

Coming soon . . . Teaching the Contemporaneous Adaptation

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A range of pedagogic, disciplinary and institutional factors can be inform the construction of a curriculum for a course on film and television adaptations; among these factors, the availability of published scholarship on the set texts (whether literary, film or television) may be a key concern for tutors, students and validating committees alike. These pressures might mean that in some circumstances those adaptations which have attracted significant academic interest are more likely to be adopted than those which have been overlooked, and in this way emerging canons can become self-perpetuating. Of course, the very notion of the canon has been critically contested and its potential complicity in hierarchies of cultural power and value interrogated, especially in relation to gender, class and race. However, questions of canon persist, and perhaps especially so when a field of study is relatively new and where the existence of a demonstrable canon might be seen as a necessary condition for disciplinary credibility. In this context it may seem perverse to focus on adaptations which, by definition, offer no supporting critical apparatus. This chapter seeks to explore the value and benefits of teaching contemporaneous adaptations, by which I mean film or television adaptations whose release or broadcast is concurrent with the delivery of the teaching programme; it will do so through a focus on a specific case study in pedagogic practice - an active learning strategy presented under the title of 'Adaptation Watch'.¹

Students participating in the Adaptation Watch exercise are asked to monitor the discourses of publicity and reception which precede and follow a film or television adaptation whose broadcast or release is concurrent with the course of the module. Working independently, both as individuals and in small groups, students gather and collate evidence from a range of sources – whether print, broadcast or online - including previews, reviews, interviews, trailers, posters, prizes, awards and merchandising; this material then forms the basis of group discussion. Significantly, for this task students are *not* required or expected to read the source text, as is standard pedagogic practice where adaptations are concerned; here the emphasis is placed on the televisual,

cinematic and critical contexts in which film and television adaptations are produced and consumed. This task has been employed in two contexts, both taking the form of final year option modules offered within an English Honours programme at a UK University.ⁱⁱ The first context is a module dedicated to the study of film and television adaptations which aims to explore the key critical, contextual and historical contexts in which adaptation as a cultural practice can be understood. In this context the Adaptation Watch task is an integral part of a teaching programme which also incorporates the close comparative analysis of a selection of film and television adaptations and their source texts. The second context is a module on twenty first century literary culture which aims to examine the changing conditions of literary production, consumption and reception and their impact on books as a cultural form, authorship as a conceptual category and reading as a collective experience; in this context film and television adaptations are studied alongside topics including literary prize culture, book clubs and reading groups, public reading events, celebrity authorship and literary biopics.

The design and delivery of Adaptation Watch was informed by two pedagogic principles. Firstly, while close comparative analysis continues to be an invaluable methodology for adaptation studies, its propensity to privilege the literary source text over the adapted text – perhaps especially when taught in English Literature curricula contexts – can be problematic. Through a focus on discourses of publicity and reception this strategy seeks to promote an appreciation of televisual and cinematic contexts. Secondly, this exercise is designed to foster qualities of initiative, autonomy and independence and to do so in a context where the drama, suspense and excitement of ‘live’ projects are positively mobilised in support of student engagement. Terry Smith suggests that the experience of the ‘contemporaneous’ is defined by the following qualities: “its immediacy, its presentness, its instantaneity, its prioritising of the moment over the time, the instant over the epoch, of direct experience of multiplicitous complexity over the singular simplicity of distanced reflection”.ⁱⁱⁱ In this task, tutor and students alike occupy the identical moment of the contemporary; neither is privileged by the advantage that hindsight affords and all experience – simultaneously - the same journey of enquiry and discovery. In this way, this exercise aims to dissolve the boundary between culture as an object of canonised study and culture as a lived experience to which we all contribute. Moreover, it seeks to

enable students to recognise themselves as active producers – rather than passive consumers - of cultural meaning.

This chapter will offer three Adaptation Watch topics as case studies;^{iv} it will consider the intertextual relationship between source text, adaptation and ‘remake’ in relation to *Brideshead Revisited* (UK, Dir. Julian Jarrold, 2008), the representation of black British history in the classic adaptation with reference to *Wuthering Heights* (UK, Dir. Andrea Arnold, 2011) and the relationship between literary prizes and adaptation, with a focus on postcolonial politics, with a focus on *Life of Pi* (US / Taiwan / UK, Dir. Ang Lee, 2012).

Revisiting *Brideshead Revisited*

British director Julian Jarrold’s 2007 film *Becoming Jane* brought the aesthetics of the post-Andrew Davies literary adaptation to the task of imagining the life of a classic author. Making no special claim to historical authenticity - and taking some liberties with the known details of her life - this biopic of Jane Austen was nevertheless not denounced as a travesty by Austen enthusiasts. It is perhaps a testament to the new kinds of literary celebrity which have been cultivated by a culture of appropriation and adaptation that it takes its place in the ever expanding canon of the Austen industry (from Karen Joy Fowler’s 1994 novel *The Jane Austen Book Club* to Amy Heckerling’s 1995 film *Clueless* to Hank Green and Bernie Su’s 2013 web drama *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*), which increasingly takes its cue from the sensibilities of its consumers rather than from any deference to traditional notions of authorial control. The kind of cavalier fidelity evident in *Becoming Jane* seemed to signal an interesting shift in the expanded field of literary adaptation, with the signifiers of a particular kind of ‘classic’ adaptation being applied to the historic genre of the biopic, and Austen’s life imagined as if she were a character in an adaptation of one of her own novels. However, any expectations that Jarrold might bring a similar ingenuity to his next project – the 2008 feature film *Brideshead Revisited* – seem to have been met with disappointment in much of the film’s critical reception.

