

ADAPTATION AND RAISED EXPECTATIONS:

# Brideshead

## Revisited – Again

*Brian McFarlane reflects on how famous antecedent texts can have an undue influence on film adaptation appraisals – especially in the case of the new film version of an Evelyn Waugh classic.*


**A**NY new film adaptation of *Great Expectations* comes to us with two crucial texts hovering over it – and over our response to it.<sup>1</sup> I mean, of course, Charles Dickens' novel of 1861 and David Lean's celebrated film version of 1946. Both of these are now invested with such prestige, and come to us bearing so much cultural baggage, that any new attempt to adapt the novel into another medium, or indeed to extrapolate from it to create a new novel as Peter Carey or Lloyd Jones did,<sup>2</sup> will be likely to evoke critical reference to the earlier texts.

### Adaptation and intertextuality

The idea of 'intertextuality' – that is, those other texts that may influence how we receive the new one – seems to me one of the most productive ways of approaching film adaptation. The intertextuality that each of us brings to bear on any given film version of a famous work will differ from person to person, according to how well we know those earlier texts and what other texts (novels, plays, films) have a special resonance for us. If you've never read *Great Expectations* or seen Lean's film, your intertextual references will be different from those who know either or both well. Nevertheless, in coming to serious terms with a film adaptation of a famous and/or popular novel or play, we shall all want to have some sense of its antecedents, less from a point of view of evaluating one against the other than of understanding what processes of adaptation have taken place.

Certainly anyone approaching the new film of *Brideshead Revisited* as an adaptation will need to have in mind both Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel<sup>3</sup> and the by-now legendary Granada Television version of 1981,<sup>4</sup> following which the novel was reprinted six times in the year. Virtually all the writing about Julian Jarrold's new film evokes both, to the extent that it has become difficult for the new film to stake its own claim on our attention. Almost no films come to us without trailing some allusions to earlier works in their wake, but not all have such illustrious precursors as *Brideshead*. More people have probably seen the eleven-part miniseries (at 659 minutes running time, 'mini' is perhaps an understatement) than have read Waugh's nearly 400-page novel. One account of the television version says:

*With its heavy air of nostalgia, it caught a national mood and gained eight million viewers. Few complained that John*

A photograph of Emma Thompson as Lady Marchmain from the film 'The Remains of the Day'. She is seated in a dark, ornate chair, wearing a rich red, off-the-shoulder dress with a sheer overlay. Her hair is styled in a classic, elegant updo. She is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The background is a dark, textured wall.

**Waugh's novel of Catholicism, seductive aristocratic living and so on will be a key factor in our response to the film if we are familiar with it. So, too, it seems is the famous miniseries.**

ABOVE: LADY MARCHMAIN (EMMA THOMPSON)

*Mortimer's slavish adherence to the original text made for long-windedness ...*<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, most coming to the new film will have some knowledge – of the existence at least – of these two prestigious forebears. How well you know either or both, and how recently you have read/seen them, will determine for you their importance as intertextual influences on how you receive the new film. In my own case, I re-read the novel for the first time in twenty years in the week before seeing the new film and had the slightly eerie experience of anticipating what the next line of dialogue might be. If I'd not re-read it, my approach to the film as an

adaptation might have been substantially different. Someone I spoke to after the screening was haunted by echoes in the film's soundtrack of the miniseries' famous score – another kind of intertextual reference that might influence one's viewing, or, to be exact, audio-viewing, of the new film.

This brings me to some key questions: What is the function of adaptation? What do we mean by a good adaptation? At the outset, I'd say that I expect something more than a literal-minded attempt to 'translate' words on a page to audio-visual moving images on a screen, even if this were possible. Surely, over and above every other criterion, we should be

asking: Is this a good film? Is it exciting or lively or interesting or stimulating as a *film*? The answers to such questions are of course very subjective, but if our answers are 'No', are we likely to value it because of mere slavish 'faithfulness' to the original novel, if that is all it has to offer? If the film has not proved intrinsically interesting, I wonder how far we shall be drawn to pursuing its relationship to the anterior text. And speaking of 'subjectivity', the demand for 'fidelity' in adaptation often seems to come down to nothing more than a wish for the film to tally closely with the one we have created on the screen of our own mind – and think how unlikely such a congruence is!

