

SMALL PLEASURES: ADAPTATION AND THE PAST IN  
BRITISH FILM AND TELEVISION

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The adaptation of classic literature, or more precisely the construction of certain literary works as classic—the classic serial—has been a characteristic of British television almost since television began. Certainly, since television resumed its normal service after the break in transmission enforced by World War II, the novels of Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, Conrad, Dickens, and occasionally Henry James, have been adapted and sometimes readapted. In the mid-1990s, adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), *Middlemarch* (1994) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1994) not only reaffirmed the status of the BBC as the cornerstone of national broadcasting, but also confirmed its cultural prestige overseas. It also, of course, secured it a healthy slice of the substantial international market in 'quality television'. In the 1980s, endless adaptations of E.M.Foster, suffused with the charms of manners and costume and basking in the warm glow of the past, have made adaptation a cultural dominant in representations of Britain, helping to shape the perception of Britishness - or at least of Englishness - as a quality whose real meaning can be found in the past, and whose commodity value can be found in the heritage industry. Revealingly, the Government Ministry now charged with the administration of culture in Britain has been renamed the Department of National Heritage.

And yet academic film and television criticism in Britain—inclined by habit towards the analysis of popular culture, more comfortable with the soap opera or the Hollywood melodrama than with 'high culture', and always suspicious of the 'elitist pretension' of adaptation and the literary tradition—has remained deafeningly silent. In this article, I want to examine some of the issues which determine the allure of the past for British film and television, and to suggest some of the aesthetic, and inherently political questions which it raises.

Jean Luc Godard has said, 'Before you talk about art in the cinema, you must always talk about money'. While feeling considerable unease about the extent to which the vocabulary of the market has insinuated itself into the field of culture as if it were a natural language, it seems impossible to describe the current condition of the cinema in Britain—or anywhere else—without also talking about money. Indeed, one of the virtues of the study of film and television in an academic context is the extent to which such obviously commercial forms force a new dialogue between industry and art, commerce and creativity. Some dialogue between these terms, which idealist versions of cultural criticism have seen as mutually exclusive since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, seems necessary if we are to prevent considerations of identity and culture from slipping off into national—or nationalistic—essentialisms. Cultural identities happen under certain conditions, and they are shaped not simply by the private insights and expressions of individual artists but by the public determinations of law, economy and money. This is not to say that private insight, passion and imagination are terms to be extirpated from critical discourse by a ruthless materialism (though we in Film Studies came dangerously close to such an 'intellectual cleansing' in the enthusiasm for scientific analysis and remorselessly rationalist discourse out of which our discipline was formed after 1968). Rather, my fairly modest proposal would be that the terms of creativity and imagination exist in particular relations with the material conditions which form, transform and sometimes deform them. Men make their own history, as old Marx

said, but not always in conditions of their own choosing. So if I talk about money and markets, it is not with any enthusiasm for the vocabulary but because these seem to me to be some of the determinations which shape the images through which Britishness (or Scottishness, or Irishness, Englishness or Brazilianness) is defined. Film—at least at the international level—is a tradable good, and what it ultimately deals in are marketable images.

*I do not think the British are temperamentally equipped to make the best use of the movie camera.* (Satyajit Ray)

*Isn't there a certain incompatibility between the terms 'cinema' and 'Britain'?* (François Truffaut)

These two quotations hang like a millstone round the neck of British cinema, appearing in almost every book published and every article written, as if they were some kind of final judgement and all-embracing explanation. I am not satisfied, however, that the perceived inadequacies of British cinema as an industrial form continually lurching from renaissance to despair, or of British film as an aesthetic form which has never quite evoked the passion of criticism which is evoked by Hollywood cinema, European cinema—or indeed by Latin American cinema—can simply be laid at the door of temperament. I have always had difficulty with the notion of national temperaments, particularly in a country which is so temperamentally diverse, and even perverse, as the so-called 'United' Kingdom. At the same time, the quotations cannot be dismissed altogether: not everything can be explained by market forces, and it seems evident that certain aesthetic and cultural forms may be dominant within a culture, a historical dominance which establishes the system of values to which other forms aspire. If this is so, Britain, or at least England, has a literary culture, and it is the prestige of literary forms (in which, for television, I would include drama) which sets the standard and assigns value to other—upstart—forms like film and television. Much of the British cinema which has received attention

over the last decade and a half is a highly literate cinema, a literacy which, in recent years, it may have learned from the success of adaptation and the classic serial on television.

