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**Filming the Past,
Screening the Present:
Neo-Victorian Adaptations**

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MARGARIDA ESTEVES PEREIRA

Victorian Fiction on the Global Screen: The Case of Michael Winterbottom's Thomas Hardy

This essay focuses on two films by British director Michael Winterbottom, *The Claim* (2000) and *Trishna* (2011), which, notwithstanding the titles, are both based on Thomas Hardy's novels: the first is based on Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and the second on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). They are not the first incursions of Winterbottom into Hardy's novels, since he had already adapted *Jude the Obscure* to the screen in 1996, with the title *Jude*. However, these are particularly interesting examples of narratives that, as Linda Hutcheon's appropriate metaphor of biological adaptation suggests, adapt to "new environments by virtue of mutation" (Hutcheon 2006, 32). The main interest of focusing on these two films is related to the fact that they adapt Thomas Hardy's stories to completely different locations and historical times. I will be arguing that these adaptations are fruitful examples of what we can call trans-cultural and transhistorical adaptations in the context of contemporary transnational/global cinema. I will draw attention to these aspects separately, taking into account the fact that we are dealing with transnational/global films on the one hand, and trans-cultural and transhistorical adaptations, on the other.

As happens with so many Victorian writers, Thomas Hardy's novels have been profusely adapted both to the small and the big screen. It is true that, as is stated by Paul J. Niemeyer, Hardy has not been as popular a "subject for filmmakers" as have other writers, such as Dickens, Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters (cf. Niemeyer 2003, 4). However, a cursory search in the IMDb tells us that Hardy's novels and short stories have been steadily used as source stories for a great number of films and TV films, as well as TV series and mini-series. Ranging from a 1913 silent American adaptation of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* to the last adaptation of *Far from the Madding Crowd* (2015), several of Hardy's narratives have found their way into different screens. Interestingly, not only is the range of stories adapted quite long, as it shows a great number of adaptations that come from very different geographical and cultural locations. It is indeed curious to notice that as far back as 1940 we find an Italian adaptation with the title *Una romantica avventura* (1940), which was apparently based on Hardy's tale "The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid". IMDb also lists two Indian adaptations of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (*Man Ki Jeet*, 1944, and *Dulhan Ek Raat Ki*, 1967, as well as a South-Korean version titled *Cheongchun mujeong*, 1970).

In *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), Linda Hutcheon draws on the Darwinian evolution theory to make a parallel with what happens when stories get adapted to different media but also to different contexts. She states that “like biological adaptation, cultural adaptation involves migration to favourable conditions: stories travel to different cultures and different media” (Hutcheon 2006, 31). This is the case of adaptations that appropriate more or less extensively a particular narrative, transposing it to a completely different historical and/or cultural context, in a movement of re-location or “proximation”, as is indicated by Julie Sanders. The term used by Sanders here is taken from Gérard Genette’s theorization of transtextuality in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1997), where Genette talks about a “movement of proximation”, which he explains in the following terms:

As has just been indicated with reference to nationality, the habitual movement of diegetic transposition is a movement of proximation: the hypertext transposes the diegesis of its hypotext to bring it up to date and closer to its audience (in temporal, geographic, or social terms). (1997, 304)

In these cases, as is explained by Sanders, the adaptation contains “further layers of transposition, relocating their source texts not just generically, but in cultural, geographical and temporal terms” (Sanders 2010, 20).

The referred to movement of “proximation” or “proximization” (according to Genette), which is made by a re-contextualization of the source text to a contemporary time, performs an obvious updating of the text for an audience for whom a novel from the 19th century might not be of interest. In the cases under consideration, however, this movement of proximation can only strictly be applied to *Trishna*, a film that is set in contemporary India and which tells the story of a contemporary common Indian girl. *The Claim*, on the other hand, brings to the fore a historical time that is contemporary to the historical time of Hardy’s novel, but changes its location, reterritorializing it from Hardy’s West to Sierra Nevada in California, 1867, just after the gold rush of the 1840s and the expansion of the American frontier. It is no doubt interesting that it moves away from the usual Victorian costume film by rewriting the narrative into the Western genre.