How much do we care about the relationship between a film and the novel (I'll let 'novel' stand metonymically for the other kinds of texts that may have been adapted)? Is adaptation the only kind of relationship that we can envisage between a novel and a film? In this matter, it is worth considering a film such as *Dreamchild* (Gavin Millar, 1985) which takes on board a classic novel (Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*) and the lives of those involved in its creation, and, as well, sets us thinking about the nature of narrative



# Newspaper reviewers are apt to get steamed up about issues of fidelity, as if the novel had some sort of sacred significance, instead of its being a work that grew out of ideas or observations that had inspired the author.

in various media. We may care about the connection with the precursor text if we know and value the novel, but what about all those who don't know and, so, don't care? Perhaps they're 'the vast majority, and are a happy folk', as Fowler says of those who 'neither know nor care what a split infinitive is'.<sup>6</sup>

This article, though, is intended for those to whom the names of author and text resonate with significance and status, so where do they/we stand in responding to a film version of a major literary work such as Waugh's novel? Is the latter no more than one intertextual element we should have in mind when we consider the latest film version, its importance varying directly as our knowledge of, and valuing of the novel? The answer to this question must, I think, be 'Yes'. Certainly Waugh's novel of Catholicism, seductive aristocratic living and so on will be a key factor in our response to the film if we are familiar with it. So too, it seems, is the famous miniseries, though not having seen it since its original screening, I have

to admit to feeling no more than a sense of its vague aura of 'distinction' staying with me as I watch the new film.

There are other important intertextual elements that may also affect our response to this film. It may be seen as the latest example of what is somewhat slightly referred to as 'heritage cinema', a term applied to a range of British films (or co-productions that are creatively British even if some of the money is coming from elsewhere). 'Heritage cinema' has been used:

*to describe the seeming conjunction of period costume films and the heritage industry ... a concern for period fidelity leading to the spectacular display of heritage attractions (landscapes, architecture, interiors, costumes) and a particular view of the national past.<sup>7</sup>*

To this account, one might add that such films have almost invariably been based on famous novels. Films such as the Merchant Ivory adaptations of E.M. Forster (*A Room with a View* [James Ivory, 1985]) and Henry James (*The Golden Bowl* [James Ivory, 2000]), or of film versions of Jane Austen (*Emma* [Douglas McGrath, 1996]), Ian McEwan (*Atonement* [Joe Wright, 2007]) or, indeed, Evelyn Waugh (*A Handful of Dust* [Charles Sturridge, 1988]), all reveal a preoccupation with presenting the British past in a sympathetic light, even if it is also possible to discern elements of critique in their presentation of, say, the class system. Overall, though, one tends to remember how ravishing these films *look*, as their distinguished casts perform before the splendours of man and nature. It is worth considering to what extent the new film of *Brideshead* belongs in such generic company and how much our knowledge of these films informs our viewing of the new one. Almost all of these films have been adaptations, and some have attracted criticism for 'tampering with' or not 'measuring up to' their famous precursors.

LEFT PAGE MAIN: JULIA (HAYLEY ATWELL) AND CHARLES (MATTHEW GOODE)  
LEFT PAGE INSET: SEBASTIAN (BEN WHISHAW) AND CHARLES  
ABOVE: CHARLES (MATTHEW GOODE)

*The film in general may be said to represent Catholicism as a life-stifling influence, particularly in its characterization of Lady Marchmain as exercising a too-rigid control over the lives of her children.*



ABOVE: LADY MARCHMAIN AND CHARLES AT BRIDESHEAD

'Change is not a choice.' This was a comment made in Spike Jonze's brilliant and eccentric film *Adaptation* (2002), in which a filmmaker is toying with the idea of making a film from Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief* (2000). He wants to focus on orchid cultivation, whereas his producer wants to foreground people and is untroubled by notions of 'fidelity' to the book. Neither, in my view, should we be. In fact, Jonze's film should be required viewing for anyone trying to come to terms with the concept of adaptation of literature into film. Of course changes will be necessary in the move from a sign system consisting of words in straight lines on a page to moving images on a screen. Newspaper reviewers are apt to get steamed up about issues of fidelity, as if the novel had some sort of sacred significance, instead of its being a work that grew out of ideas or observations that had inspired the author, and that novel, in turn,

becomes one of the ideas or observations that inspire the filmmaker. Or, to put it another way, the filmmakers may have been excited by or interested in one or more aspects of the novel as a basis for making a film, and will bring to bear on it their own insights and capacities and the filmmaking practices in which they are steeped. Remember, too, that film is an industry as well as an art form and that will make for a different set of pressures on the filmmaker, who will need to be answerable for much vaster sums of money than a novel requires for its publication.