On the other hand, just to retain an element of scepticism, it is worth recalling that when Lindsay Anderson was asked about the exclusive use of adaptations of novels or plays in the British New Wave of the late 1950s/early 1960s, he suggested that in an industry as fragile and precarious as the British film industry the only way you could raise the money to make a film was to base it on a work which had already had success in another form, a success which gave it a guaranteed audience. To that we might add, before we exclusively read the recent obsession with the adaptation of classic novels as a symptom of Britain's desire in uncertain times to return to a more secure past, that the adaptation and re-adaptation of novels which are more than fifty years old may also have something to do with copyright law.

*If the United States spoke Spanish, Britain would have a film industry.* (anon)

Within the logic of the global market, nations are not simply mapped out as nation-state territories, but as linguistic markets. Britain inhabits the linguistic market—English—which is not only the largest but also the richest in the world, and the one which has by far the largest proportion of national populations for whom English is the second language. This obviously makes it the most lucrative market, and Britain should be able to capitalize on this. There is a snag. Britain cohabits this market with the United States, the country which has had the most successful film industry since the First World War, and particularly since the arrival of sound, like a tower of Babel, breaking the universality of the language of cinema, and fragmenting it into linguistic markets. British cinema, conditioned by a national history of imperialism to conquer the world rather than belong to Europe, has continually tried to place itself in a competition with Hollywood which history and logic suggest it cannot win.

To oversimplify: if an American film is successful it can recover much of its now astronomical costs of production from North American box office receipts alone. This is a simple fact of population: there are enough consumers in the market to support a large scale industry with streamlined modes of production. What a successful film earns from overseas distribution is then largely profit. (And if it is not successful, it is only a small dent in the global profits of the multinational company by which all Hollywood studios are now owned.) If a British film is successful, on the other hand, it is still almost impossible that it will be able to make enough profit on British box office receipts alone to invest in the next film. The circulation of capital between production and exhibition is arrested, the development of a streamlined industrial mode of production is prevented, and films are produced by entrepreneurs working in something like a cottage industry. In this system, if a British film fails, there is not the cross-capitalization of the multinational parent company to protect it from disaster, and capital investment in film production is a very high-risk business. There are simply not enough people in the British domestic market to support a film industry of the kind which has historically been defined by Hollywood, and which has more recently been characterized by the increasing conglomeration and globalization of the 'leisure industries'. Even to make enough profit to ensure continuity of production, British films must be successful overseas—and overseas has traditionally meant North America.

This is where the relationship between national cultures and markets begins to become clearer. If it is to be successful in America, British cinema has to sell the images of Britain which Americans are prepared to buy, or at least which American distributors and exhibitors believe Americans are prepared to pay to see. In the terms in which the international image market defines success, it is not enough to reflect the changing complexities of our lives to ourselves, we must project the kinds of images of our lives which others have come to expect of us. For Britain, in the 1980s and 1990s, this has very often meant the representations of a classic literature in which irony and wit are rendered

as English quaintness, and the national past is captured like a butterfly on a pin in a museum of gleaming spires, tennis on the lawn, and the faded memory of empire. Scotland, more recently and almost predictably, has been called upon to revive the values of the tired old Western, rediscovered yet again, as it was by Scott at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as a frontier territory perched on the edge of Europe, playing out the values of Highland wilderness and lowland civilization, noble savages and cultured but corrupt gentry.

Now all national cinemas—except possibly the Bombay cinema—live in the shadow of Hollywood. But whereas it has been possible to persuade governments in many non-English-speaking nations that the national culture is tied to the national language, and therefore a national cinema speaking the national language should be protected and supported, in Britain, recent governments have shown themselves immune to this argument. British consumers, like most consumers, have shown a preference for American films, and language provides no barrier. One of the undoubted, and most insidious, discursive successes of Thatcherism has been the replacement of the concept of ‘the public’ with that of ‘consumers’, and the consequent redefinition of words like ‘freedom’, ‘choice’, and ‘liberty’ along market lines. Words which are still haunted by the ghosts of the barricades have become part of the routine vocabulary of the market and its *philosophes*. Within that discursive shift, British consumers freely choose American films and it is not for the government to inhibit that choice by protection or support. The market, in this case the global market, must protect its own, and if British films cannot compete with the might of Hollywood, so be it. Britain’s only recourse is to develop a niche within world cinema and television — heritage film and classic serial — a niche which it is developing quite successfully, a kind of art cinema balanced precariously between a European sensibility and the North American market.

