

Earl G. Ingersoll, 2012
Filming Forster: The Challenge in Adapting
E. M. Forster's Novels for the Screen
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In his author's Introduction, Ingersoll writes that his "project" in *Filming Forster* takes its cue from the adaptations scholar Simone Murray, whose exemplary empirically grounded study of the interrelationships between the businesses of post-2000 book-to-film adaptation and contemporary transnational corporate publishing in *The Adaptation Industry* (2012) broke new ground in "rethink[ing] adaptation [...] as a material phenomenon produced by a system of institutional interests and actors" (Ingersoll, 12, quoting Murray 2008, 10). More prosaically, Ingersoll positions his book in relation to the US film scholar Marcia Landy's short chapter on the five feature-film adaptations of all of Forster's novels except *The Longest Journey* that were produced in the 1980s to early 1990s, published a decade ago in the *Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster* edited by David Bradshaw (2007).

Filming Forster promises an expansion upon Landy's survey, coupled with an ostensible shift in methodological emphasis—away from "the restrictive perception of the five films as merely finished *products*" towards "the *process* of producing" them (12–13). In at least two respects, however, it replicates the limitations of Landy's overview, albeit at greater length. Like Landy (and too many other scholars) before him, Ingersoll proceeds as though the 1980s to 1990s Forster-films cycle (a glut prompted by the Forster Estate's decision to put the film rights to his novels on the market around a decade after his death) were and are the *only* cross-media adaptations of Forster's novels or short fiction. It would be refreshing to see an account which contextualises the "Forster films" by at least acknowledging their radio,

theatre and TV precursors—and successors—but that is not provided here (and it is unclear how far the author is even aware of this wider field). Ingersoll's one, unavoidable, exception is that his chapter on David Lean's *A Passage to India* (1984) recounts Lean's abysmal treatment of Santha Rama Rau—the Indian-born, US-educated author of *A Passage to India*'s astonishingly successful stage adaptation (written in 1957, first staged in 1960, and televised for BBC-TV's *Play of the Month* strand in 1965).⁶

Landy's piece was limited further by its slavish attachment to the dismissive orthodoxies of early-1990s anti-heritage-film criticism. Ingersoll repeats the (non-obligatory) ritual of framing the Forster films as "heritage cinema" — at length, in a muddled, puzzled account which awkwardly (and for no clear reason) interrupts his chapter on Merchant Ivory Productions' 1985 global hit adaptation of *A Room with a View*. If he regards the UK heritage-film debates—in which the "Merchant-Forster-Ivory" films were a central target—as an important contextual frame, they should surely be outlined in his Introduction. On a personal note, Ingersoll curiously declines to acknowledge or make use of my own contributions to these debates (Monk 1995/2001, 1997, 2002, 2011a, 2011b), even though his discussion of the "elaborate [textual] structure of looking and being looked at" in Ivory's *A Room with a View* (92) has points in common with the analysis developed in Monk 1997. Indeed, his whole book is fraught with anxieties about the gaze—specifically, the threat of its female, homoerotic, and queer pleasures—which some acquaintance with Monk 1997 and Monk 1995/2001, and a direct acknowledgement that the gaze is not always straight-male, might have illuminated if not eased.

Ingersoll, an Emeritus Professor at the US liberal arts College at Brockport (part of SUNY) has spent a long career as a literature—rather than film or adaptation studies—scholar; his specialisms include modernist and contemporary English and Anglophone literature, but not specifically Forster. His Introduction shows that he has taken the trouble to engage with developments in 21st-century adaptation theory—especially its turn away from "fidelity criticism" (associated with binary, hierarchical, novel-film comparisons, shading into a familiar discourse in which the book is routinely "better

⁶ Lean breached the Forster Estate's contractual requirement to retain Rau as the film's screenwriter, reworking her script so drastically that she sought removal of her credit. A similar script controversy arose around Lean's 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*.

than” or “betrayed by” the film) towards a poststructuralist, dialogic model which approaches adaptation as a field of multiple, non-hierarchical, inter-textualities, and is thus well-suited to the transmedial plurality of convergence culture. Although Ingersoll opens with a fair (if discursive) overview of the “fidelity” debates, and draws widely on the major contemporary adaptations theorists, his mastery in this area is not fully confident. For instance, his understanding of the “process” versus “product” dichotomy reverses the usual force of these terms in adaptation theory. As Suzanne Speidel has noted:

It has become common practice [...] to distinguish between adaptation as “process” and adaptation as “product”. [...] [However, t]his binary is usually intended as a means of promoting the study of adaptation as a product of its new entertainment industry [i.e. film] [...] [Whereas T]he notion of adaptation as “process” is usually associated with what we might term more “traditional” adaptation studies, namely the adaptation case study undertaken through comparative close readings. As a result its function [...] has largely been to define a conservative methodology and critical approach, often aligned with both literary and fidelity criticism. (Speidel 2014, 300, following Cardwell 2002, 10)

Ingersoll’s intended emphasis, then, is clearly on what Speidel refers to as adaptation as *product*, not “process”. But, importantly, Speidel (2014, 300) observes this dichotomy in order to redefine it: calling for empirical study of the neglected “actual creative processes undertaken by adaptors when practising the art of adaptation” which her scrupulous study of the work-in-progress screenplays of Ivory’s *Maurice* (1987) puts into practice. In addition, Ingersoll does *not* note that the backlash against fidelity criticism, and concomitant disparagement of “faithful” adaptations, have now become so entrenched within adaptation studies that the past decade has brought calls for a re-(e)valuation. As the adaptations scholars Christine Geraghty and Dudley Andrew respectively argue, “faithfulness matters if it matters to the viewer” (Geraghty 2008, 3), and “Fidelity is the umbilical cord that nourishes the judgement of ordinary viewers”, regardless of academic disparagement (Andrew 2011, 27).

The case of Forster, the detail of the film adaptations of his novels – whether approached textually, via their empirical creative processes, or as industrial products – and their contradictory critical and academic reception, illustrate perfectly the problems arising from both the over-valuing and the devaluing of “fidelity”, and the need for a more nuanced, case-sensitive approach. First, anti-heritage-film criticism and anti-fidelity adaptations criticism alike have enshrined the fallacy that the three Merchant Ivory adaptations of Forster’s novels in particular – *A Room with a View* (1985), *Maurice* (1987) and *Howards End* (1992) – are the ultimate “too-faithful”, “lifeless”, even “failed” classic/heritage adaptations (indicatively, see Desmond and Hawkes 2006, 242). This stance absurdly erases the material reality that the films are products of adaptation and creative *processes* at all; and, indeed, of *documented* processes that were highly complex, demonstrably involved plural creative inputs and negotiated agency, and can be studied.

Second, the Forster films have frequently been accused of neutralizing or “mut[ing] the political and sexual tensions of Forster’s texts” (Martin and Piggford 1997, 275). However, these very same tensions make the most radical demands of anti-fidelity criticism especially inappropriate to adaptations of Forster’s works. If applied to a text like *Maurice* or *A Passage to India*, Fredric Jameson’s call for “the film [to] be utterly different from, utterly unfaithful to, its original” (2011, 218) becomes politically insensitive at best. For producer-director – and personal – partners Ismail Merchant and James Ivory when they adapted and filmed *Maurice* as their 25th-anniversary production at the height of the 1980s HIV/AIDS crisis, *fidelity* to Forster’s normalisation of same-sex love and his refusal of gay tragedy were rightly as “imperative” as *Maurice*’s happy ending had been to Forster himself. When quizzed about the wisdom of “so defiant a salute to homosexual passion” by the *New York Times*, Merchant replied simply: “It would be wrong to turn our face from the homosexual community [...] and treat the subject as taboo” (Nightingale 1987). (Throughout the book, it remains unclear whether Ingersoll has understood that Merchant Ivory were a gay filmmaking partnership.) In contrast, Ingersoll’s chapter on David Lean’s *A Passage to India* (1984) amply confirms Lean’s “bowdleriz[ation] and inver[sion]” of Forster’s intentions (to quote Christopher Hitchens’ appalled 1985 response) in an array of adaptation decisions so crass (crudely heterosexualising Forster’s narrative, “correcting” his aversion to colonialism, and casting Sir Alec Guinness in brownface as Professor Godbole) that they justify the language of “betrayal”.