There is a lot of pious talk about whether or not a film is faithful to the 'spirit' of the novel it is derived from. I have no idea what this means. Does it suggest that the film somehow gives us an emotional or intellectual experience comparable to that which we had in reading the book? Is this what we really want from a film adaptation? In my view, we are more likely to have a compelling film if the director and their collaborators have had their attention caught by a motif or a character's situation or the evocation of a place or, in fact, any particular aspect of the novel, then gone off to make their own piece of work, with its own nuances and emphases. I don't mean to suggest that we will not have a preference for the film or for the novel, but I do suggest that this is a purely private matter, not crucial to our critical analysis of the film before us. It is very interesting to explore how a filmmaker has gone to work on a famous novel, but we shouldn't use our individual view of that novel as a stick to beat the film version with.

### Another go at *Brideshead Revisited*

To get down to the specific case of the new film of *Brideshead Revisited*: it hasn't fared very well with reviewers and other commentators, who keep suggesting that it's 'not true' to Waugh and not as classy as the famous miniseries, and who seem unable to keep these intertextual resonances in their place (they *have* a place, inevitably, but should not loom so large as to obscure other aspects of the film). One local journalist asks, as a sub-heading to her article: 'Does the new *Brideshead* movie refresh a classic or ruin it?'<sup>8</sup> Allowing that the quoted question may be a sub-editor's folly, we might still ask how any film version can possibly either 'refresh' or 'ruin' the novel from which it was adapted. The novel is there as a completed artefact and its quality and qualities are immune (even if the author is not dead, as Waugh is) to anything a film version may do to or for it. It is perhaps worth noting at this point that Waugh himself actually 'modified' some of what he called 'the grosser passages' of the original novel when it was reissued in a revised edition in 1960 'with many small additions and some substantial cuts'.<sup>9</sup> Is there an analogy here with the 'Director's Cut' of a film, usually mastered to restore material that has been cut (often by the studio), or occasionally to make cuts.<sup>10</sup> Another local account claims that 'The question that seems to be on everyone's lips about the new movie is, "Why did they bother?"' and this same dim piece goes on to pronounce that the new film 'to put it mildly, falsifies Waugh'.<sup>11</sup> It would not

be worth joining battle with such predictable knee-jerk responses if they didn't somehow so muddy the adaptation waters. If Julian Jarrold's *Brideshead* isn't a good film, that isn't necessarily because it 'falsifies' Waugh.

Waugh was not an enemy of the cinema. Snobbish as he was about so many things, the cinema was not one of them. In 1924, when he was twenty-one, he and some friends made an amateur film called *The Scarlet Woman*, filmed in his father's house and garden. It was never shown publicly but Waugh's biographer, Christopher Sykes, writes that 'It was shown several times privately at Oxford' and that three copies were made.<sup>12</sup> Indubitably one of the great novelists of the twentieth century, much concerned with upper-class British life, sometimes for satirical, sometimes for nostalgic purposes, he has been filmed several times (and notice how easy it is to say 'he has been filmed', when I really mean his books have provided the starting-point for several films). There were big-screen versions of *Decline and Fall* (1928) (filmed as *Decline and Fall ... of a Birdwatcher* [John Krish, 1968]), *The*

*Loved One* (1948) (filmed 1965, Tony Richardson), *A Handful of Dust* (1934, filmed 1987, Charles Sturridge, director of the *Brideshead* miniseries) and *Vile Bodies* (1930) (filmed as *Bright Young Things* [Stephen Fry, 2003]), and as well as *Brideshead* there was a television miniseries adapted from the trilogy *Sword of Honour* (1952–61, filmed 2001). There are plenty of reasons why Waugh is likely to be attractive to filmmakers: studies of society at various levels, picturesquely varied locations, comic situations and characters.

Some of these ingredients are more in evidence in *Brideshead* than Waugh's other works. For instance, the levels of social interaction are as subtly articulated as ever; the locations – Oxford, Brideshead, London and Venice – are a filmmaker's gift; but, though there is still a ration of comic invention, the underlying seriousness of the earlier novels has now become this novel's *raison d'être*. There was always lurking beneath the brilliant comedy of, say, *Decline and Fall* or *Put Out More Flags* (1942) a suggestion that the laughter might have to stop; there was a touch of sadness just kept at

bay, as Waugh contemplated a society pushing itself to the limits in the interests of having fun when more important matters might be demanding attention. In his Preface to the revised edition of *Brideshead* he announces that the novel's theme is 'the operation of divine grace on a group of diverse but closely connected characters', a theme that 'was perhaps presumptuously large' but for which he 'make[s] no apology'.<sup>13</sup> The book proved immensely popular when it appeared but as one writer has claimed, 'Many critics have baulked at both the theme and Waugh's treatment of it,' though they allow that it 'is also more considered, more complicated and more ambiguous than its detractors sometimes claim'.<sup>14</sup>

