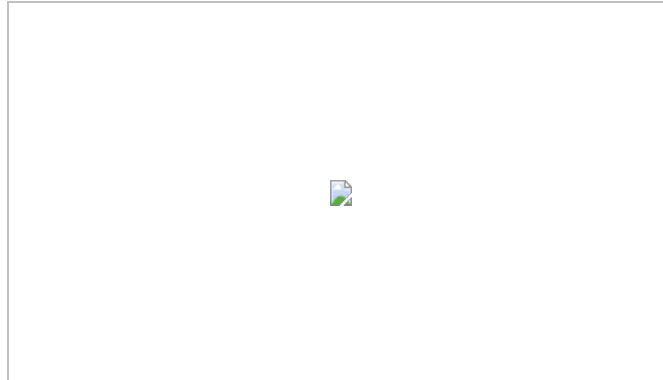




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“Looking at the Stars”: TV3 adapts *Lady Windermere’s Fan*

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As any film student will tell you, in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the technical innovations of Étienne-Jules Marey, George Eastman, Thomas Edison and many others produced a scientific curiosity without any definite application, the motion picture. Like all new media, the device was greeted with suspicion by the champions of established forms. Such misgivings were compounded by the innovation’s earliest application, projecting novelties and *actualités* for the lower class audiences of music halls, vaudeville theatres and other venues of ill-repute. Before cinema’s narrative potential could be fully realised, the form was already dismissed as disreputable by many.<sup>[1]</sup> Thus, to achieve greater legitimacy, the newly discovered storytelling medium was aligned with respected forms and canonical texts, with early film-makers adapting heavily from literature. Using cherished texts to trellis the fledgling forms’ climb to cultural legitimacy, the literary clout of Shakespeare, Dickens, Zola and others enabled film-makers to attract middle class audiences to its newly constructed nickelodeons.

This tactic of gaining cultural capital from adapting agreed “classics” is not confined to cinema, but is replicated throughout the history of the arts; as Marshall McLuhan remarked, “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” (1964: 8). In 2009, the newest and most commercially driven of Ireland’s national broadcasters, TV3 made a

similar grasp at respectability, adapting Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* for its first foray into feature length production. *Belonging to Laura*, a contemporary reworking of the revered playwright's first stage satire, was part of the broadcaster's wider ambitions to rise above the mire of overseas imports and cheaply produced daytime shows for which it is known. In 2009 the changed ambitions of the oft-maligned station could be characterised by the play's most famous line, "we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars".

TV3 began broadcasting in 1998, and as Ireland's first commercial broadcaster it has often been dismissed as the least reputable of the programmers, much to the annoyance of its creative personnel. For example, the station would not submit any programming for consideration to the 2009 Irish Film & Television Awards as they had not won in the previous five years and they believed that the event was unfairly weighted in RTÉ's favour (Nolan 2009). However, this move smacked of sour grapes, as TV3 had few home productions during this time and could not expect to compete with the traditional broadcasters at ceremonies that recognised indigenous work.

Traditionally, the majority of TV3's programming has been internationally sourced, with primetimes schedules regularly packed with US dramas (*Judging Amy*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), Australian sitcoms (*Kath & Kim*) and UK reality television programmes (*I'm a Celebrity ... Get Me Out of Here!*, *Love Island*). Such is the extent of TV3's reliance on one-time parent company ITV's productions that the station was often found simultaneously broadcasting the schedules of the British channel, despite its availability in most Irish homes. Even today, long after ITV sold its share in TV3, the station continues to simulcast many ITV programmes (such as *Coronation Street* and *The X Factor*). TV3's reliance on overseas productions has regularly found the network criticised for a lack of identity, with the *Irish Independent* noting in 2006 that "TV3 has never fully managed to develop a distinctive, clearly Irish identity" (Stacey).

Traditionally, Irish productions on the station were confined to the daytime schedules with *Ireland AM*, a breakfast show, TV3's longest-running production (with the exception of news and sports programming). However, in recent years the more firmly established station has begun making concerted efforts to distinguish itself in the broadcasting landscape. When appointed director of programming in 2007, Ben Frow a former commissioning editor for Channel 5 in the UK, said of the station, "I think we need to do more home produced [programmes] to give us a better sense of identity, give viewers what

they really want, reflect TV3's values and help us be less reliant on acquisitions" (IFTN Broadcasters Spotlight – Ben Frow TV3). Soon enough, original Irish programming began creeping into the evening schedules with the introduction of a daily entertainment magazine show *Xposé* in 2007, and a version of the successful US series *The Apprentice*, with Irish candidates vying to work for businessman Bill Cullen. Furthermore, the late night current affairs programmes *Tonight with Vincent Browne* and *Midweek*, which began broadcasting in 2008 and 2009 respectively, continued the discussion of national topics into the late night schedules. Another, major turning point for the channel was the acquisition of the cable and satellite station Channel 6. In concert with the newly established TV3 Group, Channel 6 was renamed 3e in 2009. 3e took over broadcasting many of TV3's overseas entertainment programmes, freeing the channel to create Frow's promised new identity.

