

## (Read)dressing the Victorian past in the filmic adaptation of A. S. Byatt's *Possession*

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“The past will connect them. The passion will possess them” reads the sell line of Neil LaBute’s 2002 film based on A. S. Byatt’s postmodern-Victorian pastiche *Possession: A Romance* (1990). Despite its very appealing *mise-en-scene*, which involves the exquisite recreation of Victorian England, and a cast including Gwyneth Paltrow and heritage favourites Jennifer Ehle and Jeremy Northam, the film version of Byatt’s Booker-prize winning and best-selling novel may be considered a critical failure. Nevertheless, with this filmic text under the spotlight, I would like to demonstrate that heritage films such as *Possession* show a thematic preoccupation with class and gender and are implicitly aware of their inability to re-create the past even as they journey into it through a visual emphasis on historical accuracy. My focus is on the ways the past acts upon the present, and vice-versa, in LaBute’s twenty-first century discourse about the nineteenth century. How do texts and ideas of the past act upon the present? Does the way that we read the past say more about us than it does about any “real” past? Do we speak the past, or does the past speak us?

The verb *readdressing* in the title of this essay signals out the all too evident fact that the Victorian age has been frequently dealt with by filmmakers (making it into some sort of fetish), each one *dressing* up the past in the colours they saw fit. In fact, for some decades now, we have witnessed a distinct fascination with the past, Victorian or otherwise, through an upsurge of heritage films, most of them cinematic adaptations of canonical Anglo-American texts. Literary adaptation of the British literary canon is certainly the main contributor to the development of the heritage genre, although contemporary novels and stories have also made their way into the heritage scripts, keeping the connection with heritage cinema through their dealing with the past. These films have enjoyed considerable critical attention and box office success. The Victorian age clearly prevails, with films based on what Dana Shiller has titled “neo-Victorian novels” where a particular play between present and past is embedded, also making their way into the heritage scripts. Here we can include, besides *Possession*, adaptations of contemporary novels and stories set in the nineteenth to early twentieth century such as John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), adapted for the screen in 1981, and Byatt’s *Morpho Eugenia* (1992), made into *Angels and Insects* in 1996 by Philip Haas. I argue that contemporary culture is engaged in a re-mapping, in which literature and film, and heritage films

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in particular, intend to communicate a postmodern awareness of the instability of gender and class and to rethink questions of history and representation. There is one aspect which I would like to foreground in order to set the focus of this essay: heritage *mise-en-scene* does not aim to re-create, in the sense of reproduce, but distinctively to re-present the past. Countering the claims of many film critics in Britain, heritage films do not attempt to convey the past as reality, but rather cite the means available to re-present it. My argument here thus responds to heritage critics' accusations that these films attempt to promote a false, idyllic image of the past as historical reality. It is my view that, no matter what images are on display, these films do not offer them as "reality."

Examining an adaptation of a "neo-Victorian novel" following the parallel love stories between two Victorian poets and two contemporary academics interested in the lives and works of the former entails making out the impact of such revisionist cultural practices. Both novel and film grapple with several issues current in critical theory about the ways in which we *know* the past (if there ever can be such a thing) and the uses to which we put that knowledge. Paraphrasing Kate Flint, my point of departure can be formulated as follows: in establishing a dialogue with the Victorian period, re-telling it, texts like *Possession* inevitably emphasize that the idea of Victorian England itself needs to be re-fashioned to serve the critical needs of the present (Flint 1997: 302). On the face of the contemporary recurrence of Victorian rewritings, Dianne Sadoff and John Kucich posit that aspects of late-century postmodernism could more appropriately be called "post-Victorian", a term that conveys paradoxes of historical continuity and disruption (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xiii). In the introduction to *Victorian Afterlife*, they address a thorny question: "why, exactly, has contemporary culture preferred to engage the nineteenth century [...] as its historical "other"? [...] we make a periodizing claim of our own: [...] the network of overdetermination shaped by economics, sexuality, political struggle, and technological forms privileges the Victorian period as the site of historical emergence through which postmodernism attempts to think its own cultural identity." (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xi-xxv). Within this framework, the development and reception of the heritage film stands as an illustration of key tendencies, not only in today's cinema, but also in current English culture. As noted in 2000 by Pamela Church Gibson, the heritage "genre" is at present "wider and more experimental and now has the element of pastiche; *Millennial Heritage* might be a chapter heading in ten years' time" (Gibson 2000: 124). Film criticism draws temporal barriers between the Merchant Ivory "era", considered traditional heritage, and a so-called "post-heritage" period, with its specific pleasures, opened with the release of Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992) and Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993) and continuing with *Carrington* (1995), *Elizabeth* (1998), and so on.