### The shape of the novel

There is a purposeful formality about the structure of the novel, which is worth drawing attention to, since the film departs somewhat from it, and this departure keys us into a shift of emphasis in the film's intentions. The novel is structured in three main parts or 'Books', as they are called, containing respective-



ABOVE: CHARLES AND JULIA

ly five, three and five chapters, and flanked by a Prologue and an Epilogue. That is to say, there is something of almost classical ordering in the symmetry of the way the novel is put together. The Prologue is set in the early days of World War II and brings the novel's protagonist, Charles Ryder, back to Brideshead, the great house which has been requisitioned for wartime purposes. Its last line, as part of Charles' narration, is 'I had been there before. I knew all about it.' Hence the title of 'Prologue: Brideshead Revisited' – and also 'Epilogue: Brideshead Revisited', and indeed of the whole novel.

This is a novel about the way the past has shaped Charles' life, and following the Prologue it takes us back to a period twenty years earlier when middle-class Charles has gone up to Oxford, met Sebastian Flyte, and been seduced by Sebastian's glamour and even more by the whole aristocratic way of life embodied in Brideshead. Book One is entitled 'Et in Arcadia ego' and in that Latin tag is already a foreshadowing of the end of the idea/ideal that Brideshead represents for Charles. Roughly translated it means 'Even in Arcadia I exist' and is attributed to Death: if Brideshead seems in this first part of the novel to evoke for Charles the kind of pastoral paradise<sup>15</sup> that 'Arcadia' suggests, it also inevitably carries with it the inescapable possibility of the ravages of time and death. Melancholy hangs over the novel then from the start. For Charles, during that summer long ago at Brideshead with Sebastian, 'I ... believed myself very near heaven' (p.96), but Sebastian is already concerned that Charles should not find himself too

drawn into the spell of the house and the family, instinctively knowing that he (Sebastian) will in time have to sever all his connections with it. If there is an element of nostalgia in the novel's depiction of Brideshead and indeed of Oxford, it is necessary to have in mind that this is a novel in which memory plays a powerful role, that the nostalgia is part of Charles' memory of enchanted worlds that opened up for him. The third location that becomes idealized in his memory is Venice, where he and Sebastian visit Lord Marchmain, long estranged from his Catholic wife who presides over Brideshead.

Book Two, ominously entitled 'Brideshead Deserted', sees Charles off to Paris to study art; Sebastian has been misled in North Africa by Rex Mottram who confides to Charles his aspirations about marrying Sebastian's sister Julia. When Lady Marchmain is dying, Julia asks Charles to try to find Sebastian and bring him home, but he is now a hopeless alcoholic in a Moroccan hospital and dependent on a dubious German called Curt, and Charles returns to England without him. The narrating Charles refers to what he 'learned about Julia, bit by bit, as one does learn the former – as it seems at the time, the preparatory – life of a woman one loves' (p.211), and I think it must be said that the growth of Charles' love for Julia is inadequately rendered in the novel.

The affair between Charles and Julia develops when, in Book Three, they re-meet on a liner travelling from New York to England. Both are now unhappily

married, Julia to the crass opportunist Rex, Charles to Celia, a foolish socialite and sister of the disgusting 'Boy' Mulcaster whom Charles has known at Oxford. This Book is called 'A Twitch Upon a Thread', and though this title could be seen as a reference to how easily he is re-attracted by Brideshead and by Julia ('Here she and I, who were never friends before, met on terms of long and unbroken intimacy' [p.272] on the liner), there is the more serious notion of how a twitch on the thread of Julia's Catholicism reasserts itself. Lord Marchmain has come back to Brideshead to die, and the matter of a priest at his deathbed and Julia's insistence on this, divorced as she is, and her father's final gesture of the sign of the cross are more fundamental to the novel's purposes. Even Charles, not a Catholic, 'suddenly felt the longing for a sign, if only of courtesy, if only for the sake of the woman I loved' (p.384). The 'thread' tying one to other people, to places, to beliefs, the novel suggests, is never broken, and a mere 'twitch' can reaffirm its tenacity. When Julia parts from Charles after her father's death, she tells him, 'I've always been bad. Probably I shall be bad again. But the worse I am, the more I need God. I can't shut myself out from his mercy.' (p.386–7) The Epilogue closes with Charles back at Brideshead, now owned by the absent Julia, and acknowledging a continuity of faith, 'a small red flame ... burning anew among the old stones', as he 'quicken[ed] [his] pace' (p.395) and moved out.

