Strange Moorings

Unearthing passion from realism in *Wuthering Heights*
An unconventional approach to one of English literature’s most revered works is sure to incense some purists, warns BRIAN MCFARLANE, but those willing to accept the detours of Andrea Arnold’s bold film will find a fresh and engaging approach to a challenging text.
As far as film is concerned, the Brontës are a phenomenon. As writers they always were, of course, but when you consider that Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre* has been filmed for either the big or small screen twenty-one times and that Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* has been adapted seventeen times (youngest sister Anne falls behind with only two TV versions of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*), you have to feel they were on to something – and something that goes on feeling relevant to succeeding generations. In their respective ways, both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are extraordinary books: the former now reads like an amazingly prescient polemic on the subject of women’s place in the social structure, and the latter like … well, I’ll come back to that. What makes the achievements the more extraordinary is that these remarkable works came from the seclusion of a bleak parsonage in Yorkshire, and yet are two of the most passionate works of English fiction. Charlotte wrote a couple of other novels and Emily wrote poetry, but it is these two books for which they are read and re-read, filmed and re-filmed.

‘A kind of sport’

The once-feared literary critic FR Leavis, in his account of ‘the great tradition’ of the English novel, describes *Wuthering Heights* as ‘a kind of sport’, essentially denying it a place in the line he traces from Jane Austen to DH Lawrence. I quote this only to suggest that *Wuthering Heights* occupies a unique place in the history of the novel, in that it seems to come from nowhere and doesn’t seem to lead to a clear line of descendants.

The nineteenth-century English novel is essentially a triumph of social and psychological realism; of the careful accretion of concrete details of places and people, of social life in families and communities; of looking to understand the workings of the human heart and mind in relationship with others, typically through rendering outward behaviour so as to arrive at a sense of the inner life. We carelessly call works of art ‘realistic’ when they accord with our ideas of real life; in fact, ‘realism’ in relation to fiction is not an evaluative criterion so much as a mode of representation. I want to suggest that this latter notion of realism is present in *Wuthering Heights*. It is not set in some fantastic neverland, but is rather a work with a powerful feeling for place (indoors and out) and for the changing seasons, and one that carefully renders speech patterns and precise dates. If you follow up the references to ages, and to events taking place so many years before, they all tally with the actual dates given (a small point, but it is another piece of evidence for the sort of realist care I mean).

However, in spite of all the realistic aspects of the novel – and they go beyond physical matters to include a good deal of the motivation for characters’ behaviour – it is not enough to think of *Wuthering Heights* as being a ‘realistic novel’. This would leave the elements of mystery and strangeness at its heart.
unaccounted for. I would suggest that part of its fascination in fact lies in the sustained tension between its realist surfaces and the genuinely mysterious matter of the passion between Cathy and Heathcliff. While matters of money, inheritance, class and propriety may have some part in this, they are not central – they don’t account for the genuinely strange, unique feeling between them. And this is not easy to account for, as it seems to have little to do with liking or tenderness or sex.

Filming history

It has not been easy for film to come to terms with this strangeness. The most famous movie version hitherto – William Wyler’s 1939 adaptation – may be a skilfully crafted piece of classic Hollywood, but this is achieved at the expense of a lot of the roughness and danger of the original. I’m not advocating that tiresome myth of the ‘faithful adaptation’; I merely draw attention to differences between the two versions of the story and to something elusive at the core of Emily Brontë’s ‘sport’.

The fact that Wuthering Heights has been filmed so often suggests that there is something at its heart that challenges filmmakers – and, it might be added, eludes them. Only the 1939 film has had any sort of shelf life: with a glowering Laurence Olivier as Heathcliff and a ravishing Merle Oberon as Cathy, it was a star vehicle par excellence, one with a largely British supporting cast and set in the mountains of California. The stars make the most of some dreadful dialogue: on Penistone Crags, Cathy intones, ‘Let the world stop right here ... Standing on this hill with you, this is me forever.’ That is more like Hollywood in 1939 than Brontë in 1847, but let that pass. Though this film does have some moments of fleeting power that hint at its great source, it is essentially a romantic melodrama with ghostly visitants at the end.

