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Pulping Fictions: Consuming Literature across the Literature / Media Divide

By Deborah Cartmell, I. Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye and Imelda Whelehan (eds.)

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A Review by E J M Duggan, Suffolk College and UEA

Novel-film adaptation is hardly a burgeoning area, more a trickle than a flow (cf the 1990s Cultural Studies publishing boom). A handful of the most recent publications spans the entire decade: Robert Giddings, et al, *Screening the Novel* (1990); Peter Reynolds, *Novel Images* (1993); and Brian MacFarlane, *Novel to Film* (1996). *Pulping Fictions*, edited by Cartmell, et al, is then a welcome addition to the corpus, the more so as it is the first volume in Pluto's new Film/Fiction series.

Cartmell, et al's brief introduction is partly a rationale for the series, partly a resume of this original collection of essays. The introduction sets the tone for both series and volume: the 'original' novel text or the 'literary classic' is not afforded primacy over the film text, rather the tension between literary production and media consumption provides the terrain to be explored.

In 'Film Adaptation and the Mystery of the Original', John O. Thompson discusses George Sluizer's two adaptations of Tim Krabbes' *The Golden Egg*, the 1988 Dutch/French *Spoorloos* (aka *The Vanishing*) and the 1993 American *The Vanishing*. Thompson discusses adaptation in terms of what he calls 'concretisation'-the imaginable or signified of the literary text and the 'something that can be filmed'-the filmic signifier-mounting a fascinating, idiosyncratic argument for adaptation-as-allegory, as a precaution-against-loss which, ultimately, is rather sad.

Ken Gelder continues the theme of adaptation-and-loss in 'The Vampire Writes Back', discussing the 'un-dead' author of *Interview with the Vampire* in terms of the loss-or fear of the loss-of authorship. Anne Rice's histrionic relationship to the film seeks to re-negotiate the 'lost' authorial position in relation to Tom Cruise's portrayal of Lestat, and in relation to Neil Jordan's direction and script.

In her 1926 essay 'The Cinema', Virginia Woolf describes the relationship between film and literature as 'unnatural'. Nicola Shaughnessy's discussion of *Orlando* begins with an epigrammatical quote from Woolfe's essay, evoking a masculinised notion of ('immensely rapacious') film and a feminised literature (film's 'unfortunate victim'). For Shaughnessy, however, the relationship between Woolf's *Orlando* and Sally Potter's *Orlando* is not as distressing for the literary text as Woolf's essay anticipates. For Shaughnessy, Potter's *Orlando* is not so much a queer film

(Shaughnessy doesn't use the term) as one which plays with gender identity in a way which allows for the relationship between film and novel to be 'one of mutual sexual exchange', as well as a form of 'giv[ing] birth' (44).

Heidi Kaye offers an insightful critique of Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. While the title asserts a relationship (implies a fidelity) between film and novel, it also negotiates the obstacle of Universal's copyright of the title of James Whale's 1931 film. Kaye argues that, despite its title, Branagh's film is 'about' the conditions of its own production: it is not only 'a Kenneth Branagh film', but also a 'serious' adaptation, albeit one which seeks to assert Branagh's own author-ity over others, for it is also, of course, 'Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelly's Frankenstein*'. With Branagh's directorial and scriptorial interventions it is a film of and for the 1990s—a working through of 1990's ideas about motherhood—as well as a film 'of' and 'about' Mary Shelley's life and novel.

Jenny Rice and Carol Saunders' essay, 'Consuming *Middlemarch*', considers the BBC adaptation as one of a range of experiences to be consumed, along with, for example, videos, weekend breaks to Stamford, and such like. This rather pessimistic view of consumption, refracted through Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, sees the consumption of nostalgia as a sign of an economy in decline, and suggests that the construction and consumption of nostalgia serves to divert attention away from the present, thereby preventing critical appraisal.

Catherine Neale discusses 'gaps and silences' in the reception of Angela Carter's work which, for Neale, is polarised as 'hagiography' and 'sympathetic explication' (99). One of the 'potential contradictions' (99) identified by Neale is the way Carter simultaneously celebrates folk literature's 'anonymity' while exploiting her own authorial position for pecuniary gain. Neale implies that Carter 'sold out' to crass commercialism as she reminds us 'anything was to be done "to make money"' (108), a sentiment echoed in Uncle Phillip's assertion in *The Magic Toyshop* that 'entertainment must now always be paid for' (102). Ultimately, for Neale, Carter's adaptations are 'curiously downbeat hybrids' (101) which suggest that Carter's 'strengths and interests lay in the sphere of the written word, and not in [...] film' (107).

I. Q. Hunter locates *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* in the 'Dumb White Guy' cycle which emerged during the late 1980s (other examples include *Wayne's World*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Beavis and Butthead*). Hunter identifies typical aspects of the criticism the film received on its release: castigated for its celebration of 'dumbness' and 'trash culture', and its attack on 'respectability' and 'intellectualism'. Hunter argues however that the 'dumb white guy' movies can be seen as a working through of the contradictions of what Fukiyama called 'the end of history'. Hunter elaborates: 'the dumb white guys are the shock troops of the end of history, who benevolently further the spread of consumerism by trashing morality, high culture and taste' (113). Hunter suggests *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* is the 'utopian counterpart' to the dystopianism of *Blade Runner*. Ultimately, however, Bill and Ted offer more than a simple utopian vision, as Hunter identifies within the film 'fragments of other, more critical perspectives' (121).

In his essay, '*Robin Hood, Men in Tights: Fitting the Tradition snugly*', Stephen Knight seeks to recuperate Mel Brooks's film, castigated by reviewers as low-brow farce, by identifying its setting, borrowings, and irreverent, transgressive humour as typical elements in the Robin Hood tradition.

Peter and Will Brooker's essay, 'Pulpmodernism: Tarantino's Affirmative Action', finds some common ground among some apparently contrasting critical views of Tarantino's 'cinema of viscera'. For the Brookers, this common ground constitutes something of a consensus: Tarantino's films are 'empty of social and moral content' (137). They argue, however, that *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* explore relationships and identity despite-because of-the use of stereotypical characters and plot situations. Violence and postmodernity are also discussed in an essay which concludes that Tarantino 'give[s] new life to the familiar and conventional' (150).

The essays are linked: a theme in one essay is picked up-sometimes obliquely-in the next. For example, 'loss' links Thompson's essay to Gelder's; 'vampirism' links Gelder to Shaughnessy; 'motherhood' links Shaughnessy's essay to Kaye's, and so on. As these links are not discussed in the introduction, it may be they appear by chance rather than design.

Other links can be found between the essays. For example, Hunter's essay refers to Fukiyama's notion of 'the last man', a phrase which resonates with Carol Clover's figure of 'the final girl', discussed in Thompson's essay. Similarly Lorna Sage's anti-barthesian construction, 'the proliferation of the author', cited in Neale's discussion of Carter, is echoed in Gelder's term, the un-dead author. An image described by Kaye, Victor dancing with the Creaturess, is strikingly similar to Lestat's dancing with the corpse in *Interview with the Vampire*, decried by John Ezard as 'just about acceptable on the page [but degrading] in the cinema' (32). One wonders also how Bill and Ted might 'do' Stamford. While these links are not discussed in the essays, they might be fruitfully explored in the seminar room.

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