The foregoing paragraphs are essentially an attempt to highlight the key events, what Roland Barthes calls 'cardinal functions' or 'hinge-points' of narrative,<sup>16</sup> the outcomes of



ABOVE RIGHT: LADY MARCHMAIN,  
SEBASTIAN  
LEFT: CHARLES



*This emphasis on Charles's love for Julia, however convincingly this emerges in the film, is certainly one of the ways in which the filmmaker has imposed his vision on the antecedent novel's plotline.*

which are not merely sequential but consequential as well. Trying to assemble them in our minds so as to discern overall patterns in the narrative is another matter. In the case of *Brideshead Revisited*, we should have in mind such motifs, such thematic preoccupations, as faith, guilt, memory, family, nostalgia, dream and reality, all of which are important in the texture of the novel. We need now to consider how Julian Jarrold's film has taken such notions on board and how they are articulated through the film's narrative.

### The shape of the film

Screenwriters Andrew Davies (a name to conjure with in relation to 'heritage' adaptations<sup>17</sup>) and Jeremy Brock have elected to structure the film in a way comparable to but not exactly parallel to Waugh's almost-Palladian classicist symmetry. The film opens and closes at

wartime Brideshead as the novel does, but in between are four main time sequences.

Post the wartime-set Prologue, the film opens on a long shot of an ocean liner on which Charles (Matthew Goode), the now-successful artist, and his wife Celia (Anna Madeley) are travelling back to England from New York, and this sequence ends with Charles pursuing the retreating figure of Julia (Hayley Atwell), whom he has glimpsed in the crowd his wife has invited to a party in their stateroom.

The long central section of the film retreats first to 'Ten years earlier', with Charles leaving his father's dreary house to go up to Oxford, with his meeting Sebastian (Ben Whishaw) and his set, falling under the spell of Brideshead and the influences of Lady Marchmain (Emma Thompson) and Julia. Sebastian and

Charles, accompanied by Julia, go to visit Lord Marchmain (Michael Gambon) in Venice where he lives with his mistress, Cara (Greta Scacchi). Kevin Loader, the film's producer explains: '... what Jeremy did was to put Julia in the Venice sequence of the novel ... It became the pivot of the story for us.'<sup>18</sup> Sebastian sees Charles and Julia kiss and the narrative necessarily takes a different turn. On return to Oxford, Sebastian is under surveillance from 'sad little Catholic' Samgrass (James Bradshaw) on instructions from Lady Marchmain, who later accuses Charles of encouraging Sebastian to drink and dismisses him from Brideshead on the night of the ball given to celebrate Julia's coming-out and her engagement to Rex Mottram (Jonathan Cake).

Four years later. This period is introduced by Charles' meeting with Celia, whom he will subsequently marry, and Lady



Marchmain, having expelled Charles from Brideshead, now has a favour to ask. While defending her actions – ‘I took you into my confidence and you betrayed me’ – she announces that ‘I’m not here to argue with you’ and that she wants Charles to go to Africa to find Sebastian. He does find his old friend who, in answer to Charles’ mission to persuade him home, says, ‘I wouldn’t even if I could,’ and in his state of alcoholic degeneration Sebastian is not fit to travel anywhere, and accepts that it was his ‘fault for bringing [Charles] to Brideshead’.

Now the film’s symmetrical structuring becomes apparent as it cuts back to the ocean liner, where Charles and Julia begin their *affaire*. They eventually return to Brideshead, sloughing off their spouses, and are about to leave when Lord Marchmain returns to die. His death has the same effect on Julia as it had in the novel: ‘I can’t shut myself off from [God’s] mercy’ and she has to support her priggish older brother’s insistence on a priest’s attendance. ‘I have to let you go,’ she tells Charles, her Catholicism having asserted its claims again, as they stand before a picture of Madonna and child, which is being covered by soldiers as the film moves back into the wartime Brideshead. Charles moves out into the light, but we remember from the Prologue voice-over that the emotion that possesses him is ‘guilt’. It may then be simplistic to interpret the seemingly symbolic exit from the interior gloom as his freeing

himself of Brideshead, of the past with its tentacles of languorous beauty and its pervasive intimations of pain.

