
Hila Shachar’s text, *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature: Wuthering Heights and Company*, analyses five film and television adaptations of Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* in order to expose what she has defined as the ‘cultural afterlives’ of classic literary texts. Shachar’s study examines the following adaptations: William Wyler’s highly influential *Wuthering Heights* (1939); Jacques Rivette’s *Hurlevent* (1985); Peter Kosminsky’s *Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights* (1992); Suri Krishnamma’s MTV movie *Wuthering Heights* (2003); and finally, ITV’s two-part television serial *Wuthering Heights* (2009). Shachar positions her argument within the critical literature by firstly acknowledging the significance of Patsy Stoneman’s foundational text, *Bronte Transformations*. Shachar then outlines how she departs from this text and the field of Adaptation Studies by examining how the historical and cultural context in which each film was produced influences the way the adaptation interacts with specific themes from Bronte’s source text. By examining how multiple and varied discourses – such as feminism, postfeminism and ideologies of race – and cultural contexts – such as the advent of Heritage Cinema, youth popular culture and Neo-Victorianism – are implicated within these adaptations, Shachar is able to provide compelling insights into how adaptations of classic literature function within and beyond the cultural context in which they are produced. I now propose to evaluate the effectiveness of Shachar’s argument by first providing a brief outline of each chapter’s analysis. I will then consider how this contributes to the text’s overall thesis.

The first chapter, ‘Before the Afterlife: Analysing *Wuthering Heights*’, is a necessary, albeit brief, examination of the source text itself, Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*. Such an examination, Shachar explains, will be used to ‘focus on characters, spaces, discourses and ideologies that are relevant to the adaptations rather than aiming for a more comprehensive approach to the novel’ (p.14). This approach allows Shachar to identify and explain the themes that will inform the rest of the analysis. Her choice to focus primarily on the central characters of Heathcliff and Cathy, while unsurprising, also lends itself to a consideration of how masculinity and femininity are implicated not only within the source text, but also within each of the following adaptations. Along with this focus on gender, Shachar further specifies that there are three lines of inquiry that will recur through the following analysis due to their significant presence both within the source text and the adaptations. Namely, the concept of home (most often articulated through the character of Cathy), the lovers’ discourse and the Sublime are lines of inquiry pursued in her analysis. These lines of inquiry are significant not only to the construction of the characters, but also to the way the visual medium consistently draws upon them, thus making them an effective way through which to structure the text’s argument.

In the second chapter entitled ‘The Cinema of Spectacle: Establishing the *Wuthering Heights* Tradition on the Eve of Hollywood’s Golden Era’, Shachar examines how the interwar period has influenced Wyler’s 1939 adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*. This argument is particularly persuasive. Shachar is not only able to articulate how in
this time of political crisis, the relationship between Britain and the United States sought to promote ‘Anglo-American solidarity’ (p.44) as evidenced through the Hollywood production of a quintessentially English text. She is also able to link the cultural and historical context of the interwar period to the performance of masculinity and femininity within the adaptation. In Shachar’s view, the metaphor of the soldier’s body in this adaptation characterises the masculinity of Heathcliff, while the desire for escapism influences the production of femininity as spectacle for Cathy.

The third chapter, ‘Moving Backward, Looking Forward: Jacques Rivette’s Hurlevent’, moves away from Hollywood film and examines a little known adaptation of Wuthering Heights, namely, Hurlevent. While Shachar acknowledges that Rivette’s Hurlevent (1985) is an ‘obscure film’, her work reveals its significance to understanding how classic texts can be used to critically engage with contemporary societal issues. In terms of this particular adaptation, Shachar has argued that Rivette is critically engaging with French President Mitterand’s ‘attempt to reorder national history’ (p.77), through Rivette’s use of French discursive practices surrounding the ‘masculine peasant body’ of the Heathcliff character, Roch. This use of the peasant body, Shachar argues, simultaneously evokes the glorified French pastoral past while revealing the class-based antagonisms directed towards the lower classes. Shachar’s engagement with the French political context in this chapter demonstrates the significance of the ‘cultural afterlives’ of classic literary texts, revealing the way these texts can critically engage with contemporary societal issues in a historicised, and therefore safer, space.

