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***The History of British Literature on Film, 1895–2015*. Greg M. Colón Semenza and Bob Hasenfratz. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015 (488 pages). ISBN: 978-1-62356-043-0.**

A Review by Kevin M. Flanagan, University of Pittsburgh

The first in a new series of volumes covering national literatures adapted for the screen (forthcoming titles will cover America, Germany and France), *The History of British Literature on Film, 1895–2015* sits somewhere between monograph and reference book. Semenza and Hasenfratz's work has the scope of a reference title—it mentions hundreds of films—yet offers the depth of a more specifically focused book. Most importantly, the book avoids the temptation merely to aggregate and list. Early on, the authors seize the opportunity to offer an intervention into the status of adaptation studies, and in so doing, demonstrate how they have conceived their project. As adaptation studies is "not quite literary studies, not quite film studies", it has occasioned significant self-reflexivity in how scholars territorialise their work (6). Semenza and Hasenfratz are not beholden to any particular methodological approach (such as, for instance, Robert Stam's dialogic and transtextual model), but rather want to show both how adaptations have functioned within film culture at different points, and how the practice of adaptation has itself adapted to suit new industries, audiences and media:

> In *The History of British Literature on Film*, as in all the forthcoming books in this series, the primary methodological commitment is to *film history* specifically—though there is of course great overlap between the history of the cinema and the wider economic, political, cultural, and national histories of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Following this point, the potential power of our historical approach to adaptation might be said to lie in its capaciousness—its ability to draw out the usefulness of various methodologies and to marshal them coherently around a relatively clear set of goals (9–10).

History and adaptation studies are currently experiencing a productive overlap. As in Laurence Raw and Defne Ersin Tutan's recent edited collection, *The Adaptation of History: Essays on Ways of Telling the Past*, a commitment to adaptations *as* history as much as adaptations *of* history (or, adaptations that "do" historiographical work by way of their adaptive choices) seems to be emerging. Semenza and Hasenfratz's book certainly delights in its "capaciousness": its 450+ dense pages consider everything from the rhetoric of early cinema advertisements in newspapers to anachronistic sound in Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* (2011) (376).

Two films that bookend *The History of British Literature on Film*'s chronological remit provide representative examples of the multidimensional stakes of the analysis. *The Death of Nancy Sykes* (1897), "the very first adaptation of British literature that we can document" (37), adapts a scene made popular by stage melodrama that itself comes from Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1846). This silent short becomes important to film history as a "first" (an early example of film adapting literature) and as a document that illustrates a connection that typifies early film culture

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(by adapting Dickens, it gestures to the interdependence of stage, literature, and film, and shows how the medium made early claims to legitimacy through its connections to other art forms). One of the most recent films covered in the book, *Skyfall* (Sam Mendes, 2012), works similarly. A Bond film about the history of Bond films, it makes claims about the character's back story (it expands, leverages and rearranges the history of the franchise, which now spans novels, videogames and many other media forms such that "Bond has taken on a life of his own"). *Skyfall* and other recent Bond films "embrace the franchise's usual custom of paying reflexive homage to the earlier films but with an ideological sophistication simply lacking in the earlier films", meaning that they make continued reference to their status as historical objects in a continuum, at peace with the idea that they sit somewhere between original and remake, adaptation and fresh take (335). Throughout the history of cinema, the process of adapting literature is often not reducible to texts in a one-to-one relationship, but rather depends on multiple understandings of textuality and history.

The History of British Literature on Film lays out trends that characterise historical periods. For instance, early adaptations are trick films with few designs on narrative coherence (Georges Meliès's *She: The Pillar of Fire*, from Haggard's 1887 adventure novel of the same title), or shorts already familiar to audiences from popular children's tales (Cecil Hepworth's celebrated *Alice in Wonderland*) (55–6; 66–9). Often, this decision gives Semenza and Hasenfratz the discretion to cover more ground and create the necessary taxonomies to discuss trends of the periods in question.