### How ‘new’ is the new film?

In terms of the novel’s ‘cardinal functions’, it can be said that the film retains most of them, as the outlines of their respective structures above suggests, but it is in the departures from Waugh’s narrative line that we are perhaps most likely to locate the main concerns of Jarrold’s film. By taking Julia to Venice with Sebastian and Charles, the film is making its case for the centrality of the romantic triangle that these three comprise. Sebastian, much more overtly gay in the film than in either Waugh or in the miniseries, clearly feels himself betrayed by Charles, not just for kissing and falling in love with Julia but also for allowing himself to become involved with the family in ways Sebastian, from the first, hasn’t wanted. This emphasis on Charles’ love for Julia, however convincingly this emerges in the film, is certainly one of the ways in which the filmmaker has imposed his vision on the antecedent novel’s plotline. As a result, and bear in mind that, in the film, we meet Julia before glimpsing Sebastian, the nature of Charles’ intense attraction to all that Sebastian represents becomes almost of secondary importance. Equally, though, to give comparable presence to each of Sebastian and Julia is a way of adverting the viewer to the narrative pre-eminence

of the triangle, the kiss exchanged by Charles and Sebastian reinforcing this further. Cara is right when she tells Charles in Venice that whereas his feeling for Sebastian is a ‘phase’, a ‘romantic friendship’, for Sebastian it is much more: ‘Sebastian loves you very much I think.’ Christopher Sykes believed that ‘Where sentimentality spoils the book is ... in the ill-managed love-scenes between the narrator, Charles Ryder, and the heroine, Julia Flyte.’<sup>19</sup> It might be worth considering whether Jarrold’s increased emphasis on this aspect strengthens the overall narrative.

Our being introduced to Julia before Sebastian in the film is a result of the deliberate re-structuring of the film so that the liner episode precedes Charles’ going to Oxford. The time sequence in the film goes something like this: c.1940 (war), c.1930 (ocean liner), c.1920–24 (Oxford, Brideshead, Venice, London, Morocco), c.1930 (ocean liner again), c.1940 (war again). As noted, there’s a sort of symmetry there, but, as well, it gives the impression of Charles’ digging back, and then further back, into the memories that assail him when he revisits Brideshead during the war. In relation to such ‘structural’ matters, it is also worth noting other ways in which Jarrold and his collaborators focus our attention on parallel situations, either for comparison or for contrast. Twice Charles is about to leave Brideshead – first, with Sebastian, later with Julia



ABOVE LEFT: (L-R) CHARLES, JULIA, SEBASTIAN ABOVE RIGHT: CARA (GRETA SCACCHI) OPP. PAGE: BRIDEY (ED STOPPARD) AND LADY MARCHMAIN

The new film of *Brideshead Revisited* hasn't fared very well with reviewers and other commentators, who keep suggesting that it's 'not true' to Waugh and not as classy as the famous miniseries, and who seem unable to keep these intertextual resonances in their place.

– when departure is threatened by arrivals. As he and Sebastian are about to return to Oxford, Lady Marchmain and Julia arrive, thus bringing the existence of Julia to Charles' attention; as he and Julia are about to leave, following Rex's vulgar bartering of Julia for art works, Lord Marchmain, with Cara and nurse, arrives to die, and Julia knows she must stay, aching with guilt for her life, her lapsed Catholicism 'like an invisible thread drawing you back'. Another parallel, this time for purposes of contrast, is that between the two fathers: Charles' widowed, always-preoccupied father (Patrick Malahide) hunched over his chess set, in his gloomy suburban house, barely aware of his son's comings and goings, and Lord Marchmain, expansive and hospitable in his Venetian palazzo. These two sets of parallels, achieved in cinematic terms of imagery and editing, accentuate respectively how Charles is 'caught' by the allure of *Brideshead*, and the social and emotional gap between Sebastian's and Charles' background.

One of the recurring criticisms directed at 'heritage cinema' is that it is prone to indulge in a sort of pictorialism that Andrew Higson and others would associate with 'a cinema of attractions'.<sup>20</sup> The implication is that there is an excessive presentation of, say, landscape or beautiful buildings, and very often there is truth in such criticism. In the new *Brideshead Revisited*, it is certainly true that Oxford, *Brideshead*

(Castle Howard, Yorkshire, doing fabulous duty here) and Venice are the object of ravishing long-shots, but I'd want to contest a claim of mere pictorial splendour. That first glorious view of Oxford's 'dreaming spires' is how Charles, released from his stifling suburban home, first sees it; it has dramatic importance as it ushers in his seduction by places and people of kinds he has never before known. As to the university colleges, a contrast is made between the spacious quarters occupied by Sebastian, shot in Christchurch, 'one of the grandest and richest Colleges in Oxford', and Charles' 'at Lincoln [which] is much more intimate and domestic'.<sup>21</sup> In other words, it's not just a matter of getting us to respond to the architectural beauties of Oxford, but of rendering it in such a way as to make it *meaningful* in dramatic terms.