Indeed, many reviewers compared Jarrold's film unfavourably with the 'original', whose memory loomed large over the marketing and reception of this film. However, the 'original' that most reviewers and audiences had in mind was not the literary source text – Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel – but its celebrated 1981 television adaptation, directed by Charles Sturridge and Michael Lindsay-Hogg with a screenplay by John Mortimer. As Philip Kemp has put it: "For many [the 1981 adaptation] remains a towering achievement, no less bathed in an aura of romantic nostalgia than the Marchmain family and their great house of Brideshead, in Waugh's original novel."^v

In his 2007 book *Film Adaptation and its Discontents: From Gone With the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*, Thomas Leitch observes that the 1981 Granada Television production of *Brideshead Revisited* "profited from an . . . important lesson": "a classic adaptation did not require a classic original."^{vi} A film or television adaptation can acquire a 'classic' status within the canons of adaptation studies for a variety of reasons and this is exemplified in the 1981 *Brideshead Revisited*, which has become a key reference point in the field. Firstly, the broadcast of *Brideshead Revisited* attracted both critical acclaim, in the broadsheet press and beyond, and popular audiences. It was significant cultural and industrial event, both in terms of popular television viewing memory and in terms of setting new precedents for the commission and production of quality television drama. As such *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) has attained a cultural prestige which continues to survive the passage of years; the release of the 2008 *Brideshead Revisited* seems to have acted as an occasion for the public renewal and reaffirmation of its value, now acquiring the additional credential of having withstood the test of time. Secondly, within the field of adaptation studies, *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) is widely recognised as having established key generic signifiers for the classic adaptation, especially in the context of television production and broadcast; as Sarah Cardwell puts it, *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) "provided an instigation of various traits of content, style and mood which still define the genre today."^{vii} Leitch writes that it was "the first of the BBC miniseries to establish an aesthetic distinct from either the radio or the theatrical aesthetic of its television predecessors".^{viii} In other words, it marks the emergence of the serialised television adaptation as a genre in its own right, rather than as a derivative of its precursors; moreover, this is achieved by the mobilisation of specific production values and a particular

period aesthetic. *Brideshead Revisited* was first broadcast in the UK not on the BBC, perceived as the traditional home of the classic adaptation, but on ITV, a commercial public service network, airing between October and December 1981 in eleven weekly episodes. Its capacity to attract and retain a mass audience was by no means a foregone conclusion, perhaps especially given its focus on the lives of an aristocratic elite. However, as Cardwell has written: “The sedate pace of the narrative in *Brideshead*, though arising from fidelity to the source book, was subsequently adopted as a generic stylistic trait, along with other peculiarities of style such as its particular use of framing and editing.”^x Moreover, Leitch (and others) attribute its appeal to the seductive visual spectacle it presented: “Locations from Oxford University to Castle Howard were chosen for maximum visual splendour and sumptuously photographed, and exterior shots carefully planned to include notable or recognizable architectural monuments.”^x However, it is its charged mobilisation of selected signifiers of national cultural heritage which have ensured that *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) has become central to a key set of debates in adaptations studies: those concerning the politics of the heritage film as it emerged in the context of the adversarial politics of Thatcherite Britain. The ideological meanings of nostalgia have been the particular focus of this debate and a yearning for the past is central to a narrative structure driven by the act of ‘revisiting’. As Leitch puts it:

Brideshead Revisited was canonized by a television adaptation that embalmed in exhaustive detail and epic length the narrator’s achingly nostalgic attitude, at once disillusioned and enduringly romantic, toward a vanished idyllic past and the fugitive promise of social mobility in an England defined by class-consciousness.^{xi}

In this context, the decision to film the 2008 adaptation of Waugh’s novel on the same location as the 1981 production – the historic house, estate and gardens of Castle Howard in North Yorkshire – served to determine the terms of the film’s reception in ways which proved unfavourable to the later film.^{xii}

In his article “Refiguring National Character: The Remains of the British Estate Novel”, John J. Su writes that: “the country house represents a prominent object of nostalgia in [Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* and Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*] and postwar British society more generally because of its long-standing association with continuity, tradition, and Englishness”.^{xiii} In *Brideshead Revisited* (2008) the film location

inadvertently activates a nostalgia for a past adaptation; it serves as hallowed ground not so much in its role as *Brideshead* but as the site of the location of the 1981 production. The use of an identical - and unmistakable – location inevitably evokes the memory of the first adaptation and perhaps implicitly posits it as the source text, provoking comparisons in which the criteria of fidelity centre on the 1981 adaptation rather than Waugh’s 1945 novel. While *Brideshead Revisited* (2008) announces itself as a classic adaptation, the very status of the source text as a ‘classic’ is in some way dependent on – and arguably an after-effect of - its adaptation in 1981. Moreover, its celebrated location takes on a celebrity aura analogous to a star persona, whose extra-textual identity is more insistent than the ‘character’ it is ostensibly enlisted to play. This raises the question of whether *Brideshead Revisited* (2008) should be considered an adaptation (of Waugh’s novel) or a *remake* (of the 1981 television series) – a possibility which the title itself seems to ironically underline, given its potential to be misread as a cinematic sequel by the uninitiated. Constantine Verevis suggests that “the concept of remaking is never simply a quality of texts, but is the secondary result of a broader discursive activity”.^{xiv} Indeed, Catherine Grant writes that the status of a film as an adaptation is determined not only by its relation to a source text but by “those discourses of publicity, promotion and reception which make known the generic framework within which to comprehend [it]”.^{xv} While discourses of publicity and promotion sought to identify this film as an adaptation of a classic novel, discourses of reception often figured it as an inferior remake.