*British film is alive and well and living on television.* (anon.)

Since the early 1980s, and the introduction of the fourth terrestrial television channel, Channel 4, it has become increasingly difficult to talk about film in Britain without also talking about television. From *A Room with a View* (1985) to *Howards End* (1991), with British successes like *The Crying Game* (1992), *Naked* (1993), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Shallow Grave* (1994), *Trainspotting* (1996) to its credit, and even with an involvement in such European films as Kieslowski's trilogy, *Three Colours Red, White and Blue*, Channel 4's investment in film production has been central not only to the health of British cinema, but has made a significant contribution to European cinema.

Channel 4 opened in November 1982. Its remit had two important injunctions, laid on it by the Conservative government of the time in the Act of Parliament which brought the new channel into being. First, it was to be a publisher-broadcaster. That is to say, it was not to be a producer of programmes but a commissioner. It was staffed not with camera operators, editors and directors, but with commissioning editors, whose responsibility it was to commission the making of programmes from independent producers; and with buyers, who bought programmes on the international market (largely from USA, but also from Europe, North Africa, and, indeed, Latin America). The aim was that twenty-five per cent of the programme time of Channel 4 was to be taken up by independent production. This was in a context in which the two other sources of indigenous television programmes in the UK, the public service BBC and the commercial television network, were almost exclusively the preserve of in-house production.

The second injunction was that this new channel should innovate and experiment in its scheduling, and should seek to address audiences which had not previously been addressed. This was a unique injunction in the history of the British regulation of culture.

A third aspect of Channel 4's relationship to film is significant. The Channel demonstrated that after forty years of jealousy and rivalry it was possible for cinema and television to lay down their arms and cooperate. Channel 4 challenged the conventional wisdom that a

television screening killed a film's chance of success in the cinema, or vice versa, and it adopted the practice of allowing the films in which it invested to have as full a life as possible in the cinema before they were shown on television. The result should have been obvious all along: the cinema functioned as a shop window, and the word-of-mouth, the reviews, and even the awards which a film gathered built up a larger audience for the television screening than it might otherwise have had. In this way, Channel 4 was able to sustain not only the mainstream successes of British cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, but was also able to bring to a much wider audience more marginal, 'eccentric' or avant garde directors like Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, Sally Potter or Isaac Julien.

It is not appropriate here to go into the intricacies of British broadcasting and the even more arcane topic of regulation, but some of the effects of Channel 4's innovation are worth noting.

On the one hand, at the national level, the remit to be innovative and to address audiences not previously addressed created a context in which voices were indeed heard on television which had previously been invisible and inaudible in public culture. Most dramatically, the interests of the Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities and of the gay and lesbian communities became a part of public culture (albeit a still marginal part) in quite a new way. Regionally, socially, culturally - groups of people had access to national television in a way which had never happened before, and Channel 4 introduced a diversity into television which has played a large part in diversifying British culture—the British public sphere—as a whole. This diversity at the local level, of course, may be invisible at the global level.

On the other hand, at the international level, Channel 4's commitment to the funding of independent film production brought a level of success and international prestige to British film which it had not had at least since the early 1950s. Channel 4 did not wholly fund these films, but by providing the first £500,000 or so and by guaranteeing some public distribution (at the very least on television),

it allowed films to attract investment. More than just enabling the production of a number of high profile individual films, however, Channel 4 created the beginnings of an infrastructure in which such films could be produced. So successful was this aspect of the new Channel that in the 1990 Broadcasting Act the injunction to commission twenty-five per cent of programmes from independent producers was extended to all terrestrial broadcasters.

The paradox is that a Channel which was seen as unruly, sexually licentious, and unorthodox almost to the point of subversion introduced an economic system which became the orthodoxy. The answer to the paradox is that while Channel 4 may have been an anathema to conservative ideologists it was music to the ears of conservative, market-oriented economists. What it did was to transform unruly film producers into small business men and business women, sensitive to the market and responsive to its conditions. If the market was strong, production could expand; if it was weak, Channel 4 could cut its commissions and the sector would retract. Economically speaking, Channel 4 travelled light and its flexibility was a stick with which the Thatcherites delighted in beating the inertia of the monoliths of British broadcasting—the BBC and the commercial companies—whose broad and ponderous backs did indeed invite a little beating.