Similarly with *Brideshead*. Charles has to be bowled over by the sheer magnificence on display. If the film simply lingered over its façade and its landscaped grounds and its art-laden interiors, one might cavil, but again we have to be persuaded that there is reason enough in what it stands for to account for Charles' falling for its effortless seductiveness. Castle Howard had been used for *Brideshead* in the television version and this may be the most insistent intertextual echo it bequeaths to the new version. And perhaps it was not just the magnificence

of the place that is so compelling, but as Nigel Nicholson has written of it:

*As you approach the area of Castle Howard ... you notice that something is happening to the countryside. A sense of expectation is being created, as by the tuning of the orchestra before the curtain rises.*<sup>22</sup>

Jarrold and cinematographer Jess Hall have achieved a cinematic equivalent of Charles' first glimpse of the surrounding countryside and then of the house itself that is cleverly enough done not to deserve one reviewer's easy put-down: 'Aided by Jess Hall's luminous cinematography, his [Jarrold's] film is extremely beautiful, but all this stylistic verve is distracting [i.e., from important issues].'<sup>23</sup>

Another point to be made about the film's use of Castle Howard is that it resists tendencies to 'distract' us with the merely pictorial but instead, in the dinner scene, underscores the drama's tensions through a series of medium close-ups of the various speakers.

As for Venice, the opening shot of this ravishing city just misses the clichéd vista that takes in St Mark's Square and its familiar landmarks. It again impresses as a literal and metaphoric expansion of Charles' horizons, before quickly cutting to a shot of the three – Charles, Sebastian and Julia – making their way to Lord Marchmain's palazzo, by boat, having resisted the cliché of a gondola. Venice, as noted, marks a turning point in the



ABOVE: SEBASTIAN, LORD MARCHMAIN (MICHAEL GAMBON), JULIA RIGHT: LADY MARCHMAIN

narrative when Charles realizes he is in love with Julia. The Venetian carnival setting has been used before to usher in a new stage in the drama as in Iain Softley's fine film version of Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (novel 1902, film 1997), and Venice at large has been used as the site for a reappraisal of relationships in Paul Schrader's adaptation of Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* (novel 1981, film 1990). Jarrold's touch may be less sure in its deployment of Venice as a key influence in the film's narrative, but it does evoke a sense of release from the pressures of English life.

And a remark passed by Cara, Lord Marchmain's mistress, is useful for turning our attention to how Catholicism is presented in the film. After Charles has politely rebuffed her comments about Lady Marchmain's strict religious observances, Cara says, 'It's different in Italy. We do what the heart tells us and then we go to confession.' The film in general may be said to represent Catholicism as a life-stifling influence, particularly in its characterization of Lady Marchmain as exercising a too-rigid control over the lives of her children. However, if we choose to examine carefully how the matter of faith is interrogated in the film, can we accept Cara's comment as anything other than an easy, hedonistic approach to it? Certainly, in Lady Marchmain, played with silvery aplomb by Emma Thompson, faith seems not to lead to affection but to censoriousness and to the sort of exclusivity that would cause her to dismiss Charles' wish to marry Julia, not

merely on class grounds but because he is an atheist. Nevertheless, it is hard to agree with the reviewer who claimed that 'Thompson plays all her scenes in the key of high comedy';<sup>24</sup> such a comment unpersuasively reduces the importance of the issue of religious conviction as it is dramatized in the film. In relation to the film's attitude to religious faith, and specifically to Catholicism, one should consider what Charles' final moment in the Brideshead chapel means, when he dips his fingers in holy water, then goes to extinguish a candle – and draws back at the last. It would take a peculiarly obtuse viewer to come up with the judgement that the film makes Catholicism 'seem like a weirdo cult.'<sup>25</sup>

The last point I want to draw attention to in considering the film as an adaptation is in how it responds to the idea of Charles as a first-person narrator. One might also query how Waugh manages this strategy. It is at least arguable that Charles' narrational voice is more sophisticated, more convoluted, than we might easily attribute to the 'character' of Charles whose life is wrenched out of its expected course by his infatuation with the world of Brideshead. Film generally has difficulty with rendering a first-person narrator: in this case, we begin with Charles reflecting on his own identity: 'If you asked me who I am, I would only say my name is Charles Ryder', adding that,



'among the borrowed and the second-hand', only 'guilt' is real to him. But the film quickly discards the voice-over technique, returning to it at the end with 'Was it fate or some divine power that I find myself once more returned to Brideshead? ... Did I want too much?'

