

ИСТОРИЯ НА КНИГАТА
*BOOK HISTORY***A STUDY OF THREE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT
ADAPTATIONS OF WUTHERING HEIGHTS**

Diana-Nicoleta Ciucu
University of Bucharest

Abstract: *The intention of the paper is to demonstrate the way in which the feminine in Wuthering Heights films is rendered on screen. The author of the article is interested in the feminine, the role of women and the way in which they were received in the society of those days. The research is focus on analysing Wuthering Heights adaptations in terms of their fidelity (or lack of it) to the source text; moreover, it is aim to also address this issue in terms of intertextuality with reference to the layering process, the adding and / or altering of previous film adaptations of the text. The partial conclusion so far is that Wuthering Heights film adaptations imply both recognition and remembrance (of the novel), while also carrying an individual aura within them in terms of the way in which the original material is filtered and staged.*

Keywords: *novel; adaptation; context; intention; creation; reception*

Aim and context

The article aims not only to analyze Wuthering Heights more closely, both as a literary text and in the wider context of political, economic and historical factors, but also to discuss some of the most relevant screenings of the novel. Therefore, the research shall examine the way in which an adapted work differs from the original, taking into account the familiarity and the novelty of adaptations, in terms of differences perceived between literature and film, and likewise the contexts of the films considered, the process of (re)creation and reception presupposed by them, as well as the shifting intentions of an adapted piece of literature into another work.

The discussion will focus on three Wuthering Heights adaptations: the first one is the 1939 film, which is considered up to the present as a reference point, a fact which is easily noticed by some scenes being replicated in many of the upcoming screenings. Further on, I continue with the 1992 adaptation, as it has been considered an ambitious narrative of the novel, in terms of aesthetics and scope; also, Peter Kosminsky's film if seen as one of the most representative Wuthering Heights films, considering the multitude of novelty

elements it conveys. Last but not least, ITV's two-part serial is brought into question due to its fresh perspective upon the well-known and established story of Catherine and Heathcliff, also because it is the first and only series created based on Emily Brontë's novel.

Adaptations of Wuthering Heights

William Wyler's 1939 film adaptation of Wuthering Heights

The first adaptation to be considered is the one from 1939, which gave the novel "cultural significance" and also set a "standard" to which many of the future films have been related. The film, directed by William Wyler, appeared on the eve of World War II, and this historical context is strongly imbued in the images of the film. Although both the main actors and the screenwriter are British, the scenes in the film are materialized in a British-American cultural dialogue (Shachar 2012, 43), the main goal being to strengthen the alliance between the two nations at a delicate historic moment.

At the same time, the cultural context of the 1939 film is also worth mentioning: the swamps meetings between Catherine and Heathcliff represent transcendence. Thus, the emergence, development, and establishment of British studies as the essence of social formation occurred amid the context of the World Wars – as the trauma of war led to a "spiritual hunger" (Shachar 2012, 45–46), for which literature apparently had the answer. In other words, literary education has replaced lost social, religious, moral and intellectual traditions.

However, the film was made in the Hollywood's "Golden Era" (Shachar 2012, 39), and this is reflected in the love story between Catherine and Heathcliff, transmitted to the public through beautiful, spectacular images and scenes. Perhaps the aspect of the film that contrasts most with the novel is the image of Heathcliff: while Emily Brontë structured him as a hard and implacable character, the film presents him as a romantic hero, who tolerantly and silently endures the pain caused by other characters. These elements, and not only, made their mark on the "personal note" that William Wyler gave to the 1939 film, granting the novel its action nuances in tune with the socio-economic, cultural, historical and political aspects of the time.

There is a pertinent reason for which Wyler's adaptation was established as canonical, and that is because of the themes rendered so grandly on screen: the Sublime, the hilltop lovers, transcendent love. Thus, the shots of Catherine and Heathcliff while being on the moor are very still compared to the rest of the action, as if the lovers become one with the landscape and the sky, as if eternity sets up for those moments of transcendent unity and calmness (Federico 2009, 154). Nature is also an important element in the film, acquiring traits of the lovers and lending them characteristics of its own, leading thus to a communion between these forces. Moreover, the 1939 adaptation is also about the notions of identity and "home", rendering a

representational power that “has in fact assured the “afterlife” of *Wuthering Heights* beyond the pages of the novel.” (Shachar 2012, 49).

