterogeneous research, is pursued in five long chapters. The first trudges through the film and TV dealings with ‘England’s Jane’ as she designates the author, suggesting that “post-Depression moviegoers” (as well as later decades) “avidly consumed adaptations of Austen’s novels to indulge and alleviate status anxiety” (p. 17). Considering the MGM Pride and Prejudice was the only film version around in that decade, and 1939 at that, I worry about what a lean time it must have been for those 1930s worriers. There is a real sense of strain in contextualising this film as a ‘Depression-era story about “women, money, and marriage” and as a critique of “female cultural consumerism and taste acquisition as vulgar consumerism, even as it seems wholeheartedly to endorse both” (p. 25). In the second chapter, ominously titled “Being True to Nineteenth-Century Narrative”, Sadoff strains to locate Wuthering Heights (USA 1939) and Jane Eyre (USA 1944) as belonging respectively to “the post-Depression era and the wartime workforce” (p. 72) and as ‘1940s Brontë films’, quoting as her authority various other commentators.

She then turns her attention to “Reproducing Monsters, Vampires, and Cyborgs” in Chapter 3, linking Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and Bram Stoker’s Dracula to the ‘horror flicks’ of the 20th century, without feeling any need to refer to Hammer Film’s output, which was almost certainly the most coherent body of work drawing on these earlier sources. In writing about the films derived from these latter, she doesn’t distinguish between...
the audiences for them and those for the heritage films drawn from more mainstream 19th-century fictions. The *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* derivations of the late 20th century are predictably related to the sorts of bodily invasion and birth technologies of that period, and there are tedious and tenuous links asserted, rather than established, such as the following: "Stoker's paean to modern technology also inscribes anxiety about the power of such machinery, a dread the movies marshal" (p. 114). This kind of assumption of connection is one of the book's ongoing irritations.

When she turns to sex and Henry James in Chapter 4, Sadoff surpasses herself in employing unsubstantiated generalisations. For instance, her commentary on 'brow' levels: "Whereas high-culture consumers practice [sic] the skills of aesthetic detachment and interpretation, popular-culture consumers seek immediately usable and disposable material; the middle-brow consumer, however, seeks cultural knowledge even as she or he hopes to experience the pleasures of attentive absorption". (p. 156) In this context, the Merchant-Ivory adaptations of James are dismissed as displaying "with little wit costume drama's highly decorative aesthetic", the costumes themselves failing "sufficiently to play the period look for laughs". (p. 185) But this is nothing compared to her account of Iain Softley's well-regarded version of *The Wings of the Dove* (USA/UK 1997) as a "tarting up of James [which] attracted an audience accustomed to the mainstreaming of soft-core porn" (1976). How does/can she know? The last chapter deals with the congruence of the sentimental and the gay culture of the late 20th century. She distinguishes between what James could show of "protolesbian coupling" (p. 211) in *The Bostonians* and what Ivory could get away with in 1984. In the case of filmings of Oscar Wilde, she strains again to associate *Dorian Gray* 's moment with the anxieties of post-war Britain.

Her underlying approach is not easy to grasp. She quotes my own use of Roland Barthes' concept of narrative functions as a basis for comparison of texts in two media for a bit, but then offers no clear theoretical guidelines for the rest of the book. And it desperately needs such guidelines to sustain our attention as it potters about among publishing history over several centuries, royal scandals, ectogenous reproduction, changes in viewing habits and audiences, the collapse of capitalist structures, the delineation of camp, the shifts in sexual patterning and partnerships, etc, etc. All of this research remains mined in its references and leads to a great deal of dubious allegorising, along the lines of this comment on Polanski's *Tess* (France/UK 1979): "This film, like Winterbottom's *[Jude]*, pictures solicitation as an allegory of Hollywood culture, itself dedicated to advertising, marketing, and selling female flesh on the screen." (p. 87)

The general procedure of this exhausting book is a frantic quoting of other scholars who have presumably focused much more rigorously on their particular fields of concern. Virtually every paragraph is stuffed with references to other critics (five, six or more per para) with no more than an affirmative nod at what has been quoted. The next stage, as already suggested above, is to move to large assertions about - oh, almost anything. I don’t mean that there is never a glimmer of perception at work: as for instance in the awareness of Austen's not allowing nostalgia to blunt the effect of critique in *Persuasion*, or in the reference to James's "vexed position as a high-cultural author who sought a general readership" (p. 151). However, the price one pays for this is stiff indeed. Here is an author so caught up in revealing her comprehensive scholarship that her own views are often either only fleetingly glimpsed or inadequately argued or articulated in large generalities about, say, decades or audiences.

And the language! Here, almost at random, is a bit on *Dorian Gray*: "Although this spectator [not absolutely clear to whom 'this' applies] is theatrical and self-fashioning, Wilde likewise constitutes spectatorship in his narrative. An implicit narratee watches the spectacle alongside the narrator, even as figural and narratorial discourse constitutes him as participant in the play."(pp. 220-21). If you can read your way through that sort of verbal thicket with equanimity, you may not might mind the endemic usage of such terms as 'remediation', 'acculturation', 'fantasmatic', 'figural', 'rhetor', 'metaleptic', 'portrayed' and 'sublate'. I had thought that the kind of clotted language on display in this book had gradually made its way out of academic writing, but no. And it seems even more off-putting in the company of such vulgarisms as 'heritage-chick', 'bimbo', 'on the lam' and 'wannabe', as if to show that this theory-chick has her finger on the popular pulse.

Brian McFarlane,
Monash University, Australia.

---

**Endnotes**


*Page maintained by: Editor © 2010. NO SPAM. Email addresses throughout this site are provided to facilitate communication with bona fide researchers and students. In accordance with the Spam Act 2003 (Australia) the provision of email addresses is not to be taken as consent to receive unsolicited commercial email, malicious code or spam.

*Created on: Sunday, 18 April 2010*