It would be extremely ungracious not to welcome the success of recent British cinema, a success which is almost entirely dependent on the convergence of film and television. The welcome, however, is tinged with just a little suspicion that something of the local has been lost in television when its success is measured by the awards of the global film industry. This is not meant to defend the indefensible or to suggest it would have been better to stay in the security wing of the 1960s, but simply to raise the question of what happens to a national television, a national television which historically has been central to the national public culture, when it becomes part of an international art cinema.

### Art cinema/ Quality cinema

Let me now move to the notion of a British art cinema, a notion which always seem to invoke a hesitation and an immediate need to qualify. If the concept of a European art cinema is formed by the experience of the Italian art cinema of Visconti, Antonioni, Fellini, the Scandinavian cinema of Bergman, the Spanish (or French or Mexican) cinema of Bunuel, the Polish cinema of Andrej Wajda, the German cinema of Herzog, Kluge or Fassbinder or the French cinema of almost anyone you care to name from Renoir and Truffaut to Godard and Duras; or if the concept is formed by the memory of films like *La Strada*, *L'Avventura*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, *The Seventh Seal*, *Senso*, *Ashes and Diamonds*, *Jules et Jim*, *Tout va bien*, *Fear Eats the Soul*; in short, if the concept of an art cinema is of a cinema which became one of the late flowering glories of twentieth century modernism, then it is hard to find a body of work in British cinema which occupies the same place in European or world culture. Peter Greenaway has the mannerisms, but the matter always seems to me to be lacking. On the margins, directors like Sally Potter, Terence Davies and Derek Jarman are undoubted contenders but their interest is precisely in their position on the margins rather than in the mainstream of national or world culture. Historically, Britain's unique contribution to world cinema has been the documentary movement, a cinema befitting the utilitarianism and empiricism of British traditions in thought, an art cinema, as Alan Lovell once said, which has no time for art.

The cinema which I am really concerned with here, and its cognate area in television—the cinema which has characterised in the international imagination Britain's relationship to its past—is a quality cinema rather than an art cinema. This term, 'quality cinema', needs some brief description since the term now perhaps has a unique significance in Britain— though it refers to that same tradition de *qualité*, the quality tradition formed by films based on adaptations mainly by Laurens and Bost in the 1940s and 1950s in France, which Truffaut

denounced in the 1953 article which polemically launched the *politique des auteurs* (the auteur policy) in *Cahiers du cinéma*. (And the term can also be applied to more recent French adaptations like *Cyrano*, *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*.) In British film, the notion of a quality cinema is associated with critics like Dilys Powell, C.A. Lejeune and Graham Greene writing in the 1940s and 1950s in the midst of a postwar cultural reconstruction which covered all the arts. For the cinema this attempt to found a British tradition of quality hinged on the distinction of the best of British cinema, and it was expressed as a conscious desire for a national cinema distinct from the mere entertainment of Hollywood. The guarantee of that distinction was frequently adaptation from texts which were already prestigious in theatre or literature, and it is associated with theatrical adaptations like *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1952), Olivier's *Henry V* (1945) or *Hamlet* (1948), literary adaptations like *Brighton Rock* (1947) and *Odd Man Out* (1947), and perhaps most characteristically, with David Lean's adaptations of Dickens in *Great Expectations* (1946) and *Oliver Twist* (1948).

More recently the term 'quality' has been given new life in the debates surrounding the re-regulation of television in the late 1980s. Fears of the complete destruction of the values of public service broadcasting if television were thrown completely to the market were addressed by introducing something called the 'quality threshold', an undefined notion of quality which bidders had to satisfy if they were to be awarded a franchise to operate one of the regional commercial stations. Again, in the public debate which surrounded the introduction of new legislation for television, the shorthand for what was meant by quality in the public mind came to be defined with strong roots in adaptation: the titles which were wheeled out time after time as examples were *Brideshead Revisited* (1981), adapted from Evelyn Waugh, and *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984), adapted from Paul Scott's trilogy of the British Raj. These two became the hallmark of quality, and it was their television success nationally and internationally, coming at

the same time as such cinema successes as *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *Ghandi* (1982), and *Passage to India* (1985) which firmly established British quality cinema in a particular and peculiar relationship to the past, a relationship which, through the work of Merchant/Ivory, blossoms into an oddly obsessive love affair with the work of E.M. Forster. Quality television returns again and again to adaptation, with Andrew Davies' 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (already adapted at least once every ten years since the war) achieving international success by re-writing irony as romance.