As Grant’s article demonstrates, the film remake can be a vehicle for an auteurist intervention as much as a commercial strategy designed to capitalise on a ‘pre-sold’ property. However, *Brideshead Revisited* (2008) was widely perceived as falling short of the interpretative originality expected of an auteur production. In a review for the *New York Times*, A.O Scott described *Brideshead Revisited* (2008) as a “strenuously picturesque adaptation”, “necessarily shorter [than the television series, broadcast on PBS in 1982]”, “less faithful to Waugh’s book” and “tedious, confused and banal.”^{xvi} Scott concludes that it is a “lazy, complacent film, which takes the novel’s name in vain.”^{xvii} Roger Ebert pronounces it “a good sound example of the British period drama; mid-range Merchant Ivory, you could say” but judges that “the movie is not the equal of the TV production, in part because so much material had to be compressed into such a short

time.”^{xviii} Writing in *The Observer*, Philip French expresses disappointment with this “dull, perfunctory and moderately efficient”^{xix} film and in *The Guardian* Peter Bradshaw dismisses it as a “handsome-looking, workmanlike but fundamentally uninspired and obtuse adaptation” which offers “neither the time nor space to swoon”.^{xx} The language of automated labour which runs through these reviews – “perfunctory”, “efficient” and “workmanlike” - suggest that the seductive mechanisms of the classic adaptation are now not only familiar but visible to audiences once dazzled by the judicious placing of carefully costumed actors, with old school theatrical pedigrees, within the stately interiors of ancestral homes. Directors who merely set these signifiers in motion are now castigated as either working the machinery too hard to achieve the desired languorous tone (“strenuously picturesque”) or as not working hard enough to bring something new and original to the proceedings (“lazy” and “complacent”). Bradshaw, French and Scott, make a point of referring to Waugh’s book as a “resplendent”^{xxi} novel of “rich fibre” and “delight”,^{xxii} which “live[s] and breathe[s]”^{xxiii} but the references to the length of this feature film – which could hardly match the 11 hours screening time of its television counterpart – suggest that it is the memory of the 1981 adaptation against which this film is being compared. “Why revisit it?” asks Bradshaw and declares the outcome “superfluous”.^{xxiv} A capacity to inspire and accommodate multiple interpretations, and to acquire new meanings for new audiences in successive historical and cultural contexts, is arguably a key characteristic of the classic text – such a text is not exhausted but renewed by ‘revisiting’. The reception of Jarrold’s *Brideshead Revisited* seems to instate the 1981 Granada Television production as simultaneously the original source and the definitive version, enlisting discourses of fidelity in defence of an adapted text elevated to the canons of quality television, while at the same time deploying the language of creative ennui to belittle the very act of adaptation as derivative.

***Wuthering Heights* and black British history**

As the director of a literary biopic of a leading adaptation ‘property’ Jarrold’s progression to the classic adaptation did not seem remarkable; by contrast, the news that an auteur director more often situated in a British social realist tradition was to direct a new film adaptation of Emily Brontë’s 1847 novel *Wuthering*

Heights was met with surprise and anticipation. As the director of the critically acclaimed *Red Road* (2006) and *Fish Tank* (2009) – both awarded the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival – Andrea Arnold’s cinematic signature has come to be associated with contemporary themes, poetic realism, psychological drama (including transgressive desire) and naturalistic performance. A period drama and literary adaptation marked a significant departure for Arnold and the critical reception of her film confirmed that her *Wuthering Heights* was very much an expression of a distinctive cinematic vision. Reviews were distinguished both by repeated references to Arnold’s authorial signature (legitimised as an original creative intervention, rather than criticised as overwriting the ‘original’) and to the perceived conventions of the literary adaptation as a genre. In a feature article in *Sight & Sound*, Amy Raphael pronounces the film an “anti-heritage take”^{xxxv} on Brontë’s novel and one which “tear[s] up the rule book for adapting period novels.”^{xxxvi} Reviewing the film in the same publication, Kate Stables describes it as “stripping away . . . literary, romantic and supernatural trappings” and “gutting the gothic framework of the novel”.^{xxxvii} Writing in similar terms, Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* sees the film as “strip[ping] the story ruthlessly down to its bare essentials”^{xxxviii} and “sweep[ing] away the period choreography of the conventional literary adaptation”.^{xxxix} Both Stables and Bradshaw celebrate the “shock of the new”^{xxx} delivered by this adaptation, with Bradshaw adding that such a sensation is “something I never expect to get from any classic literary adaptation”.^{xxxi} Raphael even goes so far as to attribute a “punk ethos”^{xxxii} to Arnold’s film, in an essay whose title - “Love Will Tear Us Apart” - evokes the post-punk music scene from the other side of the Pennines, conjuring a northern sensibility uniquely forged by industry and landscape. The language of “stripping”, “sweeping” and “gutting” is suggestive of an act of artistic renovation which is both iconoclastic (in terms of literary adaptation convention) and ‘faithful’ (in terms of its dedication to an idea of textual truth). The more conventional classic adaptation has often been castigated for its over-reliance on dialogue at the expense of the wider audio-visual qualities of the medium as a mode of storytelling; in this context Nicolas Becker’s sound design is especially significant when interpreted as expressing a kind of sensual fidelity to the aural and material texture of the ‘original’. In *The Independent*, Anthony Quinn notes that “dialogue is pared to a minimum, while incidental music is banished almost entirely”,^{xxxiii} while in *The Observer* Philip French applauds the “remarkable soundtrack . . . [which] incorporates wind, birdsong, barking dogs, rain, the flapping of shutters,