Other adaptations have made little impact at time of release and been more or less unheard of since though Peter Kosminsky’s 1992 film with Juliette Binoche and Ralph Fiennes

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As Cathy and Heathcliff at least sounds strongly cast, and the half-dozen or so TV versions have come and gone without a trace. What now, in 2012, has brought Andrea Arnold, the very striking director of contemporary scenes and themes, to the Yorkshire moors?

Andrea Arnold

Arnold won the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006 for *Red Road*, her brilliant study of a woman whose life is confined to what she observes on the surveillance television screens she operates as a security guard on a Glasgow housing estate. Her follow-up film, *Fish Tank* (2009), is also set on a housing estate and offers a typically bleak view of life on the estate. This is a view we’ve had in several key British films in recent years, but as with these other films *Fish Tank* offers unobtrusive though palpable signs that not everything is hopeless, despite the setting. This is not just a predictable study in miserabilist cinema.

But this is a world in which young lives are fraught with dangers: easy booze and fags, the constant mindless swearing which saves them from ever having to think out a serious response to anything, the sexual display, the hedonism that thrives when there are no role models to suggest anything more durable. An early image of hills and wind-farm turbines stays in the mind, partly because it seems at odds with the urban landscape, partly because it suggests a level of environmental concern that doesn’t get translated into the everyday concern for the directionless lives of the endangered young.

Does this sound like a world away from *Wuthering Heights*? Well, yes and no. I want to suggest that Arnold has made a film for 2012 that packs in both the realism and the uniquely passionate in ways that do justice to Brontë without resort to costume-drama gloss. When one thinks about young people and the constraints on their passions – on all the other aspects of their lives that distract them from their truest centres of self – Andrea Arnold may be just what this tough, tormented classic needs. So what has she done with it?

Whose story?

It is an interesting coincidence that, within a year of each other, both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* have made major film reappearances, both of which reveal daring approaches to the process of adaptation. In *Jane Eyre* (2011), Cary Fukunaga reorders the novel’s linear narrative procedure in favour of opening on the novel’s central turning point and bringing us to an understanding of how this has come about. Arnold has opted for doing away completely with Emily Brontë’s narrative mode and confronts us directly with the potency of her emotional engagement. The film retains the overall narrative trajectory of the novel (well, about two-thirds of the novel), but it chooses to present the events which comprise this without the intercession of Brontë’s two narrators, Lockwood and Nelly Dean.

In Brontë’s novel, when the bland and superficial Lockwood, tenant at Thrushcross Grange, comes to talk to his landlord, Heathcliff, at Wuthering Heights, he has a strange, nightmarish
experience while spending the night in this bizarre household. When he returns to his leased home in an enfeebled condition, he asks the housekeeper, Nelly, to tell him the story of how the present situation at Wuthering Heights came about. Nelly, ‘waiting no further invitation to her story’, embarks on the tale of how Heathcliff was rescued from the streets of Liverpool by old Mr Earnshaw and brought up in the household, but always in an inferior situation with regard to everyone but Cathy Earnshaw, the daughter of the house. It is perhaps another aspect of the novel’s realism that Brontë should feel that so strange a story needed the filter of two narrators. In the case of Nelly, Brontë has had the clever notion of explaining her unusually literate speech by having her tell us that, once she went to live at Thrushcross Grange, she had unlimited access to Mr Linton’s library.3 Thus she does not speak like ‘a poor man’s daughter’, and readers should be grateful: just imagine if the whole story had been narrated by someone who’d never learnt a more standard English than the canting old servant Joseph, whose dialect is barely intelligible.

But Arnold dispenses entirely with Lockwood, as either character or narrator, and while Nelly remains a character, and is given a certain dignity in Simone Jackson’s performance, she has been stripped of her narrator’s function. Apart from a brief opening image of Heathcliff (James Howson) kicking against the walls of the cell-like room confining him, the events come to us unfiltered by any narrator. There is a kind of daring in this approach: we don’t have to make allowances for the unreliability of anyone’s recollections (which adds another sort of realist element in the novel), but we have to be persuaded by a sort of savage immediacy. These strange situations and events and relationships are happening as we watch, not as remembered by someone else. It is no longer Nelly’s story, let alone Lockwood’s. As Arnold presents it to us, it loses their mediation, and the impact, as a screen experience, is arguably more powerful as a result. The passion is there up close, as it is happening, not as it is ‘told’. In the novel, telling works perfectly well, but the film viewing experience demands a different order of directness.