Peter Kosminsky’s 1992 ambitious narrative of Wuthering Heights

In the case of this adaptation, we are dealing with elements that keep the line of the novel, but also with new scenes added by the director, that are not found in Emily Brontë’s work. An undeniable similarity between the film and the novel is that of Catherine’s character: the director built an image very close to the one described by the author, an energetic Catherine, talkative and joking, who does not follow the rules. In opposition with Catherine’s vitality and energy, Heathcliff, although equally rebellious, is portrayed as rough and grim. Kosminsky also attaches importance to the second generation, not only to the first, as other films have done, and this aspect is also a new element brought in the film as screening of the novel.

As mentioned above, the 1939 film became a reference point for the later ones: Kosminsky’s adaptation not only demonstrates fidelity to the original work, but also similarities to the scenes of the two lovers in the first film. Similarly to William Wyler, Peter Kosminsky shows Catherine and Heathcliff, in their meetings, with their eyes turned to the sky, in a transcendental union, motionless for a long time (compared to the usual frames of the film). In addition, like in the *Golden Age* film, this is in fact the story of the main male character, Heathcliff, being presented as a hero with multiple facets and character traits. In Kosminsky’s hands, Heathcliff preserves some aspects of the Romantic character in the novel, he is a suffering wronged hero, but also an attractive sadist.

Moreover, both 1939 and 1992 screen adaptations are men’s narratives, as Heathcliff plays the leading role, with the implicit hypothesis that these films are the representations of “masculine narratives and masculine dramas of being, marketed as romantic stories for women under the trope of the “lovers’ discourse” (Shachar 2012, 92). Kosminsky’s work of art is, likewise Wyler’s, an embodiment of Heathcliff’s spectacle of pain – thus, the 1992 adaptation mirrors the fascination of the 1990s cinema with the masculine grief (Shachar 2012, 95).

Not only does Peter Kosminsky pay tribute to William Wyler’s 1939 screen adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, but he also out-represents the latter by impressive scenes and elements that define the film he directed: first of all, the 1992 moors consist of giant white rocks that contrast the darkness of the couple, as if Catherine and Heathcliff are the only inhabitants on earth. Second of all, although both screenings glamorize masculine pain and violence, on the one hand Wyler’s Heathcliff directs it onto himself, while Kosminsky’s Heathcliff inflicts cruelty upon women – differently said, the 1992 Romantic hero, as Kosminsky interprets him, is a product of the times when masculine misogyny was celebrated. Debating upon this issue within the wider context of the fall of

post-industrialism, Ralph Fiennes exhibits the recognition of men as “subjects-in-themselves”, having their own needs and individuality (Federico 2009, 161).

Beyond the reference to Emily Brontë’s work and Wyler’s landmark screening, Kosminsky’s ambitious screen “translation” of *Wuthering Heights* also brings new elements: first, the presence of the character of the author of the novel in the film is an aspect that had not previously been introduced. At the same time, the director places the male at the center of the narrative, which inevitably leads to the removal of the female to the edge. Along this line of ideas, with Heathcliff in absolute control of nature, the director added a scene not found in the novel or in any other adaptation: the male character is depicted as the master of nature and the one who decides Catherine’s destiny when he prophesies about her life in accordance with the weather. With this in mind, I believe that the ambitious 1992 film is an aesthetic transposition of undeniable importance, which introduces elements of absolute novelty, giving the story a fresh air and a unique perspective.

ITV’s 2009 two-part series adaptation of Wuthering Heights

Like the previous screenings discussed, the 2009 serial presents both known components, already well established at that time by the novel itself and the films launched before. Firstly, the ITV serial is quite faithful to Catherine’s image as described by Emily Brontë, embodying a personality characterized by desire, aggression and excess found in the pages of the novel. Secondly, the film that features Charlotte Riley and Tom Hardy tells, like previous major screenings, the story of Heathcliff: this time, the beginning scene has Heathcliff in the foreground, (a reminder of Ralph Fiennes’ image) who is in Catherine’s bed (instead of Lockwood, as we already know from the writer’s story). At the same time, the opening scene is resumed at the end (technique found in Kosminsky’s film), a unique feature that gives Tom Hardy the role of the narrator.

On the other hand, the neo-Victorian adaptation of ITV incorporates characteristics of the Victorian era, for example social class, gender roles and expectations imposed onto characters, gothic elements and family and inheritance, emotional intensity, brought to the fore precisely to be realized: “We no longer see in the past refuge from the present; instead, we excavate the past to expose its “iniquities and indignities” (Shachar 2012, 148).