In the article "Sexuality and Heritage" (1995), Claire Monk adopts an ambiguous attitude towards the division between (traditional) heritage and "post-heritage" productions, which suggests that, although tempting, this theoretical separation is difficult to support when closely analysing cinematic texts like *Possession*. In fact, the

critic apparently endorses the compartmentalizing of heritage films into traditional and post-heritage, with the latter “offering plentiful postmodern pleasures: of the performative, of self-referentiality and irony” (Monk 1995: 9), all presumably lacking in the former: “the transgressive sexual politics of the post-heritage film places it in genuine opposition to a 1990s Hollywood-defined mainstream” (Monk 1995: 7). Monk sums up the critical opinion that, in their explicit portrayal of deviant and “non-dominant” sexuality, post-heritage films apparently contradict the political and aesthetic conservatism of older heritage films: “What most unites the post-heritage films is undoubtedly an overt concern with sexuality and gender, particularly non-dominant gender and sexual identities: feminine, non-masculine, mutable, androgynous, ambiguous” (Monk 1995: 7). At the same time, however, she questions the very capacity of post-heritage films to significantly detach themselves from the heritage visual and thematic motifs: “But, paradoxically, the post-heritage films revel in the visual pleasures of heritage, even as they seem to distance themselves [...]. Similarly, the post-heritage’s film up-front sexuality owes rather more to its heritage predecessors than the post-heritage filmmaker would like to think” (Monk 1995: 8). In dealing with these topics, “post-heritage” films do not contradict, but rather take forward similar notions debated in traditional heritage films. “Post-heritage” productions not only extend the self-referentially pictorial representation of the past in their *mise-en-scene*, but also draw on key heritage terms. If online reviews of LaBute’s film criticize the perpetuation of the Merchant Ivory<sup>1</sup> formulas in the Victorian sequences, it would also be accurate to say that it offers postmodern pleasures — of the performative and of self-referentiality — usually associated with post-heritage productions. *Possession* encodes the notion that everything can be performed — from class and gender to the past itself. While narratively centring on the search for the truth behind the performance, this film signals an acute awareness of the limits of such quest.

Charging heritage films with a nostalgic and selective rendering of the past, Andrew Higson suggests that they abound in useless shots of landscape and architecture. When focusing on the critical controversy surrounding heritage cinema’s ideological purposes, it is inescapable that in England in particular, the term “heritage” had (or still has) a negative connotation, as part of Margaret Thatcher’s program regarding the preservation of national identity through re-enacting the British past. By the end of the Thatcherite decade, most studies of British film connected the industry with ideas and values promoted by the New Right regime. One of the crucial points film critics made in the 1990s was that

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<sup>1</sup> The names most often associated with heritage filmmaking are those of James Ivory and Ismail Merchant. The two filmmakers, along with the team’s writer Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, can surely be regarded as the main catalysts in the consolidation of this genre category. Beyond their own adaptations of Forster, Kazuo Ishiguro and Henry James being known as the “Merchant Ivory” canon, any highbrow, historically accurate and beautifully shot productions set in the past tends to be associated with the Merchant Ivory style of filmmaking.

heritage films became part of the decade's marketing craze<sup>2</sup>, in a way encapsulated in Robert Hewison's expression "heritage industry" (1987). According to these "heritage bashers", those films made the British past a commodity to be sold as a sightseeing attraction in organised tours of old architectural landmarks (in a way reminiscent of Julian Barnes's theme park in *England, England*) and as a cultural product in films and television. However, we contend that heritage films' turning to a cultural inheritance of the past is an intentional artistic choice. The self-conscious ambiguity of the heritage narrative reveals an understanding of the shortcomings of any attempt to represent reality, past or present. Clearly, the painterly sensuality of *Possession*'s heritage *mise-en-scene* and a distinct self-reflexiveness in its citing the past suggest the film's awareness that the past it "retrieves" is, in fact, imagined. *Possession* is as much about the failure of representation, or its inability to represent the past, as it may seem an attempt to re-create it.

