

Adaptation Through Landscape: *The Ruling Class*

There have been many screen adaptations of literary narratives set on country estates. These films and television programmes frequently place significant emphasis on the estates' landscape gardens. Invariably, the emphasis is of a different nature from that conferred on landscapes by the source texts. In the adaptation process, landscape scenes are added or elaborated, but they are rarely excised. Interpolation or transformation of landscape seems, therefore, to have often played an intrinsic role in the transition of narrative from page or stage to film. However, the significance of landscape to the adaptation process has largely been neglected. Compared with, say, costume history, on which critics have lavished attention, landscape history is the poor relation of adaptation studies.

Since the late 1960s there has been a dramatic rise in the number of country estate screen adaptations shot on location. This tendency raises two connected questions. Firstly, does the location shot make the film more or less naturalistic than its source text? Since naturalism is a construct, we cannot readily assume that a film becomes naturalistic just by featuring an actual landscape. It depends what use the film makes of the landscape. Secondly, theoreticians of medium specificity have contrasted the concreteness of the filmic image with the imaginary breadth allowed readers by a novel. How does filmic representation delimit the associative range of the landscape? How do these associations contribute to the adaptation? Before the landscape garden is depicted on screen, it is already the result of human intervention: it has been sculpted by one or more landscape designers. The landscape garden is never just raw nature, channelled via its filmic or televisual representation: it is an art form, which the camera adapts, in much the same way that it adapts the source text. The screen adaptation is, in this sense, a double adaptation. It is in dialogue with the landscape. This dialogue facilitates the primary adaptation: that is, the film or television programme adapts the source text *through* adaptation of landscape.

Only heritage critics have written at any length about landscape's function in literary adaptations. They argue that landscape is essentially pictorial and thus detracts from the narratorial qualities of the screen version. My paper diverges from this

assumption. With *The Ruling Class* as a case study, it addresses the narratorial functions of landscape in adaptation.

The Ruling Class was adapted from Peter Barnes's path-breaking 1968 play. The 1972 film, directed by Peter Medak, adheres to the plot of the play: an Earl dies, bequeathing his estate to his son. The son, Jack is a paranoid schizophrenic, who believes he is J.C., the God of love and that he is betrothed to the 'Lady of the Camelias'. The family is desperate for J.C. to produce an heir, so that they can gain control of the estate. They employ an actress, Grace Shelley, to play the 'Lady of the Camelias'. J.C. marries her, but after violent psychiatric treatment, assumes a new identity: he becomes Jack the Ripper and later murders his aunt and his wife. The play is divided into two halves. In the first, Jack is J.C., the God of love, and in the second, he is Jack the Ripper.

The play attacks many traits of the upper class: its political power, its repressive sexual mores, its jurisdictional and ecclesiastical influence, its artistic tastes and so on. This multivalence corresponds to the play's baroque genre hybridity, which encompasses melodrama, the pastoral, popular song, farce and satire. The gear shift from one genre to another signals and enables the adjustment of aim from one target of ruling class life to another. Moreover, the play's genre hybridity is a two-pronged offensive. It not only lampoons the upper class, but also challenges the realism prevalent in British theatre in the sixties. By switching modes, the play stridently parades its non-naturalistic discourse. The most vaunted example of this is the characters' propensity to burst into popular song, as if the play were suddenly a musical.

This anti-naturalism applies to the play's frequent landscape scenes. In diametric contrast with the drawing room scenes, there is no back-drop when characters are in the garden. None of the conventional gestures to realism sometimes found in landscape stage design are employed: there are no bird noises, and no coulisses or props to suggest arboreal surroundings. The physical absence of foliage is made felt by references to the garden's plants in J.C.'s lines. The only visible prop is a minimalist, yet obtrusive device: a metal sun is lowered from the flies and the

footlights are lit. The artificiality of the metal sun is rendered more salient by the displacement of its beam onto the footlights, at the exact opposite side of the stage.

While this device differentiates landscape scenes from interiors, the landscape setting's parameters are not respected throughout the play. At one point, J.C. stumbles in a fit of paranoia through the garden and onto a cross he has had installed in the drawing room of the house. In deliberate contrast with other parts of the play, in which transitions from garden to interior are signified by a scene change, this time the sun and footlights remain. It is as if the spaces suddenly merge.