the whispering of leaves, the chattering of insects and the creaking of trees into a great symphony of nature.”^{xxxiv} Indeed, critics reached for new analogies to capture the novel kind of non-verbal fidelity manifested in this adaptation, with Bradshaw suggesting a radical reversal of the relationship between source and adapted text:

In the most extraordinary way, Arnold achieves a kind of pre-literary reality effect. Her film is not presented as another layer of interpretation, superimposed on a classic’s frills and those of all the other remembered versions, but an attempt to create something that might have existed before the book, something on which the book might have been based, a raw semi-articulate series of events, later polished and refined as a literary gemstone. That is an illusion, of course, but a convincing and thrilling one.^{xxxv}

However, it took the intervention of a commentator outside of the circle of established film reviewing to identify the importance of another departure from classic adaptation convention. In an article written in response to the release of Arnold’s film adaptation of Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, and published on *The Guardian*’s website in October 2011, British actor Paterson Joseph wrote: “Black actors belong in British costume drama. After all, we’ve been around for a lot longer than 1948”.^{xxxvi} Joseph was responding to the casting of black British actors Solomon Glave and James Howson in the roles of the younger and older Heathcliff. This casting is significant in a number of ways; it can be understood as exposing and challenging the unacknowledged racial politics of the classic adaptation genre but also as a gesture of fidelity to the source text which is an implicit critique of leading adaptations of the past.

In his essay, “Secrets and lies: black British histories and British historical films,” Stephen Bourne makes the following observation:

Over more than a century of cinema, the black historical presence in Britain has been all but invisible in British popular films. In this entire period, black appearances in films with British historical settings have been limited to a few fleeting appearances by extras . . .^{xxxvii}

The literary adaptation is a key genre of the period drama and has played an important role in establishing its generic signifiers. However, as Sarita Malik has suggested in *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian*

Images on Television, non-white actors continue to be “locked out”^{xxxviii} of this branch of quality television drama and prestige film production. Two factors can be identified as conspiring to exclude black British actors – and black British histories – in this way. Firstly, the dominance of a particular set of source texts, located in the era of the British Empire and foregrounding the lives and experiences of subjects privileged by race, class and colonialism. Secondly, the persistence of casting strategies which, on the one hand, have failed to represent the historical presence of non-white people in Britain and, on the other, have proved peculiarly resistant to integrated casting strategies (now commonplace in film and television adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays). Indeed, Bourne suggests that “there is ample ammunition for regarding ‘whiteness’ as a specific generic trait of British period films, even if it is one that their audiences unthinkingly take for granted.”^{xxxix} Joseph is not the first British actor to speak out about this issue; in an interview conducted by Stephen Bourne in 1996, Carmen Munroe commented: “I feel disheartened every time I look at the screen and see something like *Pride and Prejudice* [the 1995 BBC television production which attracted record audiences for British television drama] or *Sense and Sensibility* [Ang Lee, USA / UK, 1996] that will exclude . . . minority ethnic artists.”^{xl} The absence of non-white actors in classic adaptations perpetuates a misleading vision of Britain’s history and cultural heritage and owes more to a fidelity to culturally constructed and ideologically problematic generic signifiers than it does to a presumed authenticity to period detail. The casting of black British actors in Arnold’s film casts into relief the role of literary adaptation in erasing the visibility of black British identity and history from the collective cultural memory; however, this is not a rare example of integrated casting (in which the perceived race or ethnicity of the actor performing the role would have no significance in the narrative), but a motivated casting strategy which has its roots in the source text.

