ABIGAIL BURNHAM BLOOM and MARY SANDERS POLLOCK, eds.

VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND FILM ADAPTATION

(Cambria, November, 2011), pp. 280

Reviewed by Kamilla Elliott

A book devoted to Victorian literature and film adaptation is long overdue. Hundreds of essays and chapters have been published on the subject; prior edited collections have addressed literary film adaptation more broadly (e.g., Michael Klein and Gillian Parker, eds., The English Novel and the Movies [1981]; Robert Giddings and Erica Sheen, eds., The Classic Novel: From Page to Screen [2000]); numerous monographs have treated the subject more specifically, including books by one of this volume's editors (Abigail Burnham Bloom, The Literary Monster on Screen: Five Nineteenth-century British Novels and Their Cinematic Adaptations [2010]) and one of its contributors (Gene M. Moore, Conrad on Film [2006]). Yet Victorian Literature and Film Adaptation has never been the title of a book until now. This collection thus raises great expectations. In some ways, it exceeds them, moving outside the Victorian period to discuss films of fiction by Jane Austen and Arthur Conan Doyle; going beyond film adaptation to consider theatrical, television, VHS, and DVD adaptations; and stretching further than Linda Hutcheon's definition of "adaptation proper" (A Theory of Adaptation, 2006, 171) to study spinoffs and sequels.

In other ways, however, the collection disappoints expectations, retaining the somewhat narrow focus of much prior work in the field. The majority of its chapters treat Anglo-American film adaptations of Victorian prose fiction by authors who have been staples of adaptation
studies for decades (Austen, [Mary] Shelley, Dickens, Stevenson, Stoker, Conrad, and Doyle). Similarly, Anglo-American critics and theorists dominate the bibliographies. The collection, though eclectic, is at times dated. While Leitch contends that "these are not one's grandmother's Victorians" (14), many essays offer us one's parents' Victorians, engaging traditional aesthetic, formalist, narratological, humanist, and old historicist theories and methodologies that have been attacked, and some would argue, debunked by the theoretical turn that swept through the humanities and social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century, shifting scholarship from humanist, formalist, and aesthetic readings of high-art, canonical texts to Marxist, poststructuralist, New Historicist, and postmodern analyses of all manner of texts. Welcoming theoretical and methodological variety, I find value in older approaches, especially when--as in the essays by Gene M. Moore and Ellen Moody--they rest on a substantial body of scholarship and research. But older methodologies that privilege objectivism tend to produce work that is more descriptive than conceptual, lacking the larger theoretical payoff that scholars have come to expect following the theoretical turn, quite apart from political ideology.

Thomas Leitch's wide-ranging and informative introduction, however, treats both newer and older theories, highlighting many of the historical, theoretical, cultural, and industry factors that have influenced, contextualized, and arisen from Victorian literary film adaptation. Unlike many introductions to edited collections, Leitch's evaluates as well as summarizes the chapters, reviewing as well as previewing them and defending the volume from anticipated criticism.

While Leitch's defense of the book's structure convincingly challenges the norm of arranging edited collections chronologically (14), the organization of this volume is not entirely clear. It contains three sections: "Reinterpreting the Victorians: Adaptation and the Techne of Revision," "Modifying the Victorians: Adaptation and Shifts in Cultural Values," and
"Translating the Victorians: Teaching Books by Reading Movies." But revision and modification are synonyms, and "reinterpreting" often involves "shifts in cultural values." Moreover, chapters in the first section treat shifts in cultural values, and chapters in the second consider how adaptations "reinterpret" Victorian literature. The title of the last section articulates a valuable point that emerges in all three: that adaptations substantially and even ineluctably change subsequent readings of the works they adapt.

There are other problems with the structure. Devoting four of eleven chapters to two authors is questionable in a book bearing such a broad title. While Leitch contends that Austen deserves two chapters because of her prominent position in adaptation studies, this "eminently logical" (9) argument does not explain why Dickens, the most adapted of all Victorian authors, is confined to one chapter, while Trollope, much less often adapted, is awarded two.