If we set aside the more avant-garde, experimental or at least modernist films which Channel 4 stimulated, and the diversity which it enabled, and concentrate on the quality cinema and television which constructed the image of Britain outside of Britain, the overwhelming impression must be one of a nostalgia lovingly created out of costume and sepia tints. The notion of a 'quality' cinema, or, more tenuously, of a British art cinema seems to have come out of the 1980s inextricably linked to discourses of literary and cultural heritage. From *Chariots of Fire* to *Howards End* (1991), films seem continually to return not simply to the past in general, but to a very particular past: to the period in the first few decades of this century before and after what in Britain is known as the 'Great War', the historical moment in which the land-owning aristocracy began to give up the reigns of power to the new urban bourgeoisie, and in which Britain began to detect the fault lines in its Imperial destiny.

### **Heritage, history and memory**

It seems impossible to talk about this relationship with the past without acknowledging Fredric Jameson's magisterial warnings on the effacement of history by historicism, or without considering the place of this nostalgia mode within the wider nostalgia mode which Jameson locates as one of the characteristics of postmodernism, or of the cultural logic of late capitalism. The nostalgia film, he says,

was never a matter of some old-fashioned 'representation' of historical content, but approached the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness' by the attributes of fashion.<sup>1</sup>

The description clearly fits both television costume drama and the recreations of the world of Forster in the *Merchant/Ivory* series. The charge which Jameson lays against this 'mesmerizing new aesthetic mode'—'the waning of our historicity'—is that it denies us the 'lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way'<sup>2</sup>. History becomes the present in costume, showing us only human continuities and lingering generalities of tone and style—the seduction of the image—without the formal distance and the historical particularity—the rebellious detail—which might enable us to experience difference and change.

I have a great admiration, and even fondness, for Fredric Jameson's work, and I firmly believe that the most interesting postmodernists are the ones who are now or once were Marxists, but I am concerned that the cognitive mapping which he proposes might end up as a tourist map, giving a certain security around the main points of orientation of postmodern culture, but without the difficult topographic detail which would allow us to distinguish between a precipice and a steep grassy slope. In particular, I am concerned that cognitive mapping, like postmodern criticism itself, at least in the hands of someone less passionate than Jameson, can end up only in the constant description and redescription of a kind of cultural phenomenology. As well as understanding the general relationship which postmodern culture has to the past, I think we need to be able to distinguish within this relationship between this representation of the past and that representation of the past—to distinguish between *Chinatown* and *Body Heat* in a way which Jameson does not, or between Fay Weldon's writerly and feminist adaptation of Jane Austen in 1980 and Andrew

Davies' televisual and ahistoric adaptation in 1995; or even to distinguish between the historicism of Merchant/Ivory's costume drama adaptation of Forster in *Room with a View* (1985) and their more historical account of *Howards End*, which offers a more uneasy account of class difference and change in England. So the past and our relationship to it is not entirely stable nor is it lacking in its own contradictions and tensions, and it cannot simply be described, and then dismissed, by blanket terms like heritage or nostalgia. In Britain, the critical tendency in film criticism has been to ascribe heritage to Thatcherism and its (highly selective) appeal to the values of the Victorians (self-sufficiency and family, but not public works), and the association of anything with Thatcher seems to prevent further thought. While it is certainly true that at a time when Britain had some difficulty in selling most things, it became particularly adept at selling the past, those of us who are film scholars, or who have an interest in cultural studies, would have to afford to the heritage film and the representations of the national past in both film and television at least the same attention as we used to afford to the Western or the melodrama, discriminating between this Western and that Western, this melodrama and that melodrama, and finding in them, through critical analysis rather than description or cognitive mapping, the secret workings of values, ideologies and contradictions.

### **Detail**

I want here to take a detour through Naomi Schor's discussion of detail in her book, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*<sup>3</sup>. I am interested generally in thinking about detail as a foundational term for an aesthetics or poetics which is specific to television, and here, more particularly, in thinking about the ways in which analysis might approach representations of the past in both television and film. In the wider terms of the analysis of cultural history, Schor's discussion opens

questions of the particular and general which have been central to modernist and postmodernist debates in this century.

In her book, Naomi Schor traces the history of detail in aesthetics from the contempt in which it was held by Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Royal Academy in the eighteenth century to its new-found status in the dialectics of the particular and the general in modernism and in the historiography which derives from Foucault.