In conclusion, I'd suggest it might be instructive to consider the other – cinematic – strategies by which Charles is kept at the centre of the film. For instance, are there any important scenes from which he is absent? How frequently does the film ask us to share point-of-view shots with him? My other final remark is that it might be much more valuable to consider how Jarrold has responded to the novel, what seems to have caught his attention and how he has rendered this on film. What, for instance, is his film's attitude to the class snobberies so much a part of the novel's texture? It has been suggested that Waugh was himself half in love with the idea of an ancestral Catholic aristocracy and that this led him to a semi-nostalgic view of it. Does Jarrold seem more critical of this than Waugh? Exploring questions such as this could be more productive than slipping at once into evaluative mode and finding the new film immeasurably inferior to either of its illustrious predecessors.

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#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Incidentally, Julian Jarrold, the director of the new film version of *Brideshead Revisited*, also directed a notably thoughtful BBC television adaptation of *Great Expectations* (1999), starring Charlotte Rampling as Miss Havisham.
- <sup>2</sup> Peter Carey, *Jack Maggs*, Faber and Faber, London, 1997; Lloyd Jones, *Mr Pip*, Text Publishing Company, Melbourne, 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1981 (1945, revised edition 1960). All future page references are to this edition.
- <sup>4</sup> *Brideshead Revisited*, Granada Television, 1981. Directed by Charles Sturridge and Michael Lindsay-Hogg; screenplay by John Mortimer; starring Jeremy Irons and Anthony Andrews.
- <sup>5</sup> Jon E. Lewis and Penny Stempel, *The Ultimate TV Guide*, Orion Books, London, 1999, p.57.
- <sup>6</sup> H.W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1965, p.579.
- <sup>7</sup> Andrew Higson, 'Heritage Cinema' in *The Encyclopedia of British Film*, Third edition, Methuen, London, 2008, p.339.
- <sup>8</sup> Stephanie Bunbury, 'Waugh Stories', *The Sunday Age*, M magazine, 12 October 2008, p.7.
- <sup>9</sup> Waugh, op. cit., pp.9–10.
- <sup>10</sup> Examples of the former include *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982, director's cut 1992, final cut 2007) and *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980, director's cut 2004), and of the latter *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975, director's cut 1998).
- <sup>11</sup> Owen Richardson, 'A Tale of Waugh', *The Age*, A2, 18 October 2008, p.19.
- <sup>12</sup> Christopher Sykes, *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography*, William Collins & Sons, London, 1975, pp.55, 56. Elsa Lanchester, later a famous and eccentric actress of film and stage, appeared in it.
- <sup>13</sup> Waugh, op. cit., p.9.
- <sup>14</sup> Anon, in Peter Parker (ed.), *A Reader's Guide to the Twentieth Century Novel*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1995, p.258.
- <sup>15</sup> There is in Le Louvre, Paris, a famous painting by Nicholas Poussin with the title 'Et in Arcadia ego' (1637–8), and a rural setting in which the human figures are inspecting a tomb.
- <sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives' (1966) in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1977, p.73.
- <sup>17</sup> Author of screenplays for such television adaptations as *Middlemarch* (1994), *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) and *Vanity Fair* (1998).
- <sup>18</sup> Kevin Loader, quoted in Production Notes for the film, p.5.
- <sup>19</sup> Sykes, op. cit., p.250.
- <sup>20</sup> Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p.93.
- <sup>21</sup> Loader, op. cit, p.13.
- <sup>22</sup> Nigel Nicholson, *Great Houses of Britain*, National Trust and Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1978, p.154.
- <sup>23</sup> Lisa Mullen, 'Brideshead Revisited', *Sight & Sound*, October 2008, p.57.
- <sup>24</sup> Jake Wilson, 'Miscast Miscreants Excel at Self-importance', *The Age*, 23 October 2008, p.19.
- <sup>25</sup> Richardson, op. cit.

*By taking Julia to Venice with Sebastian and Charles, the film is making its case for the centrality of the romantic triangle that these three comprise. Sebastian, much more overtly gay in the film than in either Waugh or in the miniseries, clearly feels himself betrayed by Charles.*