A novelty of the 2009 film is that of building a metaphorical and ideological relationship between Catherine and Cathy – an example of the daughter’s materialization in her mother is the scene of Cathy’s imprisonment in Catherine’s room by Heathcliff. As he unearths Catherine’s grave to embrace her remains in a spate of possessive desire, Cathy walks her hand over the inlays in her mother’s furniture. The flashback technique that unites the two generations is present here: as Heathcliff returns from his “encounter” with Catherine, he looks up at her bedroom window to see Cathy – through this image both mother and daughter personify the captive woman.

This two-part serial was addressed to a young, educated target audience. ITV's film focuses on the historical context of the novel, and the themes covered are the role of women, feminism, notions of class and race, but also colonialism: for example, Catherine's choice in terms of the man she decides to marry and her heart being caught between her passionate love for Heathcliff and the security and social expectations imposed by a conventional union with Edgar, is an example of a recurrent theme in Victorian literature.

A novelty is Catherine's numerous red garments, which are closely linked to the modernization and sexualization of the character in the film. However, Catherine's attachment to Heathcliff is far more complex and contradictory in the novel, unlike in this film, where her personality traits in relation to Heathcliff denote a simplification, translated into her desire for the man she loves. Another new aspect introduced by the ITV film is the placement of the well-known love story in a wider social and cultural context (Catherine and Heathcliff are presented at a village market and at a church event) than the novel and previous adaptations, which had accustomed viewers to the pair of lovers isolated from the rest of the world.

The 2009 serial differs from the novel from a few points of view: firstly, the action is located in a late 19th Century, as opposed to the novel, whose setting is the mid-Victorian society. Secondly, unlike Cathy's interest for Linton found in the pages of the book, ITV presents a stronger daughter-mother bond; thirdly, the film consists of sex scenes, which are not to be found in the novel by Emily Brontë. Fourthly, Lockwood's character is removed from the screen adaptation (and its function is taken by Heathcliff), which automatically leads to a shift of focus onto the second generation. As Heathcliff becomes the narrator, there is more emphasis on his inner life and the love he shares with Catherine.

Not only in regards to the novel is ITV's serial distinct, but also in relation to the previous adaptations: whereas the previous screenings discussed have placed the lovers in isolation, the 2009 serial present Catherine, Heathcliff and their love story in a wider social context, as it is sprinkled with "a church congregation, a market day ... all crowded with people ..." (Shachar 2012, 161). Also, the fore-mentioned strong ideological link between Cathy and her mother Catherine is something fully explored in this film. In addition, the sexualization of Catherine's character is symbolized by the numerous red garments she wears in the film – together with this aspect, the modernized Catherine's contradictory desires are "domesticated" and disclosed through sexual desire (Shachar 2012, 155).

The Trauma dimension of Catherine and Heathcliff

There is a powerful trauma dimension that stems, mainly, from the way the characters are constructed both by the author and as rendered on screen. Consequently, investigating the way in which traumatic elements are transposed in the films under scrutiny has been and still is one of the key

aspects of the research. Along this line of thought, I shall direct my attention to considering the traumatic representation of the main characters and, more specifically, the way in which the mother – daughter relationship is displayed.

Catherine

Attentively constructing her character, Emily Brontë shows mastery with respect to a deep psychological insight: we are introduced to a surprisingly immoderate character that takes us by surprise every step of the way, in terms of immaturity, the refusal to grow up and assume responsibility, her inclination to a split identity, self-destruction and a constant demonstration of extreme emotions and conduct.

All through her girlhood, Catherine leads a double life: she was one at home, a reckless girl inconsiderate of her manners, while a totally different one at the Lintons, she tries to charm everyone. Although Brontë's main character sets out as a representative of innocence, authenticity, purity, the resident of the moors (by Heathcliff's side) eventually succumbs to social norms and chooses the material comfort at Thrushcross Grange and the advantages conferred by a marriage with Edgar. This choice leads to Catherine's further psyche split and her upcoming physical and mental downfall.

