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**REPRESENTING
THE EIGHTEENTH
CENTURY IN FILM
AND TELEVISION,
2000–2015**

Karen Bloom Gevirtz



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and Television, 2000–2015

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For Angela, a woman of valor

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Introduction

Abstract This introductory chapter outlines the questions that drive this study and provides the theoretical and critical framework that supports the analyses in the following chapters. The chapter begins by distinguishing between “the past” and “history,” explains its focus on history as the constructed narrative of what happened in the past, and describes the role of ideology in shaping history. Using Antonio Gramsci’s views of popular history and of popular media as sites where societies engage with ideology, the introduction shows how films and programs do so through constructing history. A review of developments in the heritage film debate and in adaptation theory by critics including Deborah Cartmell, Thomas Leitch, Claire Monk, and Laurence Ram outlines the critical and theoretical foundation for the chapters’ analyses.

Keywords Eighteenth century · Adaptation theory · Film
Television · Film adaptation

At one point in Mel Brooks’s film *Spaceballs* (1987), villains Dark Helmet and Colonel Sanders order a corporal at a radar station on their spaceship to fast-forward the film itself in order to find the location of Princess Vespa and her rescuers. Unfortunately, they fast-forward too far and wind up at the same moment in which they are watching the film. The three of them stare at the radar screen, seeing there what the audience sees on its screen:

Dark Helmet: What the hell am I looking at? When does this happen in the movie?

Colonel Sanders: Now. You're looking at Now, sir. Everything that happens now, is happening now.

Dark Helmet: What happened to Then?

Colonel: We passed it.

Dark Helmet: When?

Colonel: Just now. We're at Now, now.

Dark Helmet: Go back to Then.

Colonel: When?

Dark Helmet: Now.

Colonel: Now?

Dark Helmet: Now!

Colonel: We can't.

Dark Helmet: Why not?

Colonel: We missed it.

Dark Helmet: When?

Colonel: Just now.

Dark Helmet: When will Then be Now?

Colonel: Soon.

Dark Helmet: How soon?

Corporal: Sir, we've identified their location.

Brooks collapses several layers of time in this exchange. The dialogue adapts Abbott and Costello's famous "Who's on First?" routine, eventually concluding with Dark Helmet's frustrated howl, "Who?" It also mocks what Brooks sees as the manipulation of time to gratify both commercial interests and personal desire: The recording of the film is available because of the "latest breakthrough in video marketing" while the moment that Dark Helmet demands, "How soon?" his wish is fulfilled.¹ But Brooks's scene also remarks upon the power of film to time travel, not only by presenting events in another time that shape perceptions and actions in the present but also by using recorded experiences of the past—filmed scenes—as experiences in the present. As Brooks points out, with moving pictures the past that is recorded film and the present that is watching the film converge. The past and the present are the same; whatever Dark Helmet and Colonel Sanders are doing in the past that is the film, is what they are doing in the present that is the audience.²

This perfect overlay of past onto present using what once upon a time was called "moving pictures" is this study's primary interest. What do

the watched representations of the past do to an audience's sense of the present time in which it lives? How does the story being told on the big or small screen shape the perception of previous events and selves *and* the perception of current events and selves? Brooks has his finger on an issue for contemporary culture: representations of the past for consumption in the present collapse the distance between the two periods, changing the present's understanding of the past and therefore its understanding of the present. When will Then be Now? Now. The same moment at which Now will also be Then.

Cultures have long used representations of their past to define themselves. Beowulf, King Arthur, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, The Globe Theatre, Frederick Douglass, George Washington, the Statue of Liberty, Harriet Tubman, Colonial Williamsburg—these are examples of people, places, and objects that, whatever the realities of their existence might have been, serve to establish a history that shapes identity in the present. For their part, critics and scholars have long recognized that “history” and “the past” are actually quite different. The past is what happened: the battle was fought, the field was plowed, the novel was written, and so forth. History is what is said about the past: it is constructed and its nature, function, and value are contingent.³ Consequently there are different versions of history and different versions of historical periods: the British Victorian period is the failed theme park Dickens World or the novel *Oliver Twist* or the musical *Oliver Twist*; the Edwardian period is Peter Pan, *The Elephant Man*, or Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (2009). There's nothing particularly new or radical in recognizing this difference between the past and history, nor in recognizing history's artificial and contingent nature. The “history wars” of the 1980s and early 1990s was just one instance of a culture having to confront the histories it made and acknowledge the ancient reality that national histories vary according to the teller.⁴ Juvenal's Rome, after all, looks little like Virgil's. What history gets made and what function that history serves are questions that bear repeated examination as history, culture, and society shift.

