

Wyler's Film as an Adaptation of Emily Brontë's Novel

Peter Cochran, *Wuthering Heights*, http://petercochran.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/wuthering_heights.pdf

Wyler's ghastly sentimental version concedes nothing to the proletariat: with the exception of Leo G. Carroll, who discards his usual patrician demeanour and sports a convincing Yorkshire accent as Joseph, all the characters are as bourgeois as Sam Goldwyn could have wished. Not even Flora Robson as Ellen Dean – she should have known better – has the nerve to go vocally downmarket. Heathcliff may come from the streets of Liverpool, and may have been brought up in the dales, but Olivier's moon-eyed Romeo-alternative version of him (now and again he looks *slightly* dishevelled, and *slightly* malicious) comes from RADA and nowhere else. Any thought that Heathcliff is diabolical, or that either he or Catherine come from a different dimension altogether was, it's clear, too much for Hollywood to think about.

Couple all this with Merle Oberon's flat face, white makeup, too-straight nose and curtailed hairstyles, and you have a recipe for disaster.

We're alerted to something being wrong when, on the titles, the umlaut in Emily's surname becomes an acute accent.

Oberon announces that she "*is* Heathcliff!" in some alarm, as if being Heathcliff is the last thing she'd want to be.

Otis Ferguson, *The Film Criticism of Otis Ferguson*, 1971

Pictures made from novels, especially novels everyone is supposed to have read, are usually desperate ventures; but in this case the scriptwriters were both sober and skillful enough to get a film story out of the book; it was impossible they should not lose some of the solid effect, but on the other hand they have delivered the action from that heavy weight of words. The production was given the best in everything except music, and the best in this case included a free rein to sincere workmanship.

John C. Flinn, "Film Showmanship," *Variety*, April 19, 1939

In other words, "Wuthering Heights" in theme, characters, plot and setting possesses not one familiar attribute for which studio scenario departments search zealously through thousands of manuscripts, plays, novels and synopses.

It violates all the accepted rules of successful film stories. Its leading characters are something less than sympathetic—they are psychopathic exhibits. And the ending is stark, dire, tragic, an uncompromising finale which utterly disregards all popular theories of screen entertainment that you must send 'em out happy.

And yet the sum total of effort by the Goldwyn organization is an attraction of undisputed power and beauty, containing excellent acting, skillful direction, excellent photography, expressive musical accompaniment and technical perfection.

. . . What has been demonstrated is that commercial values which have been overlooked and disregarded may be found in many plays and novels heretofore believed to be useless.

Graham Green, "The Cinema," *The Spectator*, May 5, 1939

How much better they would have made *Wuthering Heights* in France. They know there how to shoot sexual passion; but in this California-constructed Yorkshire, among the sensitive neurotic English voices, sex is cellophaned; there is no egotism, no obsession. This Heathcliff would never have married for revenge (Mr. Olivier's nervous, breaking voice belongs to balconies and Verona, and romantic love) and one cannot imagine the ghost of this Cathy weeping with balked passion outside the broken window. Miss Merle Oberon cannot help making her a very normal girl.

MA, *Wuthering Heights*, *Time Out*, July 26, 2006

Handsomely designed by James Basevi and shot by Gregg Toland, the much-filmed tale of Cathy's passion for Heathcliff succeeds as fulsome melodrama; and while it has little to do with Emily Brontë's sense of

environment and pre-Victorian society, it's nevertheless strong on performances—especially Olivier, seen here at the peak of his romantic lead period.

Pamela Miles, “Wyler’s Version of Brontë’s Storms in *Wuthering Heights*,” *Literature Film Quarterly*, 1996, Vo. 24, Issue 4, p. 414

Because of this poetic language, the complex narrative structure, the intense and at times melodramatic character, and the atmosphere of spirits and storms, filming *Wuthering Heights* becomes a particularly challenging task, one to which director William Wyler was well suited. Finding one central theme on which to concentrate becomes vital because there are too many themes in the novel to all be represented in cinema. Screenwriters Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur chose to concentrate on the mysterious oneness of the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff and their inability to survive in a socially proper world. The screenwriters took several liberties with deletions and additions to maintain the relationship as the film's central theme. A principle to keep in mind when studying an adaptation such as *Wuthering Heights* is expressed by Hungarian critic Bela Balazs, who asserts that it is possible to take the subject of a novel and make it into a film and produce perfect works of art in each case...

In his book *Novels into Film*, George Bluestone asserts that the final standard by which to judge an adaptation is determined by whether or not “the film stands up as an autonomous work of art. Not whether the film-maker has respected his model, but whether he has respected his own vision.”

John Mosher, “Mr. Goldwyn in the Heather,” *New Yorker*, April 15, 1939

No screen version of “*Wuthering Heights*” could ever touch the heart so closely, I am sure, as does a reading of the printed page; yet the Goldwyn production approximates the quality of the fierce, tempestuous story with a force one might never have expected. The scene and the theme are dark and forbidding, and the film is likewise. It has its beauty, too, the beauty which is essential.

Variety Staff, *Wuthering Heights*, *Variety*, March 29, 1939

“*Wuthering Heights*” will have to depend on class audiences. Its general sombreness and psychological tragedy is too heavy for general appeal. With that setup, and lacking socko marquee dressing, picture is more of an artistic success for the carriage trade.

Geoffrey Wagner, “Transposition: *Wuthering Heights*,” *The Novel and the Cinema*, 1976

In a now justly celebrated study Lester Asheim found that out of twenty-four adaptations of novels for films seventeen heightened (already high) love interest. *Madame Bovary*, *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations* (in all its many filmic forms), the Robert Z. Leonard *Pride and Prejudice* of 1940 which was, with *Jane Eyre*, scripted for the screen by Aldous Huxley, all these now period pieces were transposed as essential origins of heavy love stories. The front offices could only be made to listen to such. But for any admirer of Emily Brontë Wyler's approach to *Wuthering Heights* makes the end result absurd, and indeed suggests that the supposedly literal transposition may falsify an original far more than an intelligent analogy.

If there is one thing *Wuthering Heights* is not, it is a love story in the received sense of cinema of its time.

“*Wuthering Heights*,” *London Times*, April 26, 1939

The beautiful ending of the novel is botched, the thrilling incident of the boy who dared not pass the ghostly lovers is omitted, and instead there is a deplorable transparency of Catherine and Heathcliff hand in hand