What they both have in common is the fact that they perform a rewriting of the stories they adapt into completely different cultural locations, transmuting the narratives of Hardy’s novels into very different stories. In this context, it is important to question the reasons underlying the use of 19th-century novels, which will then be so consistently changed in order to fit the location, the time, the culture, and the genre of the film. If film adaptation usually imposes an obvious thinning down of the 19th-century realist novel, by virtue of the different time lengths at the disposal of novelist and filmmaker, in these cases other types

of changes are imposed to the narratives, namely, changes in the places and characters names and sometimes a completely different focus of the story provided by the new cultural and geographical location.

This is done also by setting up these adaptations in the context of transnational filmmaking. Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim open the introductory article of a newly created journal with the title *Transnational Cinemas* by stating that the “the concept of transnational cinema is certainly now an established area of enquiry” (Higbee and Lim 2010, 8). In their article they try to elucidate the concept, which in terms of film studies is not a new one. As is stated in this and other publications (cf. Shohat and Stam 2003; Desai 2004, 1-33; Ezra and Rowden 2006; Higson 2006), there has always existed a transnational flow in film production, but today it seems obvious that film production is a global business.

Writing fifteen years ago, Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden viewed this concept of transnational cinema as a consequence of a number of factors, among which: “the increasing permeability of borders”, generated both by “the acceleration of global flows of capital and a shifting geopolitical climate”, including at that time “the end of the Cold War and the creation of the European Union”; the accelerated circulation of films enabled by the new technologies, notably, the video, the DVD and digital media (Ezra and Rowden 2006, 1).

The rapid circulation of films and the impact it had on contemporary film practices has reached another dimension in the time of the internet, which has heightened the transnational dimension of cultural practices, deterritorializing them. As is argued by Arjun Appadurai in the influential *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1997), “electronic media decisively change the wider field of mass media and other traditional media”, the other important mark of globalization being mass migration (1997, 3-4). According to Arjun Appadurai, “[...] electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination” (1997, 4).

But according to Higbee and Lim “this shift towards the transnational” can be viewed

as encouraged by a wider dissatisfaction expressed by scholars working across the humanities (in particular sociology, postcolonial studies and cultural studies) with the paradigm of the national as a means of understanding production, consumption and representation of cultural identity (both individual and collective) in an increasingly interconnected, multicultural and polycentric world. (2010, 8)

This focus on the “production, consumption and representation of cultural identity” as ever more transnational and transcultural seems to be an apt framework for our analysis of film adaptations that use as source texts narratives that are

national classics, but which are stripped of their national cloak. Thus, transnational cinema – or the cultural practice of a transnational cinema – transcends the idea of ‘national’ cinemas and can be understood either as a set of production practices, or as a set of cultural practices of reading national cinemas in an era of globalized culture.

In this context, Michael Winterbottom has been seen as a particularly ‘global’ director. In an essay titled “‘Do you want this world left on?’: Global Imaginaries in the Films of Michel Winterbottom”, Andrew Dix argues that “his is a cinema of persistent mobility and migration” (2009, 3). Furthermore, Dix sees Winterbottom’s crossing of genre frontiers, which is pointed out by many as being very characteristic of his cinema, as part of his “globalist’s verve”. Deborah Allison affirms that Winterbottom’s more recent films show “his predilection for shooting in international locations, particularly in and around the Middle East” (2013, 191). Bruce Bennett argues that Winterbottom’s “filmmaking praxis stems in part from a concern to breach categorical borders in relation to cinema” and these include, among many others “geographical and political borders between regions and nations” (2014, 2). He also states that “what makes the films of Michael Winterbottom a valuable and challenging focus for thinking through the relationship between politics and contemporary cinema, is the distinctive ways in which they are preoccupied with transnational regimes of visibility” (Bennett 2014, 3). If this is particularly obvious in the films which are set “in and around the Middle East” (cf. Allison 2013, 191), like *In this World* (2000), *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006) or *A Mighty Heart* (2007), it is no less true of other films by Winterbottom that visibly display a global focus and simultaneously a concern with those that risk exile and exclusion from the cosmopolitan framework of global economy. According to Andrew Dix (2009, 4):

That Winterbottom should demonstrate textual sensitivity towards the migrant dispossessed, yet also operate at times within the interstices of global Hollywood, suggests that his response to transnationality is complex and conflictual rather than singular. As such, his cinema lends itself well to consideration through the prism of current globalization scholarship.