Like the minimalist scenery, this spatial amorphousness suggests that landscape in the play is not subject to natural laws, but susceptible to capricious fantasy – fantasy directly derived from J.C.'s mental unbalance. This conceit is central to the play's underlying representation of landscape as power. Before his death, J.C.'s father tells the butler, 'It's all based on land, Tuck. Can't have those knaves from Whitehall moving in'. The impetus of the whole play is a struggle for possession of a country estate. The insubstantiality of the estate's landscape as presented on stage points seditiously to the contingency and fragility of the ruling class's power through possession of land. The very materiality of the land as possession is denied by the play's landscape.

Landscape is the main setting for Jack's deranged fantasies. As J.C., he acts out his fantasies of courtly love with the 'Lady of the Camelias' in the grounds. As Jack the Ripper, he pretends to be a stereotypical aristocrat, hunting in the grounds. Normative relations between landscape and owner are subverted by the play's abstract landscape, the dimensions of which are as unbalanced as Jack's mind.

How does the film adaptation's use of locations - material and ostensibly substantive landscapes – develop or diverge from the play's depiction of landscape? Reviews of the adaptation anticipated heritage criticism, arguing that the film's landscape locations introduce an incongruous naturalism to the discourse, which detracts from the play's narrative. A representative article in *The Leicester Chronicle* asserts that 'use of this Lincolnshire setting with well-drilled flower beds, grass and trees...add

up to a realism which conflicts seriously with the work of a witty playwright whose declared intention was to cock a snook at naturalism.’

However, this is erroneously to presume not only that a camera cannot portray landscape in a non-naturalistic manner, but also that landscape gardens themselves are necessarily naturalistic. In fact, British formal gardens were and are predisposed to abstract design, and rarely to naturalism. The picturesque garden, which succeeded, but never entirely replaced, the formal garden, tends towards a naturalistic arrangement, with artifice all but concealed in the composition. However, picturesque landscapes often contain gothic elements such as dilapidated ornamental buildings, which tip the composition towards myth and fantasy.

The film version of *The Ruling Class* depicts both formal gardens and picturesque landscapes, elements of each filmed at Harlaxton Manor in Lincolnshire and Cliveden House in Buckinghamshire. Whereas the landscape scenes in the play are all characterised by the same prop, the metal sun, the landscapes in the film match the hybridity of the play as a whole. The film pursues Jack’s transformation from J.C. to Jack the Ripper through a landscaped trajectory, from formal garden settings for J.C.’s escapades to a picturesque backdrop for Jack the Ripper’s hunting exploits. The bipartite structure of the play’s narrative is self-consciously mirrored in the way landscape changes in the film.

I will now screen two clips to show how Jack’s metamorphosis is reflected in the film’s deployment of landscape.

CLIPS

The first clip, from the first half of the film, shows J.C. with Grace as the ‘Lady of the Camelias’ in a formal garden. The second clip, from the latter half of the film, features the Jack the Ripper persona in a picturesque landscape. These spaces are both presented as being near the family house. Their proximity is unlikely, however. They contrast not only in design, but also in pathetic fallacy. J.C.’s happiness is rendered in sunshine, while the Gothicism of Jack the Ripper is reflected in gloom.

These grounds feature nothing as pointedly artificial as the play's metal sun, but they are hardly naturalistic, either at the profilmic phase or as represented on screen. The first shot in the first clip presents a symmetrical, theatrical garden, with an arboreal backdrop, a hedge dado, and discrete coulisses in the form of topiary. The camera's vantage point is raised as if seated in an amphitheatre.

These formal grounds are woven into the narrative. They constitute the site where J.C. is threatened by what he calls 'paranoid plots'. Earlier, he is warned about his uncle's plot to gain control of the estate. He fears the revelation of this scheme more than the scheme itself. Consequently, he lets himself become intertwined in the plots. In terms of dialogue and story, these scenes do not diverge from the play. However, they develop its preoccupations, through the evocative characteristics of the locations. Deluded, J.C. sutures the landscape into a fantasy of courtly and free love. His fantasies are in dialogue with the landscape's design. As in an allegorical garden, flowers and animals are personified: J.C. talks to them at one point in the film. In the first clip, this anthropomorphism is inverted as J.C. and the 'Lady of the Camelias', court each other, behaving as if they are birds. In doing so, they mimic Clivesden's bird-shaped topiary.

Later in the first clip, J.C. alludes to Judas in the middle of a symmetrical hedge pattern. The shot suggests that J.C. is subjugated to the designs of the aristocracy with the same stringency as the formal garden is cultivated. The film's association between the formal garden and imprisonment is reinforced by its scenes – exclusive to the adaptation – set in a lunatic asylum, where the inmates stroll through the formal grounds in which they have been incarcerated. Conversely, in the play, J.C.'s madness transcends the boundaries of the garden, when he conflates the *mise-en-scène* of the house with the garden setting.