The Middle Ages offers a case study of this phenomenon. Different societies have constructed different understandings of “The Middle Ages,” including the concept itself of “The Middle Ages.” There is no such thing as “The Middle Ages,” only “A Middle Ages”; Umberto Eco contends that there are ten “Middle Ages,” for example, each serving its own purpose.⁵ Each version of “The Middle Ages” assumes its guise depending on the cultural imperative of its historical moment. “The Middle Ages”

is therefore a period in which certain things happened (“Various wars, plagues, diseases, turmoil, and strife” as Tison Pugh and Angela Weisl put it) and a period shaped by cultural imagination, whether popular or academic or both.⁶ Constructing a historical moment and historical narrative thus also constructs a present moment, “the expansive *now*” in Carolyn Dinshaw’s phrase.⁷ And as Brooks’s spoof *Spaceballs* testifies, any and all aspects of culture can be used in this attempt, from action figures to videos, including film and television.

Like satires, epics, and text books, films and television programs are components within what Antonio Gramsci describes as a network of systems and structures that take various and multifaceted stances toward ideology. Film and television are among the “protean forms,” in Gramscian terms, that a society assumes to engage its own political thought.⁸ That characteristic makes film and television programs dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense: sites of political engagement in the same manner as the architecture of government buildings, Shakespeare’s history plays, or Emmanuel Leutze’s painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware River. Film or television that creates history does so “through social and textual renderings of space and time,” as Julianne Pidduck puts it, drawing on social and cinematic vocabularies to create a representation of space and time that can be deployed for telling history.⁹ Works of moving images that create history “place[...] actuality within melodramatic terms as a means of persuasive argument,” an argument about the past that shapes the present.¹⁰ “[I]f films about the future can convey the past metonymically,” Maria F. Magro and Mark Douglas explain, “then films set in the past can be decoded as metonymic representations of present cultural and political debates.”¹¹

One of the clearest examples of the connection of present ideology and representations of the past in film and television is heritage film, a term that, following Claire Monk’s lead, I apply to television programs as well.¹² Debates about ideology and heritage film have raged since the 1980s. The louder, more robust school charges heritage films with (among other crimes) affirming a conservative, often imperialist history built on a nostalgia for a “lost England” of great houses and beautiful lawns. Its signature narrative basis, adaptation, affirms an equally conservative canonical literary and cultural past. A different school sees considerably more political and aesthetic range in these productions.¹³ All sides agree that in representing a moment in the past, films like

Howard's End and programs like *Downton Abbey* engage with the ideology of the moment in which they were made, creating a history that conceptualizes both ends: the moment that recounts the history and the moment that the history recounts.

Heritage film criticism and adaptation studies have considerable areas of overlap given the number of heritage films that are adaptations, and the fields inevitably share contributors. Where heritage film criticism is primarily concerned with analyzing an object, adaptation studies is primarily concerned with the method of analysis. It should surprise no one that adaptation studies is as contentious as heritage film criticism. As Kamilla Elliott explains in her comprehensive review of adaptation studies, adaptation studies' early formalist/New Critical/aesthetics-oriented approach was challenged in the 1990s by the arrival of "high theory" on one hand and "postmodern cultural criticism" on the other. All these methodologies reject the traditional politics of the others to a greater or lesser degree: the formalists are associated with a conservative ideology perpetuating a limited, elitist view of art and culture encapsulated by the word "quality," for instance; the postmodernists, concerned with the contextual factors like race, gender, and class that shape the creation of cultural objects, are associated with a more liberal, leftist ideology. For the most part, Elliott notes, these approaches have competed for dominance, perpetuating what she calls the "formal-contextual" and "textual-contextual divides."¹⁴ Recently, however, scholars such as Monk and Elliott as well as Christine Geraghty, Belén Vidal Villasur, and Laurence Raw have begun to merge the postmodern context-driven approach with the formal text-driven approach by expanding their analysis to include form, examining elements such as editing, sound, and length or angle of shot to the functioning of individual films and the genre more broadly.¹⁵ This mixed approach characterizes the analyses of *Poldark* (1975, 2015) in Chap. 3.

Heritage film criticism and adaptation studies are vital for understanding the early millennium eruption of film and television representations of the eighteenth century in films and television. Between 2000 and 2015, heritage films and film adaptations did yeoman's work representing this period. The insights and methods provided by these fields readily illuminate a plethora of Austen adaptations as well as films like *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003), adapted from Patrick O'Brian's novels, for example, or *The Duchess* (2008), adapted from Amanda Foreman's biography of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire.¹⁶