'The great style in painting', says William Hazlitt in the 1780s, 'consists in avoiding the details, and peculiarities of particular objects'; and 'Genius' according to Reynolds, 'consists principally in the comprehension of A WHOLE; in taking general idea only'. A 'nice discrimination', he says 'of minute circumstances, and a punctilious delineation of them, whatever excellence it may have (and I do not mean to detract from it) never did confer on the Artist the character of Genius.'<sup>4</sup> This privileging, as Schor demonstrates, is not gender neutral, for while the sublime (which is anti-detail) is 'manly noble dignified', Dutch painting is excluded by Reynolds from the Great Tradition because it is too much based on detailed observation of particularities: 'Flemish painting [...] will appeal to women, especially to the very old and the very young, also to monks and nuns and to certain noblemen who have no sense of true harmony'.<sup>5</sup>

In her introduction, Schor establishes some of the parameters of reading in detail and reading detail. To focus on the detail, she says,

and more particularly on the detail as negativity, is to become aware, as I have discovered, of its participation in a larger semantic network, bounded on the one side by the ornamental, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the everyday, whose 'prosiness' is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women. In other words, to focus on the place and function of the detail since the mid-eighteenth century is to become aware that the normative aesthetics elaborated

and disseminated by the [Royal] Academy and its members is not sexually neutral; it is an axiology carrying into the field of representation the sexual hierarchies of the phallogocentric cultural order. The detail does not occupy a conceptual space beyond the laws of sexual difference: the detail is gendered and doubly gendered as feminine. <sup>6</sup>

The ornamental, the everyday and the feminine: the resonances for television theory are suggestive, and for the representation of the past in both cinema and television, from costume drama to classic adaptation, they are striking. Period detail and the particularities of mannerisms rather than grand narratives and the Grand Style seem indeed to be central to the allure of the past.

Modernism's concerns, however, complicate the status of detail, throwing the detail into dialectical tension with the whole. 'The reconciliation of the general and the particular', say Adorno and Horkheimer in their critique of the Culture Industry,

of the rule and the specific demands of the subject matter, the achievement of which alone gives essential, meaningful content to style, is futile because there has ceased to be the slightest tension between opposite poles; these concordant extremes are dismally identical; the general can replace the particular, and vice versa. <sup>7</sup>

Without that tension, the detail is subsumed within the general, and becomes mere style. The detail loses its rebelliousness, its 'protest against organization', and 'is liquidated together with the idea' which it expressed. <sup>8</sup>

In the Arcades Project, Benjamin's ambition was to present the very consciousness of the nineteenth century through its material details. Starting from a citation from Goethe, 'everything factual is already theory'<sup>9</sup>, Benjamin, according to Susan Buck-Morss,

retained the notion that the Arcades project would present collective history as Proust had presented his own - not 'life as it was', nor even life remembered, but life as it has been 'forgotten'. Like dream images, urban objects, relics of the past century, were hieroglyphic clues to a forgotten past. Benjamin's goal was to interpret for his own generation these dream fetishes in which, in fossilized form, history's traces had survived.<sup>10</sup>

And as Benjamin himself says,

As Proust begins his life story with awakening, so must every work of history begin with awakening; indeed, it actually must be concerned with nothing else. This work [the Arcades Project] is concerned with awakening from the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

The principle which Benjamin adopted was to be the presentation of what he called 'dialectical images' in montage: material details replete with history, a history which could be unlocked and allowed to speak for itself through the technique of montage. The principle of construction, says Buck-Morss,

is that of montage, whereby the image's ideational elements remain unreconciled, rather than fusing into one 'harmonizing perspective'. For Benjamin, the technique of montage had 'special, even total rights' as a progressive form because it 'interrupts the context into which it is inserted' and thus 'counteracts illusion'.<sup>12</sup>

'Method of this work' notes Benjamin: 'literary montage. I have nothing to say, only to show.'<sup>13</sup>

How does this help us with heritage cinema or with television's encounter with the past in the classic adaptation? It seems to me it offers a way of approaching both the pleasures of classic period adaptation, and the disappointments. The pleasures are indeed pleasure in detail, our engagement is held not by the drive of narrative but by the observation of everyday manners and the ornamental. In this context, it is interesting that the *Radio Times*<sup>14</sup> published the cover photograph of the wedding of Elizabeth and Darcy in the most recent adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* ('The wedding of the year') the week before the wedding actually happened, anticipating wedded bliss while at that point in the episodic sequence of the transmitted story the characters were still at loggerheads. The pleasure was not in what will happen, but in how.