In Brontë’s novel, the character of Heathcliff is repeatedly, if ambiguously, racially marked. Found destitute on the streets of Liverpool by Mr Earnshaw, the unnamed foundling is described by Nelly as “a dirty, ragged, black-haired child; big enough both to walk and talk” and “repeat[ing] over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand.”^{xli} Mrs Linton later rebukes Cathy for “scouring the country with a gipsy!”^{xlii} a term which Susan Meyer describes as “the generic designation for a dark-complexioned alien in

England”,^{xliii} and Mr Linton refers to him as: ““that strange acquisition my late neighbour made in his journey to Liverpool – a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish Castaway.””^{xliv} Mr Earnshaw describes the child he discovered as ““dark almost as if it came from the devil””^{xlv} and he is dehumanised and objectified as an object of property in Nelly’s account of the family legend: “he picked it up and inquired for its owner – Not a soul knew to whom it belonged . . .”^{xlvi} However, the casting of Heathcliff in television and film adaptations has followed persistent conventions which seem to defy these textual clues. Laurence Oliver’s Heathcliff in William Wyler’s 1939 *Wuthering Heights* has served as a template for later casting, with Heathcliff’s ‘otherness’ being signified by dark, unkempt hair contrasted against a markedly pale complexion. This pattern is followed both in Peter Kosminsky’s 1992 film adaptation and the Mammoth Screen / WGBH Boston co-production, directed by Coky Giedroyc and broadcast on ITV in the UK in 2009, where Ralph Fiennes and Tom Hardy mirror their co-stars (Juliette Binoche and Charlotte Riley) in the length of their dark hair and pallor. Even where cross gender casting is employed – as in *Sparkhouse* (BBC, Dir. Robin Shepperd, Screenplay by Sally Wainwright, 2002) - the ‘Heathcliff’ figure (played by Sarah Smart) is instantly identifiable by the contrast between her raven black hair and alabaster skin. This possibly Celtic fashioning of Heathcliff perhaps lends weight to interpretations of the novel which posit him as a child of the Irish diaspora; as Elsie Michie (and Winifred Gérin before her) has noted: “Brontë’s description of Heathcliff . . . links him to Victorian representations of the Irish children who were pouring into England in the late 1840s as a result of the potato famine.”^{xlvii} However, Arnold’s adaptation explicitly evokes a different diaspora, not only in the casting but also in the script. In *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women’s Fiction*, Susan Meyer identifies 1769 as the year in which Mr Earnshaw finds the child Heathcliff destitute on the streets of Liverpool:

... the city was England’s largest slave-trading port, conducting seventy to eighty-five percent of the English slave trade along the Liverpool Triangle. . . Thousands of black slaves were living in England itself in the late eighteenth century, concentrated particularly in the port cities of London, Liverpool and Bristol, to which they had been brought by captains of slaving vessels and planters, government officials, and military officers returning to the West Indies.^{xlviii}

Andrea Arnold's film adaptation makes this history visible not only by casting black British actors in the roles of the younger and older Heathcliff, but also by depicting Heathcliff as a child whose first language is not English and whose body is marked by scars and brands which seem to identify him as a child of the triangular trade. The abuse to which he is subjected – both verbal and physical – in the film adaptation then becomes an extension of a historically rooted racialised oppression; the violence of Empire is literally brought home to the English household and its displaced subjects made visible in such a way as to prompt the audience to question the ways in which prior adaptations may have marginalised a significant dimension of this radically troubling text.

'Prizing Otherness' and *Life of Pi*

Yann Martel's 2001 Man Booker Prize winning fabulist novel *Life of Pi* has been described more than once as 'unfilmable', an accolade in disguise which implicitly defines a book's literary value in direct proportion to its resistance to conversion to cinematic narrative. Its adaptation by an auteur director renowned for his "genre versatility",^{xlix} including critically acclaimed literary adaptations of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1997) and Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), ensured that its release would assume the status of a major cultural 'event' in both the film and literary worlds. When Ang Lee's film adaptation of Martel's shipwreck fantasy received 11 Academy Award nominations the conditions seemed to be set for a 'perfect storm' as far as the film and publishing industry's apparatus of cultural prestige are concerned. The release and reception of this film adaptation presented an opportunity to observe and analyse a specific form of cultural triangulation – namely, between contemporary literary fiction, literary prize culture and the adaptation industry.

In her 2009 book *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain*, Claire Squires argues that literary prizes "play a crucial role in the interaction between genre and the marketplace, and are one of the forces that come to influence notions of cultural value and literariness."¹ Indeed, the production and circulation of cultural value through the mechanism of the literary prize is the key concern of James F.

English's 2005 book *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Cultural Value*.

English suggests that the annual controversies which attend the award of leading prizes should not distract us from paying attention to their economic, cultural and ideological power, arguing that: "prizes are not a threat or contamination with respect to the field of properly cultural practice on which they have no legitimate place. The prize *is* cultural practice in its quintessential contemporary form [emphasis in original]"^{li} The close correspondence between the award of a prestigious literary prize to a contemporary novel and the likelihood of its being optioned for film or television adaptation is likewise a relationship which Simone Murray asks us to take seriously when she proposes that: "literary prizes do not merely legitimate symbolic capital in a particular cultural segment, but moreover actively facilitate the conversion of that capital into other media sectors. . . ." ^{lii} Murray situates the literary prize within what she calls the 'adaptation network', an expanded field of contexts and conditions which shape the production, circulation and reception of adaptations:

Literary prizes constitute a crucial but commonly overlooked node of the adaptation network.

Chiefly, the literary prize's role is to catalyse adaptation, by drawing attention to a particular text . . .