Most heritage narratives foreground the figure of an intellectual, artist and/or scientist. In a similar vein, *Possession* features two academics — Maud Bailey and Roland Michell — that function as observers and use literary clues to discover an illicit love affair between two famous fictional Victorian poets, Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash. The scrutinizing abilities of these two detective figures transcend the differences in their social and even professional status. Thus, Maud comes from an aristocratic family and has regularly visited her relatives at the old country house where LaMotte lived; she is a young professor bent on making a name for herself as the biographer of her ancestress LaMotte; she has achieved academic recognition as a feminist literary critic and is running a prestigious Women's Resource Centre. Roland, on the other hand, has a working-class background, lives in "the basement of a decaying Victorian house" in London (Byatt 1991: 11), works part-time as an obscure assistant of an Ash scholar, Professor Blackadder, and is basically financially supported by his girlfriend Val. LaBute's *Possession* takes significant liberties with Byatt's novel. Afraid perhaps that the American filmgoer would not pick up on the class differences, he decided to highlight the distinction between the two characters as national as well: in LaBute's film, Roland is an American scholar temporarily attached to the British Museum for his research on Ash. If we consider the white and upper-class male the standard representative of the patriarchal authority heritage films are generally perceived as promoting, it becomes clear that these characters are situated outside the sexual and social "norm". They differ in at least two ways: as gender-different (Maud is a woman) or outside the dominating class (Roland comes from a working class background). The interest clearly shifts here from the social and financial power of upper-class patriarchy, a type of power Thatcher's regime was said to emulate and which heritage films were supposed to long for, to the intellectual authority of the scrutinizing observers, who transcend class and gender differences.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, that crucial point was made by John Corner and Sylvia Harvey, the editors of *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture* (1991).

Through their emphasis on identity as performance, heritage films also allude to a certain crisis of representation. While attempting to perform Victorian history, *Possession* is simultaneously aware of its inability to re-create the past. The main characters are literary scholars in (more or less) academic pursuit of the lives and works of the two Victorian poets whose secret love affair they have discovered. Moreover, the two academics are eventually joined by more scholars who can provide literary and biographical clues for the Victorian characters' actions. These clues are taken from diaries, letters and literary works or by witnesses to the affair between Ash and LaMotte, so by the end, a few English departments across Europe become involved in the investigation. In a way mirrored in both texts — novel and film — the limits of representation are emphasized through the very truncated and ambiguous disclosure of the historical events. Heritage narratives destabilize the dependability of perception of past events. The film's self-referential visuals point to a different way of looking at the past, for easy nostalgia is undercut by constant self-references. In the novel, there is no attempt to consciously recreate that past in today's present; rather, Byatt looks to the past as an essential stepping-stone, to be comprehended by careful examination, by which we may illumine our present path.

The literary sleuths' access to the past love affair between Christabel and Ash is highly mediated, as it is gradually revealed to them (and to us) through letters, diaries, or mere metaphorical hints in the lovers' literary works. The epilogue increases our awareness of the limitations of any attempt to grasp and re-create the past, suggesting that the access to history is always incomplete. It recounts an episode in the lives of the Victorian characters — a meeting between Ash and his daughter by Christabel — which the literary sleuths in the novel would never discover. Unlike the readers, the characters in the contemporary plot will never find out that Ash knew he had a child. Roland and Maud cannot truly understand what actually occurred in the past. They can reconstruct; they can theorize; but they can never truly *know*. Frederick M. Holmes points out that “documents disrupt the initial illusion established by the novel that it is supplying direct access to an independent reality. In other words, we are reminded that textual mediation of any kind distances us from such a reality” (Holmes 1994: 321). Holmes, however, argues that any complete understanding of the past is impossible:

But how can the interpreters adequately free themselves from the limitations of their own historical situation in order to make their interpretations accurate? Byatt's answer is that they cannot do so, but that they must try anyway in full knowledge that the result will be a fictive approximation, not the objective truth. (Holmes, 1994: 331).

History, the past, the passage of time, the mystery created by the desire to know the truth about the past are all issues that lie at the heart of *Possession*. Resembling that of two heritage productions *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981) and *Heat and Dust* (1983), the film's structure uses cross-cutting to emphasize similarities and differences between the past and the present. Past and present unfold concurrently, suggesting, on the one hand, that the dialogue between the two eras is a desirable

one, and, on the other hand, as Amy Elias argues, that "*Historical periods themselves* are subject to quick cutting, montage, and juxtaposition in a postmodern attempt to signal the layered indeterminacy of History and its lack of order and comprehensibility" (Elias 2001: 119). By reconstructing the events of the past, the scholars can redefine their views of the present. The past is not the past alone; it is how the present interacts with the past. As illustrated by Maud's discovery that she is in fact the descendant of Ash and LaMotte, researching the past is a method of redefining the present and oneself. Thus, the narrative pleasure in the case of *Possession's* spectatorship lies in the various games and mysteries involved in the very search — for one type of identity or another, or for the past itself.

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### Filmography

- Angels & Insects*. Director Philip Haas. USA/UK, 1995.
- Carrington*. Director Christopher Hampton. UK/ France, 1995.
- Elizabeth*. Director Shekhar Kapur. UK, 1998.
- The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Director Karel Reisz. UK, 1981.
- Orlando*. Director Sally Potter. UK/Russia/France/Italy/Netherlands, 1992.
- The Piano*. Director Jane Campion. Australia/New Zealand/France, 1993.
- Possession*. Director Neil LaBute. USA/UK, 2002.