And although Bruce Bennett proposes an analysis of *The Claim* as part of a discussion of “the value of framing [Winterbottom’s] work in terms of national culture and also the problems with situating his work in relation to the context of British cinema” (2014, 105), we will here assess it, together with *Trishna*, as part of the transnational or global focus of his cinema.

It is interesting to notice that Winterbottom seems to be particularly attracted to the work of Thomas Hardy, since he has already done three Hardy adaptations, the first of which, *Jude* (1996), unlike the two ensuing ones, follows the novel’s setting and time frame. Although this first adaptation can be analysed in

the context of the heritage drama, some critics have seen it as working against the most alluring and pervasive features of the genre (cf. Bennett 2014, 112–121), seeing it as going against the grain of conservative nostalgia that is seen as part of the heritage film. Bruce Bennett, for example, argues that the film eschews a pleasurable identification with the characters and a sense of nostalgia that is so common to the heritage drama. However, the last two Hardy adaptations seem to fit very clearly what Andrew Dix sees as a global trend in the films of Winterbottom, and in both cases this is true for the processes of production of the films as well as for the way we can read them in terms of their transcultural aspects.

In relation to questions of production, we should note that in each case we are dealing with transnational co-productions, in the case of the *The Claim* a UK/France/Canadian production, and in the case of *Trishna* a UK/Swedish one. In purely industrial and commercial terms, these films are part of the current “acceleration of global flows of capital” that are mentioned by Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden. Moreover, in both cases the shooting locations are outside the UK, for *The Claim* was shot in fact in Canada, although the narrative is set in 1867 California, and *Trishna* was entirely shot in India. Thus, both in terms of financing and choice of location, these are films that reflect the current globalization of production processes.

On the other hand, in both films we can see at work clearly hybrid cultural or transcultural processes, beginning with (but not confined to) the use of classic British 19th-century realist novels as source texts for stories that are not limited to the British nation or to questions of national identity. They do so in such a way that we may pose the question of whether these two films should be seen as adaptations of Hardy’s novels at all. In other words, in what ways can we talk about *The Claim* and *Trishna* as adaptations of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, despite their display of these narratives of source texts to the films?

As adaptations both films would probably fall into a category which Dudley Andrew refers to as “borrowing”, which he defines as a form of adaptation where “the artist employs, more or less extensively, the material, the idea, or form of an earlier, generally successful text” (1984, 98). In any case, it could be said of the two adaptations what Philip Allingham says about *The Claim*, that it “is not so much an adaptation as a translation of the original novel” (2005, 134), although I would rather use the term rewriting than that of translation.

In the case of *The Claim*, apparently, the project did not even start out as an adaptation of Hardy’s novel. According to Deborah Allison (who consulted information on the film’s website, no longer available),

Andrew Eaton [producer] suggested making a 'potato western' centred on Irish immigrant characters and, later on, they 'decided it should be a European western with immigrants from all over'. It was the screenwriter, Cottrell Boyce, who proposed integrating these ideas with elements drawn from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, which he was reading at the time'. (Allison 2013, 88)

And although the film borrows some of the ideas that structure Hardy's novel, it completely rearranges them to fit a whole new story, set on a different continent and withdrawn from any limits of the usual British costume film, let alone from the heritage film. *The Claim* does appropriate the central tragedy of the protagonist of Hardy's novel, Henchard, who is constrained between his own debased character and the desire to be able to make reparation for his actions – namely, the particular sin of selling his wife and daughter to a stranger when drunk, in the beginning of the narrative – by doing the right thing. The screenplay of *Trishna*, on the other hand, was entirely made by Winterbottom himself, and inevitably compresses Hardy's novel into the core skeleton of the plot. As in the case of *The Claim*, the plot revolves around the protagonist, in this case, Tess of the d'Urbervilles/Trishna, who is played by Freida Pinto. It even chooses to suppress one of the male characters of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by condensing both Alec and Angel into only one character, that of Jay (Riz Ahmed), who is portrayed as a diasporic/cosmopolitan Indian millionaire, who lives between England and India, where his father owns a chain of hotels.