In the relationship with Heathcliff, Cathy lives in a heavenly setting; she is like a bridge to Heathcliff, leading us into his deepest inner being, as they defy both time and space. Her "fall from heaven" commences with her five-week stay at Thrushcross Grange for medical care after having been bitten by one of the Lintons' dogs. Upon her return to Wuthering Heights, Catherine confesses to Nelly her oneness with Heathcliff, but chooses to give into Edgar's marriage proposal.

Heathcliff's leaving brings about Catherine's delirious behavior, by means of hallucinations and catatonic symptoms. When Heathcliff returns, Catherine's twofold personality and her to and fro oscillation between conformity and nonconformity surface again: she is overjoyed at seeing his former lover, as inappropriate and preposterous as it may be for her condition of a married woman. It is on this particular occasion, again, an instance of Cathy evincing this "double character without exactly intending to deceive anyone" (Bloom 2008, 72) and without being entirely conscious of her thoughts, feelings and actions. This example adds up to the occurrences illustrating the main character's identity diffusion and infantile regression, as well as her insecure attachment.

Catherine's trauma, stemming (also) from childhood, is transposed into her self-destructive behavior: there are a few situations when she locks herself in her bedroom and refuses to eat, her target being that of indirectly punishing Heathcliff and Edgar (through means of direct self-punishment). This instability is due to the fact that she realizes, after Heathcliff's return and vengeful marriage to Isabella, that what she feared most has happened – she has lost the paradisiac state of her youth. Alongside this idea, it is worth

mentioning the instance when Catherine fails to recognize herself in the mirror: looking with her child's eyes, she cannot make out who that grown-up woman in the mirror is.

The heroine of the novel fails once more to distinguish between past and present when being heavily pregnant and on her deathbed – Catherine still doesn't admit her actual condition and dreams about her childhood on the moors, a time when she hadn't "betrayed her heart". Not only the first Catherine is subject to a tragic life, but also her daughter: when a teenager, Catherine Linton seems to follow Cathy's footsteps, as she seems not to live her own life, but to re-live that of her mother. Nonetheless, although they may have a rough start as a couple at Wuthering Heights, Catherine Linton and Hareton's love leads them to a bright future.

On the one hand, Catherine has multiple facets and a troubled personality out of which she herself cannot make much of (complementary to her attitude towards other people, her own self is distorted, as in her bedroom there are three different options of name scribbled – Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Heathcliff and Catherine Linton); what is more, there is an extensive inclination on her part to live in the past instead of the present – on Heathcliff's return, her repressed love for him emerges, but in her delirium she doesn't refer to the grown-up lover that has returned and is before her eyes, but to her companion with whom she wandered the moors in her youth.

On the other hand, although the second Catherine commences her adulthood similar to her mother's and is prone to low points in life, she realizes only her action and determination will save her. Consequently, the heroine of the other part of the novel tames her intricate inner nature and decides to invest time and affection in her relationship with Hareton. By deciding to go on the road not taken by the previous generation, Cathy Linton and her husband rewrite the love story Catherine and Heathcliff shared, while at the same time shedding hope for the reader, as it is by their own will that they freed themselves from past constraints.

In 1939 *Wuthering Heights*, the camera is an active participant in the story, actively moving around to catch and render the happenings, except for the moments of tranquility as it observes the lovers on the moors. In Wyler's film, Catherine's emotional turmoil is a main focus: as Catherine separates herself from Heathcliff and the moors, and chooses the riches at Thrushcross Grange, the camera seems to distance itself from her and only presents her objectively, as an "ice sculpture", a beautiful spectacle to look at (Shachar 2012, 52). Moreover, Catherine is doubly distanced from the audience, both shown by the camera and being "framed" by the mirror, in the ballroom scene.

Camerawork is of paramount importance in ITV's TV series as well, since it is by means of it that the ideological link between Catherine and her daughter is provided to the audience. Also, the elaborate flashbacks that yield important details regarding the themes which bring the story full circle, are possible through skillful camerawork. An instance of the transition from

mother to daughter is made as Heathcliff goes home after having dug Catherine's grave and sees, at the bedroom window, imprisoned Cathy – in addition to this, the idea that the two women share a status of objectified possessions, is created.

Heathcliff

Heathcliff is one of the main characters, alongside Catherine, being endowed with a complex, troubled personality. He is often described as primitive, brutal, his sole interest being Catherine, whilst his human state is frequently questioned (Shachar 2012, 66). On the one hand, considering *Wuthering Heights* a Gothic novel has resulted in no interpretation of Heathcliff and his actions whatsoever in as much as, on the other hand, his unworldly love for Cathy and hate for the families residing at *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange* respectively, taken to the extreme, have been thought of to pertain to a realm outside human nature.