In the fourth chapter, ‘Wuthering Heights in the 1990s: Peter Kosminsky’s Ambitious Narrative’, Shachar’s analysis moves to focus on how the postfeminist cultural context has influenced the remaking of Wuthering Heights through an understanding of masculinity ‘in crisis’. Through her critique of masculinity and the complementary femininity exhibited within Kosminsky’s adaptation, Shachar indicates how Wuthering Heights is being reworked as a ‘masculine narrative and masculine drama of being, marketed as romantic stories for women’ (p.92). In so doing, the author successfully demonstrates that adaptations of classic literature are influenced by the cultural context in which they were produced.

Chapter five, entitled ‘Catherine and Heathcliff for the Y Generation: MTV’s Modernisation of Wuthering Heights’, continues to insightfully examine the role of postfeminism in influencing Wuthering Heights, this time for the youth audience. Linking her analysis of this film to contemporary debates about the role of feminism in the lives of contemporary women as well as the concept of home identified in the first chapter, Shachar convincingly argues that this film acts to portray ‘the home is a private and depoliticised space and that women are inherently linked to this space in the ‘natural order of things’ (p.119). Critiques of masculinity are also tied to this concept of the ‘natural’, as the Heathcliff character, Heath, performs his masculinity as articulated through the negotiations of authenticity and superficiality within rock music.

Chapter six, ‘Critical Legacies and Contemporary Audiences: The Politics of Neo-Victorianism in ITV’s 2009 Adaptation of Wuthering Heights’, examines the final adaptation in Shachar’s research: ITV’s two-part Wuthering Heights. According to Shachar, this rendition of Wuthering Heights is ‘one of the more complex and critically-aware screen adaptations of the novel’ (p.146). This adaptation’s engagement with literary and cultural theory has allowed Shachar to engage with the serial’s depicted feminist motivations and the role and influence of postfeminism within its production, and to consider the role of neo-Victorianism in the recent influx of adaptations of classic literature. Examining the role of neo-Victorianism has also allowed Shachar to again widen her frame of analysis. In considering how recent adaptations like Pride & Prejudice and Jane Eyre are influenced by such discursive strategies within the postfeminist cultural context, the author reaffirms the significance of her work to a popular culture
influenced by the cultural afterlives of such texts.

The final chapter of this text, ‘Afterword: Myths and Demystification’, considers in summary how the characters of Catherine and Heathcliff, and the concepts of landscape and loss, are implicated within each of the adaptations. Shachar successfully and articulately summarises the links between each adaptation. In this concluding chapter, she brings together her analysis of how the characters of Cathy and Heathcliff have been consistently reworked and influenced by the cultural context in which they were produced. Furthermore, the author revisits the influential tropes of the home, the lovers’ discourse and the Sublime that have consistently shaped how Wuthering Heights is understood within contemporary culture, thereby reaffirming the significance of the concept of the ‘cultural afterlife’ to critiques of adaptations of classic literary texts.

This is a far-ranging analysis, written in sophisticated but accessible language. Shachar has provided a text that offers a useful way of considering the role of adaptations of classic literature in contemporary society. In support of the author’s argument, well-articulated examples of how adaptations can be interpreted in numerous ways are offered in the text, including through social, cultural and political contexts. While each of the adaptations considers how the characters of Cathy and Heathcliff represent gendered norms and expectations and how these are linked to the wider cultural context in which the adaptation is produced, the analysis benefits from Shachar’s chosen theoretical approaches. Her application of postfeminism, multiple categories of cinema (heritage, French, classic Hollywood, costume), neo-Victorianism, postmodernism and youth media culture arguably provide a much more complex critique of how adaptations of classic literature both function and shape the cultural context in which they are produced. The wide use of many subject areas within this research makes this text appealing to those with a broad interest in popular culture, from feminist theorists to adaptations studies, and everyone in between.

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