By broadening interest in the title beyond the reviews pages of the literary community, typically increasing sales and public recognition of the winning volume in the process and, through a combination of all of these factors, markedly increasing the likelihood of the title's adaptation into other media formats.^{liii}

The literary adaptation has played a key role in the evolution of the 'prestige' film production, and the award of an internationally recognised literary prize often serves to provide advance cultural legitimation through the perceived status of the literary 'property'. Jim Collins has discerned the "creation of [a] new terrain for quality cinema, between blockbuster movies and the art house cinema"^{liv} which he designates the 'cine-literary'; he offers the "seamless, simultaneous, interconnection of novel, film, featurette, Web site, and digital reading device" as the "foundation of cine-literary culture" within which "reading the book has become only one of a host of interlocking literary experiences."^{lv} Collins posits Miramax, under the creative co-direction of Harvey Weinstein, as playing a key role in the creation of this new critically acclaimed and commercially successful product and writes that: "Weinstein's explanation of the success of Miramax in a

Hollywood dominated by high-concept blockbusters – ‘our special effects are *words*’ – suggest just how important literary values were in that success story [emphasis in original]”.^{lvi} This turn of events is especially significant when considering the critical history of literary adaptations, whose cinematic credentials have often been perceived to be compromised by an emphasis on the verbal at the expense of the visual. Ang Lee’s *Life of Pi* presents an interesting departure from the emerging conventions of the cine-literary in that (to paraphrase Weinstein) this film’s special effects *were* its special effects, both in the judgement of its reviewers and of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

A recurring motif in the critical reception of Ang Lee’s film, which combined live action and computer generated imagery, was the discrepancy between the spectacular special effects and the quality of its narrative content. In a review headed “Great Tiger – a pity the narrative of *Life of Pi* is all at sea”, Anthony Quinn’s admiration for Lee’s “Wonder of the Universe movie, sumptuously shot, ravishingly coloured and absolutely up to the minute in its use of 3D technology” was qualified by a disappointment with its dramatic lassitude: “For long sections one forgets what the story is meant to be proposing at all, aside from the infinite possibilities of digital technology.”^{lvii} Similarly, Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* applauds the “technical brilliance” and “stunning” effects” of this “awards-season movie” but is unimpressed by the “shallow and self-important shaggy-dog story – or shaggy-tiger story”.^{lviii} This judgment seemed to be confirmed at the 85th Academy Awards, at which *Life of Pi* received four awards from its 11 nominations. Literary adaptations have traditionally done well at the Academy Awards, to the point of attracting both criticism and anxiety about the future of original content; however, their success has tended to be confined to specific categories, including screenwriting and acting, with adaptations often serving as vehicles for star performers to demonstrate their credibility within a pseudo-classical repertoire. By contrast, *Life of Pi* received awards not only for direction but also for cinematography, music (original score) and special effects; in other words it was rewarded for its cinematic properties rather than its literary origins. Aside from the presence of respected Indian character actor, Irrfan Khan (alongside British film and television actor Rafe Spall) in the less admired framing narrative, screen time is mostly occupied by younger actors making their debut; indeed, a still image of Suraj Sharma, who plays the eponymous hero during his perilous sojourn of the lifeboat,

provides the key iconography for the film marketing. This image offers a focal point for consideration of the novel's effective canonisation by the combined forces of literary prize culture, adaptation and film industry award: namely the relationship between literary prizes and postcolonial fiction, and between the film industry and the history of colonial representation.

In September 2013 the Man Booker Prize announced that eligibility for the annual award for best original novel would be extended to any novel in English and published by a UK publisher; media coverage of this significant change focussed on the Prize's global ambitions in an increasingly competitive - and crowded - literary prize marketplace, and on concerns about the potential dominance of the short-list of titles by American authors. Less discussed was the future of the Prize's distinctive historic relationship with 'Commonwealth' fiction. Sponsored by an agribusiness multinational with historical links to the slave trade (famously denounced by John Berger in his 1972 acceptance speech) and designed to reward novels written by citizens of the United Kingdom or its former colonies (including the Commonwealth and Republic of Ireland) the relationship between the prize and postcolonial fiction has been complex. The Man Booker Prize has brought new readers and markets to non UK authors, but on the condition that their fiction is written in English and published in the UK. It has championed new generations of postcolonial writing – as exemplified in the award of the 40th anniversary Best of Booker to Salman Rushdie's 1981 novel *Midnight's Children* – but it has been also been accused of privileging particular postcolonial voices and genres over others. In his essay "Prizing Otherness: A Short History of the Booker", Graham Huggan proposes that there is a "conflicted relationship between the oppositional politics of postcolonialism and the assimilative machinery of the 'global' literary prize."^{lix} Moreover, Rushdie's Booker success sets a problematic precedent for Huggan; he suggests that *Midnight's Children*, "while critical of the commodification of an Orientalised India . . . profited precisely by circulating such commercially viable Orientalist myths."^{lix} The award of the 2002 Man Booker Prize to French Canadian author Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi* would seem to support the thesis that the award privileges a certain brand of post-Rushdie 'magic realism'. Opening in the former French colonial possession of Pondicherry, written from the perspective of a boy who embraces Christian, Hindu and Muslim beliefs (to the consternation of his secular parents) and centring on the

shipwreck which tragically thwarts his family's migration from post-Partition India to Canada (on a Panamanian registered Japanese cargo ship with a Taiwanese crew), the novel is ripe with postcolonial significance. Moreover, the territorial politics of the family zoo are transposed to the lifeboat which Pi inhabits with the tiger, Richard Parker, and act as a fantastical metaphor for the challenges of peaceful co-existence. Such themes have a particular importance in the context of global post 9/11 politics. Indeed, Huggan has suggested that the novel "might be said to be an antifundamentalist text that pronounces against dogma of all kinds while provisionally accepting the importance of religious belief as the basis for human interaction in the world."^{xi} However, the critical reception of Lee's adaptation would seem to suggest that the film did not prompt the same kind of speculation about the possibility of a 'post-secular' world. Indeed, it might be argued that the film's spectacular imagery can more readily be situated in the complex history of cinema's fascination with the 'exotic'.