Last but not least, the successive waves of interpretative and contextual scholarship which have continued to unpack and re-evaluate Forster's works and life since his death—in the light of the revelation of “queer Forster” and beyond—should alert us to a third issue. Both the production of the 1980s to 1990s wave of Forster film adaptations and their initial reception have proved *untimely* in relation to still-unfolding understandings of Forster, his works, and their uses, importance and meanings for their public(s).

The contexts I have sketched above signal that there is both scope and a real need for rigorous further work on the Forster films, the empirical detail of their adaptation and production processes, the peculiarities of their reception, and—as explored in my own recent and ongoing work—their audiences, fans, and continuing cultural and transtextual afterlives (see Monk 2011b and Monk 2016). Moreover, research access to the primary sources needed for the study of adaptation treatments, script development, and the overall production processes (in Speidel's sense) of the Forster films has been enhanced in recent years—most extensively, by James Ivory's donation of his production papers to the University of Oregon, alongside equivalent collections for Merchant and their longstanding screenwriting collaborator Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (who had a—by choice, uncredited—hand in the adaptation of *Maurice*, alongside her Academy Award-winning screenplays for *A Room with a View* and *Howards End* [1992]). Equivalent records for Lean's *A Passage to India* have long been available in the British Film Institute's Special Collections; and the Forster archive at King's College, Cambridge has long held script materials for all the stage and screen adaptations of his works. (In addition, versions of Jhabvala's screenplays for *A Room with a View* and *Howards End* have been available online in recent years, possibly unofficially.)

It must be stated immediately that *Filming Forster* does not rise to this opportunity—either in the methodologies Ingersoll actually deploys, or in the reliability and rigour of his contextual and textual commentaries on the five films. Despite its introductory rhetoric, and an endorsement calling it an “important study”, in practice the book's account of the processes and “challenges” of fiction-to-screen adaptation in the Forster films is entirely secondary sourced. (The book relies especially heavily on the eminent British film historian, documentarist and film editor Kevin Brownlow's 1996 *David Lean: A Biography*. Robert Emmet Long's excellent 2005 *James Ivory in Conversation*—the most recent book on the creative processes and production practices of the transnational Merchant-Ivory-Jhabvala triumvirate—is also

extensively used.) Ingersoll displays no overt awareness that these processes might be studied by consulting primary sources such as scripts, or that his own stated interests in “adaptation as process” and Murray’s materialist approach might signal methodological opportunities for his own “project”. The book’s original contribution is therefore confined to textual and contextual interpretation—of Ingersoll’s secondary sources as much as the films themselves. In the case of Ivory’s *Maurice* only, his sources extend to DVD peripherals: centrally some (although not all) of the film’s 30-plus minutes of alternative and unused scenes, which first reached the public as extras on the 2004 Merchant Ivory Collection/Criterion double DVD edition of the film—bizarrely referred to by Ingersoll as ‘the’ DVD as though it were the only edition. (The impact of the revelation of these scenes on audiences and fans is discussed in Monk 2011b.) *Filming Forster’s* value and utility—whether as scholarship or for teaching use—therefore hinge on Ingersoll’s uses and comprehension of the published work of others, and on his acuity and interpretative judgment in relation to his secondary sources, the films and deleted scenes, and (not least) Forster. Unfortunately there are shortfalls, eccentricities of judgement—and outright factual errors—across both areas which demand a *caveat emptor* warning, along with an alert to publishers that the need for further quality publications on the Forster films continues.

Unhelpfully for teaching use, the book lacks film/plot synopses or a filmography—but, most unhelpfully of all, it lacks any introductory account of Forster’s themes and concerns as a novelist. Ingersoll’s Introduction establishes, at length, Forster’s reservations (characteristic of his class, time and cultural milieu) about the movies as mass entertainment and his desire not to see his novels filmed; and—usefully—the role of the Trustees of Forster’s Literary Estate at King’s College, Cambridge as gatekeepers when granting film rights. (The latter is returned to in each chapter, but would benefit from a more critical study not provided here.) But in place of mentioning Forster’s secular humanism, social critique, treatment of class or use of irony, Ingersoll foregrounds his own preoccupation—“It is difficult not to be distracted by the issues [sic] of Forster’s homosexuality” (16)—and conflates Forster’s first four novels as “brittle” expressions of a “condition of sexual masquerade” (15). Ingersoll’s treatment of the subject of sexuality in later chapters—centrally those on Ivory’s *A Room with a View* and *Maurice*—oscillates uneasily between earnest displays of empathy, and an obsessive, intrusive anxiety about homoeroticism and male nudity which contrasts painfully with Ivory’s own

notably natural, unprurient and relaxed approach to this in films made more than 30 years ago.