As part of this strategy, the channel made its first attempt at an original long format production with a TV movie for the 2009 Christmas schedules. Like many fledgling entertainments, the station ensured the production had built-in credibility by adapting an indisputable "classic" for *Belonging to Laura*, a contemporary telling of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The importance of *Belonging to Laura* to TV3 could not be mistaken. The network thoroughly promoted it through its entertainment programmes *Xposé* and *Ireland AM*, TV3's website claimed it was "the most eagerly-awaited Irish drama of the year", and the station even considered legal action against RTÉ when the broadcaster's Christmas edition of the television magazine, *RTÉ Guide* incorrectly listed the film in its schedules (McConnell 2009). Furthermore, lest viewers doubt the film's literary pedigree, the source material was constantly reinforced with the "Based on Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*" tagline appearing in each advertisement.

Wilde's play follows the mysterious Mrs Erylne's attempts to break into late Victorian society. She is aided, although we do not know why, by Lord Windermere, provoking gossip from the puritanical upper crust and sending Windermere's wife to seek out another man, Lord Darlington. Some typically Wilde-like misunderstandings occur before Mrs Erylne (revealed to be Lady Windermere's mother) sacrifices her fledgling reputation to save her daughter's. One could hardly think of a more appropriate source material for TV3's strive for credibility. Much like Wilde's scarlet woman, TV3's youthful indiscretions have seen the station excluded from the upper echelons that the more reputable broadcasters freely enjoy, but with Wilde's literary clout the broadcaster may now finally "get into this damned thing called Society".

Of course, *Belonging to Laura* is not the first adaptation of Wilde's play. In 1916, when British films borrowed heavily from theatre, Fred Paul directed West End actors in a silent version that was largely faithful to the source, with the exception of revealing Mrs Erylne's background in the first scene, thereby making her a sympathetic protagonist rather than an uncertain presence. Otto Preminger adapted the play for the 1949 version *The Fan* starring George Sanders as Lord Darlington. Preminger added scenes of an elderly Mrs. Erylne reminiscing in Blitz-hit London to frame the Victorian setting, which otherwise may have rankled film-goers still relying on ration books. This version leans more heavily on the play's melodramatic underpinnings than its social satire, but is effective in opening up Wilde's drawing room drama to fit a cinematic proscenium. More recently, Helen Hunt and Scarlett Johansson starred in a version that re-located the setting to Italy's Amalfi Coast in the 1930s. Adopting the play's subtitle, *A Good Woman* (Mike Barker 2004) stretched fidelity by interpolating Wilde witticism from outside the source. Although the younger cast flounder, Hunt and Tom Wilkinson (as Lord Augustus) achieve a quick-fire repartee, absent in other adaptations.

*Belonging to Laura* marks the greatest departure from the source material of any previous adaptation. The film, co-produced with Samson Films (*Once*), resituates the narrative to modern day Dublin. Lady Windermere, now Laura Wilde (lest there be any confusion of the author), is due to marry Tiernan Fitzpatrick at her father's palatial South Dublin home, when rumours of her fiancé's stag-night transgression begin to emerge. Although *Belonging to Laura* faces its own charges of infidelity, director Karl Golden dismisses any misplaced reverence, stating ahead of the broadcast, "My attitude is that if Oscar Wilde was looking down on us he'd be encouraging us to fuck with his drama ... the last thing I wanted to do with this was to have a theatrical style film" (Moon 2009).

Many of the film's amendments are appropriate. As outlined in the preface, the adaptation is set in the "The Present" rather than in 1892, when it was first performed at London's St James Theatre. Thus a modernisation is fitting for a play and playwright celebrated for satirising contemporary mores. In keeping with this present day setting, *Belonging to Laura* includes some clever variations on the source: The puritanical upper crust are gone, replaced by pseudo-bohemian Dublin loafers, who only eat organic appetisers and live off their parents' money – in Laura's case a tax-exile father; the titular fan is refashioned to an equally "essential" accessory, a designer bag (appropriate for a generation that queued in their thousands for a

voguish carrier bag)<sup>[2]</sup> and Ireland's multiculturalism is reflected with Indian-themed marquees, Korean chefs and a Polish wedding band. There's even an oh-so-modern scene where the priest offers relationship advice to the couple's lovelorn gay friend, "swallow your pride, pick up the phone".