That said, Trollope's appearance does represent a welcome departure from the usual suspects populating Victorian film adaptation studies. So too do chapters addressing adaptations of works by Robert Browning and Oscar Wilde (by Mary Sanders Pollock and Jean-Marie Lecomte, respectively), which bring much-needed discussions of poetry and plays into a collection devoted predominantly to prose fiction. Elsewhere, Leitch and Ellen Moody widen the collection's scope, examining the understudied intertexts of theatrical adaptations and screenplays positioned between literature and its film and television adaptations. Gene M. Moore's essay too carries the collection beyond Anglo-American materials.

Pollock's study of Browning's poetry and the Pied Piper legend in Adam Egoyan's The Sweet Hereafter (1997) is also innovative in departing from the common practice of addressing a single text adapted to a single film. Chapters by Leitch, Natalie Neill, Sarah J. Heidt, and Tamara S. Wagner do likewise, considering numerous adaptations of a single literary text. Conversely,
Moody offers a variation on standard approaches by discussing adaptations of several books by a single author.

Authors who address a single text adapted to a single film (Lecomte, Moore, Michael Eberle-Sinatra, Louise McDonald, Laura Carroll, Christopher Palmer, Sue Thomas, and Rebecca Waese) innovate in other ways, probing a variety of issues. Lecomte analyzes Wilde's play and Lubitsch's film of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925) in terms of aesthetics, poetics, practitioner, and audience expectations. Eberle-Sinatra reads Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995) back into Jane Austen's *Emma*, which it modernizes, to argue that the novel's Frank Churchill is also gay. In examining Roger Michell's film of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1995), co-authors Carroll, Palmer, Thomas, and Waese consider ideological, political, and cultural issues raised by the theoretical turn.

If Leitch's introduction serves as a largely positive review of the chapters, the final chapter challenges the assumptions of some essays. But while several authors respond to Leitch's opening chapter, which addresses four models of intertextuality, none responds to the challenges of the final chapter. I would have liked to see some dialogue, if not with the final chapter, at least with the newer theories that challenge older ones. How, for instance, would Moore situate his fascinating points about servants in Patrice Chéreau's *Gabrielle* (2005), a film of Conrad's short story "The Return," within political and social discourses about class? Could Moody step back from her meticulous microanalyses of screenplays to present a broader perspective of how screenplays mediate between literature and film? In a similar vein, many essays unfold their arguments divorced from mainstream Victorian criticism of their texts, topics, and authors. Eberle-Sinatra seems unaware of the extensive discourse on queer Austen (by D. A. Miller, Terry Castle, Clara Tuite, Vincent Quinn, and many others); entering into it would have enriched
his somewhat under-researched discussion and strengthened his sometimes speculative argumentation. Similarly, comments on sympathy in this collection are made in a common, everyday, humanist sense, unenriched by engagement with discussions by Audrey Jaffe (Scenes of Sympathy 2000), Brigid Lowe (Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy 2007), and numerous other critics who have complexly theorized and keenly debated this topic so central to Victorian studies.

Most contributors ignore the challenges to realism raised in the final chapter, as well as debates over realism that are central to Victorian studies of fiction, photography, and the arts and essential reading for Victorian studies of literature and film. (See, for example, Katherine Kearns, Nineteenth-century Literary Realism [1996]; Alison Byerly, Realism, Representation, and the Arts in Nineteenth-century Literature [1997]; Nancy Armstrong, Fiction in the Age of Photography [2002]; Daniel Novak, Realism, Photography, and Nineteenth-century Fiction [2008]). Lecomte writes: "One simply wants to understand how Lubitsch assembled the fragments of cinema to conjure up a world that might be just as real as the empirical one" (51). But Lecomte's narratological approach, which aspires to objectivity, is decidedly at odds with postmodern and poststructuralist challenges to realism.