The important point is that the pleasure in detail is a pleasure in profusion, and, for analysis, this pleasure has to be thought differently than a pleasure governed by the Law of the Father and driven by desire and lack. It is, if you like, a small pleasure, a pleasure of observation rather than of fantasy and identification, a pleasure in the ornamental and the everyday which the history of aesthetics has assigned to the feminine, a pleasure which the academy, and academic film and television theory has not regarded as manly, noble or dignified.

The disappointment, of course, is that the pleasure in period detail is not so much an awakening from the nineteenth century as a slumbering in it: it does indeed, as Jameson claims, deny us the 'lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way'. History becomes the present in costume, showing us only human continuities and lingering generalities of tone and style—the seduction of the image—without the formal distance and the historical particularity—the rebellious detail or the materiality of Benjamin's 'dialectical image'—which might enable us to experience difference and change.

So I come to a definition of quality cinema which says something about its relationship to the past : to borrow a phrase from Colin McArthur, quality cinema is an art cinema which has missed its historical appointment with the challenges of modernism. It is this evasion which

sets British quality cinema apart from the great modernist tradition of art cinema in Europe.

### **Reading in detail**

I want to suggest, then, that attention to detail offers a way of understanding both the pleasures and the disappointments of heritage film and classic serial, and provides a mode of approach which might allow us to account for those pleasures and disappointments in a more analytical way than blanket dismissals or denunciations of postmodern nostalgia permit. Let me end by suggesting some of the questions that attention to detail might raise.

First, irony. It seems to me an irony in itself that British quality film and television adaptation is drawn, like a butterfly to a flame, to a literature which is itself deeply ironic, to texts whose central defining ironic trope resists easy translation into the visual. The nineteenth-century novels of Austen, Eliot, Dickens, the twentieth-century novels of E.M. Forster or Evelyn Waugh are sown through with an ironic discourse which continually nudges the reader into judgement, assigning to him or her an understanding of the social which the characters do not have. Consider Jane Austen's famous first line in *Pride and Prejudice*: 'It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that a single man possessed of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.' What happens when that is transferred from the narrator's discourse to Elizabeth Bennet? It assigns to Elizabeth a knowledge of her social and historical situation, a knowledge which in the novel is shared between author and reader over the heads of the characters. In adaptation, characters become knowing and textual irony, the discourse of the narrator, becomes Elizabeth Bennet's arch knowingness. The ironic trope of an embryonic modernism regresses historically into the wit of an earlier classicism. Or think of E.M Forster's famous authorial intervention in *Howards End*:

Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.<sup>15</sup>

This is missing from the film — quite correctly, since its ironic complexity would have been reduced to banality in the mouth of a character — but with it goes the irony of Forster's own discourse, his radical but complex plea for a liberal humanism, and his modernist agonism.

Irony is not an impossible figure for cinema. It has been a commonplace of film theory, at least since Colin MacCabe's influential essay on realism in *Screen* in 1974<sup>16</sup>, that the metadiscourse, the discourse which is the discourse of knowledge and which allows us to place all the other discourses in a hierarchy of truth, is located in the realist film in the *mise en scène*. Don't trust what the characters say, trust what you see. It is the *mise en scène* which gives to the spectator an understanding of the characters' situation which the characters themselves do not have. The detail of the *mise en scène* may stand in an ironic relation to the other discourses. But what happens when the space of irony, the *mise en scène*, is occupied by quality and the loving recreation of period? Quality cinema, the classic serial, sell a particular relation to the past, a relationship based on feel rather than on understanding, on slumbering rather than awakening, on a profusion of detail rather than the dialectical image, on nostalgic longing rather than the 'lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way'. The money shots<sup>17</sup> fill the screen with connotations of pastness, a pastness which has become a thing in itself. The space of the ironic authorial discourse is taken up with shots which caress the past into living presence, the directness and complexity of Forster's ironic relationship to class and empire is suffused with warm light and lost in the lingering period detail which is the hall-mark—and the trade-mark—of the quality film.