Furthermore, in keeping with TV3's newly discovered nationalism, the characters (in the play named after British places) have each been given the type of Oirish monikers (Oisín, Kiernan, Tiernan etc.) typically only found in a Fáilte Ireland commercial. Such is the extent of the film's repatriation of Wilde's play that one of the wedding party guests suggests a culinary geographical *faux pas* is "offensive, like calling us British" – ironic for a station that viewers regularly confuse with its UK alternate.

Golden had promised to remove the play from the limits of its theatrical origins, and indeed the adaptation does feel like a film – a Richard Curtis film (*Notting Hill*, *Love Actually*). Owing much to the British director, many of the characters seem to have been picked up from Working Title's cutting room floor. From the attractive leads (the willowy Christina Carty and beefy Brendan McCormack), to the kooky in-laws and one-dimensional best friends (the fiery BFF, back-stabbing best man, the camp photographer etc.), each conform to established rom-com traditions. The characters may be *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, but the aesthetic is more *Rachel Getting Married*. The use of hand-held photography, solemn close-ups and shots framed within doorways all strive for a voyeuristic *cinéma vérité*, but these stylistic flourishes are at odds with the film's inevitable descent into soapiness.

All adaptations of *Lady Windermere's Fan* have struggled to balance the play's delicate mix of satire and melodrama, with the scales generally tipping toward the latter – and *Belonging to Laura* is no exception. TV3's publicity for the film promised a "hilariously witty remake of Oscar Wilde's classic play" (On the Town: *Belonging to Laura*), yet these moments never fully materialise. Although there are some attempts at broad comedy and a few neat observations – the adaptation's Lord Darlington has a D4 address with views of the Poolbeg chimneys – there is no sustained satire, with any sparks snuffed out beneath the weight of the maudlin interpretation. This is a disappointment, as the film hints at some prime opportunities to ridicule a group of people for whom D4 is not a postal code but a way of life.

It should be noted that the film-makers display considerable restraint in not using many of the play's oft-quoted lines. However, one would have

to question the decision to have the few direct quotes come from the film's only homosexual character — an over-the-top caricature that stops to admire the flowers and pines after the groom — presumably the film-makers thought only a dandified character was capable of delivering Wilde's witticisms in a contemporary context.

The greatest sacrifice to the adaptation's rom-com approach is the play's dominant presence, Mrs Erylne. In more faithful adaptations, the puritanical Lady Windermere can come across as foolishly naïve — believing scandal rather than her husband and running off to Lord Darlington's home at the slightest suggestion of marital impropriety. To redress the balance the film attempts to make Laura more sympathetic and justify her actions. Resultantly, Tiernan is uncertain as to whether he cheated on his fiancée after an alcohol-induced black-out (he didn't) and Mrs Erylne (Tatiana Ouliankina), now Sasha — a Prada-wearing Russian “international sex Goddess” — is content to let the couple (and the audience) believe the lie. This makes Sasha's reveal as Laura's mother feel more like a plot contrivance from actress Ouliankina's former soap *Fair City*, and by the time the character makes her self-sacrificing gesture, traditionally the play's most emotive moment, the audience is firmly in Carrigstown. This is not to diminish the performers, Ouliankina certainly has the look of a formidable Mrs Erylne and newcomer Carty shows some genuine promise, but despite the film starting well and including some clever interpretations, it ultimately is too unsure of itself and its source material to win Lady Windermere many new fans.

In a particularly quotable scene from *Lady Windermere's Fan* one of Lord Darlington's reprobates, Cecil opines, “a sentimentalist ... is a man who sees an absurd value in everything, and doesn't know the market price of any single thing”. One could certainly not accuse TV3 of sentimentality, recognising the value the credibility of a theatrical adaptation might bring; the broadcaster refashioned Wilde's original play into an accessory befitting a station on the rise. Although this interpretation may not have enabled Lady Windermere to pick up any new fans, TV3 certainly did with the film nominated alongside productions from BBC, TG4 and RTÉ in the Best Single Drama category at the once-impenetrable Irish Film and Television Awards. Although, the film failed to convert the nomination into a win, the adaptation had served its function, as *Belonging to Laura* is less a film than a declaration of intent: TV3 is a legitimate broadcaster and now has the accessories to prove it.

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[1] Desmond and Hawke note that, 'In the period between 1895 and 1903, cinema was not primarily a storytelling medium. Certainly there were some narrative films; however, until around 1904 early cinema saw storytelling as a subordinate task' (2006: 12).

[2] In 2007 the sale of the limited edition 'I'm Not A Plastic Bag' carrier bag, popularised by eco-conscious celebrities such as Keira Knightly, saw queues of thousands lining up outside Ireland's Brown Thomas stores (O'Brien 2007).

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