Narratology is rarely entirely objective. It is generally accompanied by aesthetic and humanist values that hardly consist with what Leitch calls the "ultimate goal of a collection of case studies like this": "to remind one of the radical contingency of culture that is so often proposed, for example, as an anchor or bulwark against the erosion of middle-class values in modern times" (16). In diametric opposition to this claim, Neill reads Dickens's A Christmas Carol to affirm rather than to challenge or historicize the middle-class values of "giving and receiving, goodwill towards others, joviality, togetherness, and self-improvement" (81) and to
declare their relevance to "modern times." Gleaning a moral lesson from the tale, she contends that it "encourages audiences to engage, along with Scrooge, in self-evaluation" (81). Yet insofar as it reckons with spinoffs, Neill's well-researched chapter pushes adaptation beyond the boundaries set for it by scholars like Hutcheon.

Some chapters try to use postmodern theory, but do so sketchily and sometimes with theoretical confusion. McDonald's "From Victorian to Postmodern Negation" does not fully define, engage with, or apply postmodern theory, for the most part conflating postmodernism's fragmented subject with a modernist divided subject. Her essay is far more concerned with the Romantic subject ("the political and philosophical system which corrupts and then destroys innocence" [140]), modernist individualism ("the impact of an inflexible system upon an individual" [140]), and expressivist concepts of authorship ("Barry's army reflections ... reveal Thackeray's perspective" [143]), and yet it does not clearly identify its own allegiance to these theoretical positions nor does it allow postmodern theory much of a voice in the essay. Similarly, when Neill cites Catherine Waters on "commodification and consumption" (81), she invokes these terms in their ordinary senses rather than discussing or applying the political and psychoanalytic theories that inform Waters's work. Elsewhere, Pollock invokes Laura Mulvey's work casually, without adopting psychoanalytic theory or methodology herself (99-100).

If adaptation studies espousing older theoretical positions are to survive, thrive, and reach a wider readership in twenty-first century Victorian studies, they must, I believe, acknowledge, understand, and debate with the more recent theories that have sought to discredit them. Leitch's chapter (which follows his general introduction) is exemplary in this regard, establishing a centrist position between older and newer theories. His interests in intertextuality extend to his methodology, which encompasses narratological, structuralist, and poststructuralist theories of
adaptation. Intriguingly, although he arrives at the postmodern and poststructuralist conclusion that "there are more problems in intertextual relations than any set of analytical categories can contain" (44), he does so through structuralist, rational, logical, linear argumentation rather than by using poststructuralist or postmodern modes of analysis. He thus demonstrates that one does not have to abandon older theories and methodologies for new ones, but that they can be set in fruitful intertextual relations with one another.

If I began reading the collection with great expectations, I ended up, like Oliver Twist, wanting more. Even Leitch's stimulating chapter left me wanting more. As in his prior work on adaptation (most notably *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* [2007]), Leitch's interests lie with identifying problems and debunking myths in adaptation studies. Devoting the majority of this chapter to testing the limits of existing adaptation models, he grants only few sentences to a potential model of adaptation, "generation" (42). I would have liked the proportions reversed: a few sentences on the problematic models and the majority of the chapter spent fleshing out his recommended model. It may be that the historicity of Victorian literature encourages scholars to look back more than forward and to assess the past more than envision the future.

The pedagogical chapters by Heidt, Wagner, and co-authors Carroll, Palmer, Thomas, and Waese, however, carry us from our parents' and our own Victorians to our children's Victorians--to the Victorians of the future--demonstrating the potential richness, freshness, excitement, and innovation of adaptation studies for Victorian scholars as well as for undergraduate students. Yet even here, I found myself wanting more. Wagner's admirably extensive uses of adaptations in her teaching are treated so briefly that they would have benefitted from a few more detailed, illustrative examples to flesh them out.
The collection ends with a select bibliography of adaptation and film study. If it had included a select bibliography of books and essays on Victorian literature and film adaptation, this volume would have better served teachers and undergraduate students, who seem to be its main intended audience.

Although the volume left me wanting more—a fuller bibliography; more authors, genres, nations, and theories; more engagement with mainstream Victorian studies; more engagement with contemporary theories; more conceptualization and explanation of observations and more fleshing out of theoretical and pedagogical points—I consider that to be a good effect of this collection. Hopefully it will inspire its readers to undertake more research in this important and fascinating field.

Kamilla Elliot is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Lancaster University.