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## Eckart Voigts-Virchow (Hg.): Janespotting and Beyond. British Heritage Retrovisions Since the Mid-1990s

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**Eckart Voigts-Virchow (Ed.): Janespotting and Beyond. British Heritage Retrovisions Since the Mid-1990s**

Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag 2004, 212 S., ISBN 3-8233-6096-5, € 54,-

*Janespotting*, a memorable term first deployed by John M. Forde, is a wordplay on the activity trainspotting (collecting train numbers as a hobby). “In the mid-1990s it was an easy game to play” (p.36) as adaptations of Jane Austen could be found on the small and large screens (*Sense and Sensibility*, 1995 and *Emma*, 1996). And not only of Jane Austen: Dickens and Shakespeare were also well-represented.

Eckart Voigts-Virchow has drawn together a collection of essays which analyse the distinctions between literary adaptations at the turn of the millennium and those mostly Merchant-Ivory productions of the late 1980s (*Room with a View*, 1985, *Howards End*, 1992) using the notion of ‘heritage’. A heritage film, as he points out in his excellent introduction, is not easily defined and the term is constantly being revised, but commentators seem to agree that it generally applies to English costume/historical dramas, often adapted from classic works of literature, offering a mythological, conservative view of English history, often targeted at a white, mature, feminine middle-class audience. He also tells us what it isn’t by comparing it to *Dogville* (2003) by Lars Von Trier, who “embodies a distinctly European tradition of artistic auteurism” (p.10).

The thirteen essays are sub-divided into four groupings referring to Jane Austen, William Shakespeare, using cinematic adaptations/heritage films to help teach English as a foreign language or as an aid to cultural studies, and a slightly eclectic grouping referring to history and heritage and the problems of adapting

literary properties. As with any book of this type some texts are more enlightening than others and familiarity with the film is a bonus.

One of the more interesting essays is by Andrew Higson who has written extensively on heritage. His definition of heritage films refers to English costume dramas made in the 1980s and 90s that “articulate a nostalgic and conservative celebration of the values and lifestyles of the privileged classes” (p.10). However, his essay in this collection examines how Hollywood noted that there was money to be made from heritage movies, “how Jane Austen was sold to non-Janeites, how period chic lit, albeit an upscale version of chic lit much appreciated by male intellectuals, was transformed into the multiplex friendly frock flick” (p.36).

Pamela Church Gibson looks at Patricia Rozema’s financially unsuccessful and academically neglected adaptation of *Mansfield Park* (1999). She considers it to be radically political, especially with its treatment of colonialism (it is rare in heritage cinema for the source of the rich protagonists’ wealth to be acknowledged), and anti-realist as Rozema puts dialogue into the heroine’s mouth attributed to Austen’s own letters and diaries.

Part of the iconography of a heritage film are the grand old country houses with their delightfully laid out gardens. Some commentators have seen the beautifully framed shots of garden and parkland (as well as the lavish but authentic period costumes and décor) as nothing but fulfilling an insatiable desire for spectacle, “creating a heritage space for the display of heritage properties rather than narrative space for the enactment of dramas” (p.113). Raimund Borgmeier’s thesis is that these gardens are very much part of the *mise-en-scène* reflecting the characters moods and enhancing the narrative.

Shakespeare adaptations and programmes about him could almost be seen as a sub-genre itself and part of the ‘bardbiz’, that is the tourist, media and educational institutions associated with Shakespeare as national icon. I very much enjoyed Deborah Cartmell’s essay about film adaptations of Shakespeare where “the critical constructs of literary adaptation and heritage film intersect” (p.77). Her survey of major Shakespeare films from 1990 to 2000, *William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet* (1996) being my favourite example, reveals a trend of both invoking and censoring associations of privilege, exclusion and cultural pretension, a movement away from the closeness and reverence for their literary and historical sources, in other words away from notions of heritage.

One of the themes running through this collection, in addition to the commercialization of the heritage film/TV serial to broaden its appeal to a wider audience, is that an anti-heritage aesthetic has manifested itself not only in cinema but also in revisionist classic TV serial such as *Vanity Fair* (1998). Another theme which appears in different essays is about the choices that have to be made, and the consequences of those choices, when adapting a classic literary text from page to screen. Lucia Krämer’s detailed analysis of Oliver Parker’s successful adaptation

of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1992) and his less successful attempt (at the box-office, at least) with *The Importance of Being Ernest* (2002), and Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier's overview of the adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* give insights as to whether "the illusion of the reality created by the text and the illusion of reality created by the film should coincide" (p.149).

The last section on using heritage films to teach English and/or English culture seems a little out of place in the academic context of these essays, although I am all in favour of teaching students to 'read' film. And you could also argue watching *Trainspotting* (1996) might give you a better insight into British culture than adaptations of 19th century novels featuring the aristocracy and an invisible working-class. However, this section does raise the issue of whether the concept of heritage can and should be applied to countries other than England. When reading this book I kept thinking to myself what notions of heritage are revealed in the cinema of contemporary Germany, especially now there is a trend to examine the 1930s and 40s in more detail.

Overall, I would recommend this generally well-written book to those who are interested in the adaptations of classic English literature to the big screen or those interested in the process of adaptation in general.

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#### Hinweise

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