Still more arguable is perhaps the choice of Hardy's novels as source for transnational or global narratives, given that we are talking about an author whose narratives take place in a circumscribed area of late-19th-century England. In the "General preface to the Wessex Edition of 1912" of his novels, Thomas Hardy argues about the universality of his novels, though they are all set in a circumscribed region of England. He states in this respect:

Thus, though the people in most of the novels (and in much of the shorter verse) are dwellers in a province bounded on the north by the Thames, on the south by the English Channel, on the east by a line running from Hayling Island to Windson Forest, and on the West by the Cornish coast, they were meant to be typically and essentially those of any and every place where thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool – beings in whose hearts and minds that which is apparently local should be really universal (Hardy 414).

Not only do many of Hardy's novels contain a Universal background to them, they illustrate Hardy's defiance of custom and mores as far as gender and sexuality are concerned (especially the later novels). Both *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* are set in worlds that are on the brink of transformation. They illustrate a rural world that is being transformed by modern processes of industrialization and mechanization, as well as by the social up-

heaval that this brings forth. Scott McEathron opens an introduction to the work of Thomas Hardy by mentioning this aspect of his work, pointing out that his major novels make "the protagonist almost completely defined by his or her 'native' locale, while at the same time painfully alienated from it" (2005, 1). He further argues that "[t]his essential conflict is simultaneously portrayed in his work as a conflict between historical eras, with his characters caught between rural traditionalism and the enticements, and potential dangers, of the modern and urban" (McEathron 2005, 1)

Interestingly, in an article with the title "A Global Hardy", Angélique Richardson draws our attention to the international resonances of Hardy's work, be it through subject matter or through references to other places. Referring specifically to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, this author notes that

Casterbridge itself is at the centre of international exchange, an assize town from which 'antipodean absences, and such like, were half-yearly occurrences', with a population so well used to 'dramatic returns and disappearances' that Newson and Susan's eventual return from Canada makes little odds. (Richardson 2016, 124)

Winterbottom indeed seems to be attracted to the way Hardy's works denote a fissure between the old rural world and the way it is caught in the transition to a modern society. This may be the reason why he chooses to set Hardy's stories in places outside England. In relation to this, he states that the reason why he chose to place the story of *Trishna/Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in India has to do with this sense of mobility in a changing world that we do not find in Britain, as he states in an interview: "Hardy's novels are often about modernity and speed and energy. But it's hard to get that sense of a dynamically changing world if you set one in this country. Here the problems are more to do with a lack of mobility rather than an excess of it" (Sandhu 2012).

Transience and mobility are obvious leitmotifs in both *The Claim* and *Trishna*, as they are in Hardy's novels. *The Claim* is a costume film, set in the town of Kingdom Come in Sierra Nevada, California, in 1867, as we are informed in the beginning of the film. It tells the story of the pioneer men and women who first set up in this territory in the early days of the gold rush and the way the arrival of modernity, in the form of the railroad, will upset the balance of the town and the community that lived there and ultimately will destroy it, in order to bring in a new town and a new power balance. Strikingly, the whole film draws attention to mobility and migration, since we are dealing with a mobile community that arrived there coming from so many different parts of the world: Daniel Dillon (Peter Mullan), the character that is inspired by Michael Henchard (the Mayor of Casterbridge) is Irish; the wife that he sells, Mrs. Burn (Elena/Nastassja Kinski), is Polish; Lucetta (or Lucia/Milla Jovovich), the owner

of the Saloon is Portuguese; and Donald Dalglish (Wes Bentley) is Scottish (just like Farfrae, his counterpart in the novel). Throughout the film this transient and multicultural reality is explicitly focused on through language – with bits of Polish, Portuguese or French being spoken throughout the film –, and through song. Thus, we are entertained by the traditional Portuguese song of *Fado*, which is performed twice by Milla Jovovich in the film or by Dalglish singing a Scottish song or even the French prostitute, Sue, singing a French song. Moreover, when Dalglish, who is the Central Pacific Railroad engineer, asks Lucia to name the new town (where the train is arriving), she names it after her father's hometown, Lisboa.