Heathcliff's fiendish behavior is attributed to the misery inflicted upon him when a child: as Mr. Earnshaw brought him home from Liverpool, he is rejected and abused by members of the household and develops, in time, strategies of defense. Although at first sight it may seem as if Heathcliff is rescued from a state of abandonment, with his arrival at the Earnshaws, he is psychologically abandoned. It is for this reason and for his unknown roots and primary childhood that he develops and manifests throughout the novel an acute sense of emotional instability, insecure attachment and a damaged personality.

Further on, Heathcliff exerts an out-of-the-ordinary hardness and a lack of reliance on anyone else (except Cathy), that gradually make him distance himself not only from the others, but also from his own feelings. Heathcliff becomes more estranged when he inadvertently hears the first part of Catherine's confession to Nelly, after having been proposed marriage by Edgar Linton. He then immediately flees and disappears for a few years to come back as a wealthy self-made man. Upon his return, Heathcliff's way of acting is more compartmentalized than before, as he unleashes his accumulated hatred and frustration on anyone standing in his way.

Everything goes beyond the bearable with the onset of Catherine's illness and death, which trigger Heathcliff's insanity. It is on this occasion that Nelly describes him as a Gothic "savage beast goaded to death with knives and spears" (González 2015, 18); also, Heathcliff exerts a more and more traumatic attitude and conduct, as he refuses to live in the present where his beloved is not to be found anymore, but remains attached to his memories of the careless times when he was wandering the moors with Catherine. Another straightforward example of a pathological behavior from Heathcliff's part is the exhumation of Cathy's corpse, as a result of his intense desire of being with her in any form.

As Catherine dies, Heathcliff demands of her to haunt him, as if this was the only way for them to be together:

(1) “Be with me always – take any form – drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! It is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!” (Brontë 2004, 172).

Heathcliff’s decline begins shortly afterwards, as he adopts the same standpoint as Catherine: he neglects his health, he is no longer interested in life and wanders the moors on his own. On the contrary, as soon as he senses that his painful existence is about to end and he will reunite with his beloved in a short while, Heathcliff grows into a cheerful man. During one of the following mornings, Nelly frighteningly finds him dead in Cathy’s paneled bedroom.

The camera in Peter Kosminsky’s film is important in mirroring Heathcliff’s interior: for example, in the letter scene, it closes-in on Heathcliff’s face, sculpted by light and dark next to a candle, overwhelmed by emotion, absent-mindedly staring and mumbling “... why have you not come back to me, Catherine. I have waited so long.” (Shachar 2012, 93). This scene is intertwined with Heathcliff delivering the same letter for his son to write to Catherine’s daughter, to seduce her. In this scene and not only, the focus on the hero’s body is meant to build it up as an eroticised space, attributed to Romantic excess, as the majority of the audience of the film was composed by women.

Heathcliff’s emotions expressed by means of his body is an aspect the director of ITV’s series aimed her attention at: the beginning of the film, the hero’s tortured face is half-lit by the candle in his hand, another example of Romantic element, transmitted from previous iconic adaptations. Actually, the opening scene is utterly minimalist in terms of the details offered about the character, as it relies on the already-constructed persona of Heathcliff, both from the novel and the preceding films. Alongside edgy, accelerated music, the quickly-paced camerawork contributes to the character’s insight and feelings, next framed-up for the understanding of the audience.

Conclusion

The general lines of the two films and the TV series have been evaluated both in terms of historical, cultural and social contexts and with reference to the portrayal of the main characters. It has been the focus of attention to highlight the role of the feminine both in Victorian times, as shown in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, and in the three adaptations discussed. Also, the way in which each director “read” the novel, has led to a unique interpretation and choice in rendering certain aspects and in a specific way, in the films debated. The last perspective touched upon is the traumatic aspect in both Catherine and Heathcliff and a few examples in which this is reflected on screen.

NOTES

¹ Transposed on screen by Catherine and Heathcliff. See SHACHAR, H., 2012. *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature*. Wuthering Heights & Company, p. 43.

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Diana-Nicoleta Ciucu

University of Bucharest

Mihai Eminescu Street, 81,

Bucharest, Romania

E-mail: diana.n.ciucu@gmail.com