So what else is new? Arnold seems to have been motivated by a remark of Orson Welles to the effect that, if a filmmaker doesn’t have something ‘new’ to say about a literary work, he or she had best leave it alone.4 As I’ve said above, given the fierce, unillusioned eye she had cast over the contemporary scene in her two preceding features, it was not likely that she would give us a dogged plod through this classic novel. And she doesn’t. Not only has she done away with the two narrating presences, but there are at least two other departures from Brontë that any account of this film needs to consider.

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Brontë envisages some sort of reconciliation, some prospect for a less tempestuous future, by imagining a second generation grown to young adulthood. This comprises Hareton Earnshaw, son of the brutish Hindley who has been bitterly opposed to Heathcliff, and Cathy Linton, daughter of Heathcliff’s own Cathy and her husband Edgar Linton. However conflicted the dealings between Heathcliff and Linton (whom Cathy had married because it would ‘degrade’ her to marry Heathcliff), or between Heathcliff and Hindley (against whom he has pursued revenge), the next generation offers some vestigial hope that a more benign appeasement of the worlds of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange is possible. Arnold denies her viewers this possibility: Hareton is never more than a small silent child – a witness to adult passions. Without some kind of emotional ceasefire between the two places we are left with an uncompromising look at the damage done in the name of a passion that is as tormenting as it is thrilling.

Above all, though, the film presents us with a black Heathcliff, and this is likely to be seen as Arnold’s most radical response to the novel. As has often been noted, Liverpool, from whose streets Mr Earnshaw brought the child Heathcliff, has a very long history of black immigration and community, so there may well be historical grounds for Arnold’s decision. Such a child might easily have been a poignant reminder of the vileness of the slave trade, for instance – though historical authenticity is not the same as artistic conviction. Regardless of the level of authenticity, I would claim that Arnold (aided possibly by her co-screenwriter, Olivia Hetreed) has pulled off this daring piece of casting. It may well outrage purists, but if so they might do well to ponder what its effects are. Most obviously, it reinforces Heathcliff’s outsider status at Wuthering Heights and, even more so, among the middle-class gentility of Thrushcross Grange. In the imposing stillness of Solomon Glave and James Howson, who play the child and adult Heathcliff respectively, the character’s potentially explosive otherness underlines what was obviously Emily Brontë’s intention, whatever his genetic inheritance.

In their moments together, Glave and Shannon Beer – who has a beguilingly unaffected country-girl mien as the young Cathy – create a potent sense of two people who will later be aware that each completes the identity of the other. And when these two young actors are replaced by Howson and Kaya Scodelario, and the sense of their affinity is now at least superficially sundered by the social forces that have led Cathy to marry Edgar Linton, they are the more moving as one recalls their less constrained childhood. Arnold’s sympathies, at least on the basis of her two earlier features, are likely to be unreservedly on the side of the waif who grows into a man constantly stubbing his toe against the order of things, in family or the wider community.

Achievement

When Fish Tank was in the news for winning the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2009, Arnold was reportedly going on to film Wuthering Heights next; now, whatever she does next, I really want to see it. She seems a tough-minded humanist, and that’s perhaps the best kind.

Arnold has chosen to adapt a famous story that deals in stark contrasts, and there is perhaps something intrinsically strange in these – for instance, in the utter separateness of the lives of the two houses, and in the different ideas of heaven held by Cathy and Edgar. Arnold conveys these oppositions of wilderness and comfort, of storm and calm, in imagery often
breathtaking in its aptness and beauty (as captured by her regular cinematographer, Robbie Ryan). The solidity of the domestic detail and the sweeping grandeur of the Yorkshire countryside are rendered in such ways as to persuade us that the inherent strangeness is all happening in a palpably real world. There may be a few too many self-conscious blurrings of an image prior to taking on the next stage of the narrative, but this is a minor cavil in relation to a film so assured about what it is up to. Arnold has both served Brontë’s vision and made a Wuthering Heights for today.

Brian McFarlane is Adjunct Professor at Swinburne University of Technology and Adjunct Associate Professor at Monash University. His latest book is his memoir, Real and Reel; his next will be Twenty British Films to Live With.

http://www.oscilloscope.net/wutheringheights/

Endnotes

4 The source of this remark, made I think to Peter Bogdanovich, eludes me and I’d be very grateful if anyone can tell me where it first appeared.