While the technically astounding CGI Richard Parker played a prominent role in the marketing of this film, those strategies which relied on still images made extensive use of a publicity shot of Suraj Sharma which evoked a older lexicon of unashamedly Orientalist imagery. The shot in question centres on Sharma standing on the canopy of the lifeboat in a posture of self-possession somewhat at odds with the desperate struggle for survival (in the face of starvation or predation) which dominates much of the film's action. Sharma stands squarely with feet planted astride and hands balled into fists at his side, the angles of his arm and legs accentuating the triangular outline of his torso; his upper body is exposed and he wears a headdress resembling a turban. His posture and dress, combined with the fantastic exoticism of his location, recall the iconic image and star persona of the Indian born child and adult actor Sabu Dastagir (1924-1963), more often credited simply as Sabu. Sabu appeared in a number of British and American adventure and fantasy films, including adaptations of fiction by Rudyard Kipling (*Elephant Boy*, directed by Robert Flaherty, 1937; *Jungle Book*, directed by Zoltán Korda, 1942) and versions of the tales from *One Thousand and One Nights* (*The Thief of Baghdad*, directed by Michael Powell, Ludwig Berger and Tim Whelan, 1940; *Arabian Nights*, directed by John Rawlins, 1942). Indeed, Priya Jaikumar suggests that such was his screen presence and audience appeal that the 'Sabu film' attained the status of a film genre in itself "with its animals, royalty,

magic, superstition and battling beliefs in jungle or wilderness at a non-Western location”.^{lxii} A charismatic and talented actor, Sabu’s screen persona was a complex construction, capitalising on his masculine beauty but containing his star power within strictly circumscribed racial and sexual boundaries. As Jaikumar argues:

Sabu is rarely counted as a man in any of his films. His body is effeminised, made sexually ambiguous with its attributes of over- or under-dress, yielding his figure to a range of desires outside those ruled by conventions of heterosexuality, patriarchy and empire.^{lxiii}

One of the few South Asian actors to obtain star status within the Hollywood film industry, he seems at once the willing subject of the Orientalist gaze (which constructs him either as the ‘natural’ boy or an exoticised ‘prince’) and the inviting object of subversive desire (his body sexualised and objectified).^{lxiv} Moreover, Sabu’s screen presence is closely associated with a series of films, produced or directed in the 1930s and 1940s by figures such as Robert and Zoltán Korda, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, which pioneered the use of the new technology of Technicolor. As Sarah Street writes in her essay “‘Color consciousness’: Natalie Kalmus and Technicolour in Britain”, “colour films that were successful . . . were spectacular interventions in a conventional, economy-driven aesthetic system”,^{lxv} and more especially so in a national cinema in which social realism was the dominant mode and equated with the use of black and white. Sabu appears in two of the three films discussed as case studies in Street’s essay (*The Thief of Baghdad* and *Black Narcissus*, directed by Powell and Pressburger, 1947). Indeed, Street argues that:

early discourses on colour . . . linked it with the ‘exotic’ and ‘otherness’. Indeed all three films discussed in this essay are linked by their use of colour to highlight questions of racial difference and exoticism within generic contexts which favoured the foregrounding of colour: the outdoor melodrama and empire film.^{lxvi}

This history of technology and representation seems to be evoked in both the marketing and reception of Ang Lee’s film adaptation which is able to mobilise a deeply rooted construction of the ‘Orient’ as a site of visual excess and splendour while at the same time dismissing the film as an empty spectacle.

In each of the case studies presented above, an aspect of the production, publicity or reception of a contemporaneous adaptation – whether film location or casting strategy, marketing campaign or industry award – provides a starting point for discussion; relevant critical frameworks are then mobilised to inform interpretations responsive to unfolding events. In this way fresh insights are offered into established critical debates and original readings and new questions for analysis are initiated.

However, I would like to conclude by anticipating a question which this strategy might potentially provoke: might not the insights gained through the contemporaneous study of any single film or television adaptation be identical to those achieved through more conventional means, after the passage of years and with the advantage of critical hindsight and the benefit of published scholarship? If the answer is ‘yes’, then we might reasonably question whether the benefits of this approach outweighs its challenges – including dealing with the contingencies of television broadcasting schedules (in 2007 the question of whether the new television *Frankenstein* would reach the screen before the end of the module kept us all in suspense) and the unevenness of film distribution (in 2008 the theatrical release of *Wuthering Heights* went ahead as scheduled, but was limited to art house film theatres). However, these very contingencies – if and when they occur – are instructive in revealing how specific televisual and cinematic contexts shape and even determine the reception and subsequent critical reputation of film and television adaptations. Moreover, the particular value of a focus on contemporaneous culture is the opportunity it presents to observe, evaluate and contribute to the processes of opinion shaping and canon forming – and to recognise that these processes are by no means a transparent reflection of the ‘value’ or ‘quality’ of the adaptation itself. In this way, students are able to gain new insights into the construction of cultural value and the workings of the cultural industries which profit from it; moreover, they are able to recognise their capacity to act as active agents in the production of new meanings, both as students and as citizens.