As a cultural product, *The Claim* seems to act counter to conceptions of cultural globalization which posit it as American “cultural imperialism”. The multilingual accents, as well as the insertion of “world music”, in a film that tells an American story of the expansion of the frontier, reminds us of the multicultural and transnational elements underlying American history. Also, and not less because this film works within the assumptions of the *Western*, a seemingly typical American genre, the viewer may feel an acute sense of deterritorialization which reinforces the counter-hegemonic undertones of the film.

In *Trishna* we will also find the sense of mobility in a society that is facing a dynamics of change from rural impoverishment to modern industrial and hyper-urbanized mobility. And just like the female protagonist of Hardy's novel, this Indian Tess is caught in between these two worlds. Coming from rural India and trapped in a poor environment, Trishna is faced with the possibility of upward mobility and the choice to be part of a modern world. So, she moves from rural Rajasthan to the city of Jaipur to serve at Jay's father hotel. Later on, after being seduced by Jay, she quits the hotel to work at her uncle's factory and, finally, moves in with Jay to Mumbai. Never does her will to be part of modernity become more evident as when she moves with Jay to the city of Mumbai, where she could aspire to be a Bollywood film actress. However, just like Hardy's Tess, she is forced to a tragic ending for reasons that have to do with a traditional conception of the role of women in society. Jay, who is a British-educated and wealthy man, will nevertheless behave as a traditional and conservative partner who forces Trishna back into her own entrapped poverty and ultimate despair. After treating her in the most abject way, transforming her into a sexual object to please his never-ending fantasies, Jay is led to his death at the hands of the victimised Trishna who kills him in a very graphic way, using a kitchen knife. However, subsequently, she is not able to endure the prejudice of the small milieu where her family lives, to which she returns, and ends up killing herself.

Both *The Claim* and *Trishna* may be said to depict realities that are characteristic of globalised societies and, in this sense, they can be read as transcultural

adaptations of Hardy's 19th-century realist novels. The integration in the films' narratives of migration and mobility issues greatly contribute to our appreciation of the transcultural elements of these adaptations, as well as the way these stories display a profound understanding of the world as a global space.

On the other hand, by operating outside the most mainstream forms of commercial cinema, Michael Winterbottom's visual style contributes to our perception of a cinema that goes somewhat counter the more hegemonic modes of production of Hollywood or even British cinema, for example. I would not argue that Michael Winterbottom's films are part of the diasporic and exilic filmmaking that Hamid Naficy (2001, 4) calls “accented cinema”, which he defines as films “created astride and in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices”. However, it is true that, especially in a film like *Trishna*, there is a stylistic display if not of “smallness” and “amateurishness”, at least, of “imperfection” and “lack of cinematic gloss” (Naficy 2001, 45), which are characteristics Naficy attributes to “accented cinema”. Both *Trishna* and even *The Claim* are films that do not function within the scope of heritage drama; despite their use of classic Victorian novels, these are narratives that cross genre boundaries and may well be seen as somewhat working in the “interstices” of cinematic practices.

More importantly, from the perspective of this essay, is the fact that these films rewrite Thomas Hardy's Victorian novels to the contemporary global screen by emphasising the ever-changing social contexts we inhabit. As Scott McEathron (2005, 1) states, “Perhaps because the quest for stability amidst stunning technological and social change is felt as urgently now as it was in the late Victorian era, Hardy's great novels have acquired an aura of inevitability that spreads beyond the academic canon”. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as re-written in the films *The Claim* and *Trishna* seem to fit this argument quite clearly.

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