The film's representation of a lunatic asylum as a country house also implies that all country houses are lunatic asylums, or that the Gurney family's house is in danger of becoming a lunatic asylum. This subversiveness extends to the picturesque landscape. In both the play and the film, J.C. declares that in the sky, he saw 'distinction, diversity and variety, all clearly rolled up into the unity of Universal Love.' 'Distinction, diversity and variety' are the main constituents of picturesque garden

design. In the film, the revelation of Jack's violent insanity takes place in a picturesque space, succinctly conveying the failure of his dream of Universal Love and equating that failure with landed power as represented by a picturesque landscape.

In contradistinction with the formal garden, design in the picturesque is subtle, human intervention often concealed. In the second clip, the viewer can spot the marks of design when the poacher is chased. The scenery here is composed as an undulating perspective in grass, with arboreal screens demarcating the sides. The picturesque's aesthetic is one of pleasing concealment, not only of human artifice, but also of areas of the house's grounds. A picturesque landscape induces curiosity in the mobile spectator by suggesting yet deferring the revelation of the full composition.

While design in the formal garden ultimately figures the ruthless circumscription of J.C.'s fantasies of courtly love, the picturesque's concealments pose a threat to Jack's relatives. The second clip's landscape is largely naturalistic in design. However, it utilises the characteristics of the picturesque to introduce a playful, farcical element into the narrative, thus undermining the naturalism of the picturesque. Jack's cousin is comically entwined in brambles and concealed. A poacher, hidden by the trees is accidentally shot and forced to reveal himself. Jack uses the stereotypical role of the aristocrat poaching in a picturesque space to conceal his madness from the others.

After Jack's family have left, the camera figures the revelation of his madness. There is a sudden cut which disconcertingly breaks the 180° rule of naturalistic cinematography, to an unexpectedly vertiginous high angle shot. As Jack's first soliloquy is recited, the camera zooms out, equating his maniacal monologue with the surrounding picturesque space. His body twists and lurches, his posture paralleled and framed by the tree revealed on his left. This shadowy, hollow, tilted, somewhat dilapidated tree reflects the decline of Jack into the gothic, like the dead autumnal leaves falling to the ground around him. This scene precedes the full disclosure of his identity as Jack the Ripper, but his gothic tendencies are foreshadowed here. While J.C.'s bird impression in the first clip mimics the topiary of the formal garden, here his bird-like flapping is in proleptic anticipation of the following shot, which entirely undoes any of the picturesque sequence's naturalism. We see a clichéd shot of birds in

a gothic silhouette, inexplicably abandoning a deciduous tree. The cut from a tree with falling leaves to a bare tree seems to accelerate autumn unnaturally. The emphasis on dilapidated trees is also decidedly gothic; the process of redesigning a landscape to become picturesque often required the importation and replanting of old, decrepit trees, to add an air of gothic decay.

While the formal garden contains and explicitly frames J.C.'s madness, cultivating his fantasies for his family's exploitation, here Jack's madness is secreted, its revelation surreptitious; the picturesque landscape only frames his insanity when he is alone. The film thus ironises both the holistic, open layout of symbols in the formal garden and the introversion of picturesque associationism. Neither of these scenes is ultimately naturalistic. They both figure a correspondence between garden design and Jack's madness. In the film, Jack's arc comically and perversely straddles the divide between the courtly allegories of the formal garden and the pleasing concealments of the picturesque.

While these scenes differ minimally from the play in terms of plot and dialogue, their associative range is extended. The play is about land, but we never see any *land* represented on stage. Landscape in the play is not defined by land, but by ethereal elements: the sun and its light. Landscape seems little more than an upper class dream in the play, a chimera. The sense of fantasy is retained in the film, but inscribed more substantially, in an earthbound dialectics of narrative and locations. The film does not document the landscapes in a naturalistic manner. Rather it expounds fancifully on the eccentricities of the ruling class which Barnes equates with lunacy. These eccentricities are, as the film suggests, to be witnessed as much in garden design as in anything else. The film weaves a non-naturalistic web, placing the madness and immoral schemes of the landed class in the context of its power; country estate landscapes, whether formal or picturesque, ultimately stand for and constitute that power. The fanciful subversiveness of the play's minimalist landscape is thus elaborated; its critique of landed power is substantiated in the film through the adaptation of landscapes.