ⁱ The title was inspired by a popular live broadcast natural history programme, *Autumn Watch*, which was being broadcast by the BBC at the time of first delivery.

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- ⁱⁱ I would like to thank students at Teesside University for the enthusiasm and insight which they have brought to this task; their expertise and pleasure in navigating contemporary culture has been a source of real inspiration.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity", *Critical Inquiry* 32:4 (Summer 2006) 703.
- ^{iv} Other Adaptation Watch topics have included: *Frankenstein* (ITV / Impossible Pictures, 2007); *Atonement* (UK. Dir. Joe Wright, 2007); *Little Dorrit* (BBC, 2008); *Never Let Me Go* (UK. Dir. Mark Romanek, 2010); *The Crimson Petal and the White* (BBC, 2011).
- ^v Philip Kemp, "Interview with Julian Jarrold", *Sight & Sound* 18:10 (October 2008) 37.
- ^{vi} Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and its Discontents: From Gone With the Wind to The Passion of the Christ* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) 174.
- ^{vii} Sarah Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 108.
- ^{viii} Leitch, *Film Adaptation and its Discontents* 173.
- ^{ix} Cardwell 112.
- ^x Leitch 174.
- ^{xi} Leitch 175.
- ^{xii} In an interview with Philip Kemp, Jarrold explained: "We went almost everywhere first but there was nowhere else that felt like a Catholic family had lived there." *Sight & Sound* 18:10 (October 2008) 38.
- ^{xiii} John J. Su, "Refiguring National Character: The Remains of the British Estate Novel", *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 48:3 (Fall 2002) 554.
- ^{xiv} Constantine Verevis, *Film Remakes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) 106.
- ^{xv} Catherine Grant, "Recognising Billy Budd in *Beau Travail*: epistemology and hermeneutics of an autuerist 'free' adaptation" *Screen* 43:1 (2002) 59.
- ^{xvi} A.O Scott, "Bright Young Things in Love and Pain", *The New York Times*, July 25 2008. Accessed November 29 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/25/movies/25brid.html?_r=0.
- ^{xvii} Scott, "Bright Young Things in Love and Pain".
- ^{xviii} Roger Ebert. "Brideshead Revisited [2008]" [Review]. *Rogerebert.com*. Date accessed: November 29 2013. <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/brideshead-revisited-2008>
- ^{xix} Philip French. "Brideshead Revisited [2008]" [Review]. *The Observer*. October 5 2013. Date accessed November 29 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/oct/05/periodandhistorical.drama>
- ^{xx} Peter Bradshaw. "Brideshead Revisited [2008]" [Review]. *The Guardian*. October 3 2008. Date accessed: November 29 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/oct/03/drama.periodhistorical>
- ^{xxi} Bradshaw, "Brideshead Revisited [2008]" [Review].
- ^{xxii} French, "Brideshead Revisited [2008]" [Review]. .
- ^{xxiii} Scott, "Bright Young Things in Love and Pain".
- ^{xxiv} Bradshaw, "Brideshead Revisited [2008]" [Review].
- ^{xxv} Amy Raphael, "Love Will Tear Us Apart", *Sight & Sound* 21:12 (December 2011) 34.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Simone Murray, *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012) 109.
- ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Murray, *The Adaptation Industry* 104.
- ^{liv} Jim Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010) 145.
- ^{lv} Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody* 119.
- ^{lvi} Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody* 117.
- ^{lvii} Anthony Quinn, "Life of Pi [Review]", *The Independent* December 20 2012. Date Accessed: December 8 2013.
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/film-review-great-tiger--a-pity-the-narrative-of-life-of-pi-is-all-at-sea-8427929.html>
- ^{lviii} Peter Bradshaw, "Life of Pi [Review]", *The Guardian*, December 20 2012. Date accessed December 9 2013.
<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/dec/20/life-of-pi-review>
- ^{lix} Graham Huggan, "Prizing Otherness: A Short History of the Booker", *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 118.
- ^{lx} Huggan, "Prizing Otherness: A Short History of the Booker" 115.
- ^{lxi} Graham Huggan, "Is the "Post" in "Postsecular" the "Post" in "Postcolonial"?" *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 56:4 (2010) 764-765.
- ^{lxii} Priya Jaikumar, "Sabu's Skins: The Transnational Stardom of an Elephant Boy", *Wasafiri* 27:2 (2012) 63.
- ^{lxiii} Jaikumar 64.
- ^{lxiv} See also Ian Iqbal Rashid, "Song of Sabu: Hollywood Cinema and the Displacement of Desire", *Wasafiri* 23 (1996) 33-39.
- ^{lxv} Sarah Street, "'Color consciousness': Natalie Kalmus and Technicolour in Britain", *Screen* 50:2 (Summer 2009) 208.
- ^{lxvi} Street, "'Color consciousness': Natalie Kalmus and Technicolour in Britain", 199-200.

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