Second, the author. I no longer feel embarrassed by the concept of the author, and I am prepared to dispense with all the baffles of narratology. It is Jane Austen who connects *Pride and Prejudice* to a social history - a social history which is not simply adapted for the present but which gives us a sense of historical difference and consequently a sense of our own temporality. Here we can make some of the discriminations which Jameson does not make. When Fay Weldon adapts *Pride and Prejudice*, she makes a serious effort to retain the voice of Jane, and the adaptation is marked by quite theatrical dialogue. But what she offers is an interpretation of the past, of women's relation to the marriage trade and the entailment of property. It is an interpretation of the past for and from the present, in many ways an interpretation which Jane Austen could not possibly have made herself. And the interpretation lies in details of character and nuance of speech. When Andrew Davies adapts the same novel, with a much clearer sense of both the televisual image and of the international market, Jane is commodified, lost in sweeps of romantic ahistoricism and generality. In Merchant/Ivory's loving recreation of the early years of this century, Forster, it seems to me, and his modernist irony, is nowhere to be found.

And third, the actor. I only want to signal this, but it seems to me that in its historical ignorance—and its ignoring—of the detail of acting, film and television studies is peculiarly unable to discuss television drama. When it decided that film was narrative, film theory seems to have forgotten that it was also the performance of a narrative, actors pretending to be people they weren't. However much the classic serial may lovingly recreate the past with a profusion of detail, the body of the actor is stubborn: the furniture may be authentic nineteenth century, but the body of the actor and its gestures are our contemporary. This might be where the analysis would start, for it is acting, the portrayal of character and manners, which seems to me to provide much of the pleasure of period film and the classic adaptation. The pleasure is a pleasure in performance, rather than the more seductive pleasure of

identification: a pleasure in the observation of the details of gesture and inflection, in watching skill with the relaxed detachment and critical judgement which Brecht associates with the aficionado of boxing, or which Benjamin associates with the loss or aura: a small pleasure in ornament and the everyday rather than the overwhelming jouissance of the Sublime and the Grand Style.

To suggest finally where the profusion of detail and the rebellious detail might meet, and to think about how otherwise the past might be represented, I want to refer to Andreas Huyssen's recent book, *Twilight Memories: Marking time in a culture of amnesia*.<sup>18</sup> Huyssen is intrigued by 'the paradox that novelty in our culture is ever more associated with memory and the past rather than with future expectation.'<sup>19</sup> But rather than express this purely in the terms of loss which Jameson employs, he sees in it something of 'society's need for temporal anchoring when in the wake of the information revolution, the relationship between past, present, and future is being transformed.'<sup>20</sup> Rather than simply dismiss the new relationship to the past as a mixture of nostalgia, heritage and enterprise, he sees in the museum a chance to 'reclaim a sense of non-synchronicity and of the past.'<sup>21</sup> But it is a past reconceived as something different. He proposes in the figure which forms the title of his book—twilight memories—an image which might make the past strange again. Twilight, he says,

is that moment of the day that foreshadows the night of forgetting, but that seems to slow time itself, an in-between state in which the last light of the day may still play out its ultimate marvels. It is memory's privileged time.<sup>22</sup>

I would add to that that twilight is also the time when detail stands out and begins to break its organic relationship with the general: the 'floating detail' which Naomi Schor sees as both authenticating memory and making it strange, or the rebellious detail which Adorno and Horkheimer see as a point of resistance to the generality of

administrative rationality. This seems to me to evoke a different relationship to the past and to adaptation which can be sensed in the in-betweenness of Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1993), or in the floating detail of Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), or in the queerness of Jarman's *Edward II* (1991).

The object, then, is not to lose the connection to the past which adaptation and the classic serial offer us, but to rediscover it, yet again, as another and a different country.

### Notes

- 1 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 19.
- 2 *ibid.*, p.21.
- 3 Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (London/New York: Routledge, 1989)
- 4 *ibid.*, p.12.
- 5 *ibid.*, p.20.
- 6 *ibid.*, p.4.
- 7 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1972), p. 130.
- 8 p.12.
- 9 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p.28.
- 10 *ibid.*, p.39.

11 *ibid.*

12 *ibid.*, p.67.

13 *ibid.*, p.73.

14 The *Radio Times* is the weekly British television programme guide.

15 E.M. Forster, *Howards End* [1910] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 188.

16 Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and cinema: notes on some Brechtian theses', *Screen*, 15:2 (1974).

17 'Money shots' are the shots in which the film proclaims that it is expensive — and therefore 'quality'.

18 Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York/London: Routledge, 1995).

19 *ibid.*, p.6.

20 *ibid.*, p.7.

21 *ibid.*, p.34.

22 *ibid.*, p.3.