However, this choice sometimes falters, inevitably prompting the reader to think of counterexamples or countertrends not accounted for. This is especially pronounced in Chapter Six, "Traditions and Revolutions: The Brit-Lit Film, 1957–79", which tackles the difficult task of outlining dominant tendencies of a period of pronounced pluralism, where all the certainties of production (like stable film studios or consistent production bases) and guaranteed audiences were torn apart by changes in the post-war world, chief among them the popularisation of television and the end to anything like a shared national culture. Semenza and Hasenfratz primarily want to define the period from the 1950s to the 1970s through the "ambitious reinvention of the Brit-Lit prestige film", which they call the "Panavision adaptation", with its positioning of audiences amid lush and romantic landscapes of the historical past (268; 271). This characterisation works well for epic films like *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962) or *Far from the Madding Crowd* (John Schlesinger, 1967) that are heavily reliant on expansive natural vistas, but it hardly accounts for the myriad films that experience space differently. Consider adaptations like *Secret Ceremony* (Joseph Losey, 1968, from Marco Denevi's short story), or *Leo the Last* (John Boorman, 1970, from George Tabori's unpublished play *The Prince*), the former being filmed almost entirely in lavish interiors and the latter set in claustrophobically realised streets. While Losey and Boorman's films arguably fit into Semenza and Hasenfrantz's rather catch-all label of "auteur adaptations", their experience of space has little in common with Panavision prestige. The 1960s are as much about decadent interiority as the pastoral.

Perhaps more useful is the film's avoidance of a purely national model. *The History of British Literature on Film*'s transnational concern is such that adaptations of Brit-Lit from around the world are considered alongside British productions. Particularly welcome are the

discussions of global Shakespeare, including an extensive analysis of Svend Gade and Heinz Schall's German *Hamlet* (1920) and Akira Kurosawa's Japanese *Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosu-jô*, 1957) (124–30; 262–4). The exploration of Kurosawa is representative of a timely reminder about how auteur discourse shapes the reception of adaptations. In their estimation, instead of seeing Shakespeare "as filmed by a certain director, the viewer likely sees [the film] as Kurosawa's engagements with [a] classic source text", such that "the critic will look first to the mise-en-scène and camera movement, trusting the director's understanding and artistry rather than assuming his inferiority" (258). The spectre of the auteur means that, "for the cinephile or the expert, the 'primary' and 'secondary' text relationship has been fundamentally altered by the presence of the auteur" (258). Thus, Semenza and Hasenfratz show how a wider historiographical debate in film studies challenges the primacy of the literary text, in the process helping scholars move away from seeing adaptation merely as a means of helping the written word to maintain cultural currency.

Ultimately, *The History of British Literature on Film* is not even just about film, but rather addresses textual adaptation and playfulness more broadly. This is best illustrated in the discussion of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Canterbury Tales* (*I racconti di Canterbury*, 1972), the middle part of the filmmaker's "Trilogy of Life", which is comprised of *The Decameron* (*Il Decameron*, 1971) and *Arabian Nights* (*Il fiore delle mille e una notte*, 1974). In their analysis, which shows how Pasolini "employs several techniques to undermine the priority of Chaucer's classic Brit-Lit text", Semenza and Hasenfratz nod to an intertextual inheritance which awards the audience and congratulates the director:

> Pasolini shows that he is adapting far more than a single canonical text by citing a number of other "texts" from literature, art history, and cinema within the frame of the film. In a mischievous scene, he shows himself at his desk in a skullcap furtively reading a tattered copy of *The Decameron*. When the poet hears someone coming, he hides this volume among a huge pile of other books, but not before his shocked wife (we presume) shouts scoldingly, "Geoffrey Chaucer!" *The Canterbury Tales* is, Pasolini implies, already subordinate to another text, *The Decameron*, from which Chaucer takes his inspiration. The fact that Pasolini himself plays the part of Chaucer blurs the lines of authorship and authority in the film even further: the auteur and author here merge (305).

This is strongly indicative of Semenza and Hasenfratz's approach to the adaptation of British literature *writ large*. It is not important if a particular film does full justice to a source text, or if it strives for accuracy or tonal consistency. What is far more crucial is that the film makes productive use of its hybrid relationship with different forms of textuality, instead offering insight into some historical, social, or industrial concern of its time.

The History of British Literature on Film is positioned to become a standard work in adaptation studies' ongoing quest for self-definition, and could well function as a textbook for courses exploring Brit-Lit on the world stage.

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