The book's resulting reading of *Maurice* is marred by some shocking (and, for teaching use, potentially even damaging) misunderstandings. Ingersoll's account of the opening sequence is a case in point. He misses the humour and absurdity of the schoolmaster Ducie's blundering attempt to teach 'the sacred mystery of [hetero] sex' to the fatherless adolescent Maurice by drawing crude diagrams in the sand; that the authority of this lesson is undermined further by Ivory's knowing casting of the out gay actor Simon Callow; and the deeply moving parallel scene prompted by Ducie's *deus ex machina* reappearance to Maurice and Alec inside the British Museum ten years later. Instead, he insists (against Forster's writing or own self-recorded experiences) that Maurice is too young to be aware of his own orientation, and frets that Ducie is prematurely sexualizing him (128–9). Even when discussing Ivory's unused scenes (at times, mistaking deteriorated video roughs for black-and-white footage), he focuses disproportionately on excised sexual content—ignoring, for example, the agonising 'night before Greece' sequence between Maurice and Clive (which, at January 2018, remained by far the most-viewed *Maurice* deleted scene on YouTube), and not fully analysing the film's abandoned non-linear opening. Projecting his own anxieties onto the deleted scenes, Ingersoll insists that they 'originally reveal[ed] [Maurice] more clearly as a sexual predator in the making' (141)—a homophobic reading absurdly at odds with James Wilby's perpetually tentative Maurice or any textual intention. Even Alec Scudder's smouldering active gaze at Maurice in the deleted greenhouse scene—in which Alec's attention visibly peels away from the maids he has been flirting with—causes Ingersoll to fret that Alec is 'boyish-looking' (Rupert Graves was 23!) and to cite the scene as further evidence of 'Maurice as a man preying on boys' (146). Readers may guess for themselves the pitch of panic Ingersoll reaches over the Dickie Barry episode.

Equally apparent in *Filming Forster* is a concomitant anxiety about the anticipated reactions of an imagined "mainstream audience"—consistently (if tacitly) presumed to be heterosexual, puritanical and American. Indeed, the book is compromised more widely by its US-centricity: its inaccuracies and misconceptions often owe as much to cultural myopia as to poor fact-checking. When Ingersoll proclaims that Lean's biographer Kevin Brownlow "is no filmmaker" (30), I can only assume he writes in ignorance that the Academy Honorary Award-winning British director of *It Happened Here* (1966)

and *Winstanley* (1975) is, in fact, a filmmaker. Ingersoll's chapter on Lean's *A Passage to India* makes the astonishing (and unsubstantiated) claim that "Other than some 'English majors', and some in the Gay Rights Movement who might have read his posthumous homosexual novel *Maurice* [...] very few knew who E. M. Forster was" (28). *A Room with a View* and *Where Angels Fear to Tread*—staples of English Literature syllabi translated into numerous languages—are described as a "little-known" novel and "Forster's weakest" (17), presumably on the flawed basis of the Forster Estate's (conservative but inconsistent) posturing when approached about film rights.

The British, low-budget and television-funded institutional context of most of the Forster films is not addressed either, since Ingersoll expressly equates the film industry with "Hollywood" (9) and writes obliviously of "contemporary (i.e. American) audiences" (130). The notion of a global audience, a British film industry, or indeed any other non-Hollywood film industries, film cultures and 'mainstreams', is barely entertained. So, for example, there is no mention of the involvement of Britain's Channel 4 in the production of Ivory's *A Room with a View* and *Maurice* or London Weekend Television's strategic backing of producer Derek Granger and director Charles Sturridge's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*; *Maurice*'s multiple prizes at the 1987 Venice Film Festival or *Howards End*'s 1992 premiere and Anniversary Prize at Cannes; the early-1990s mood of anti-European xenophobia which Sturridge's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* explicitly sought to critique via its exaggerated acting and the "dark" cinematography noted by Ingersoll (167) and disliked by US critics.

On the subject of critical reception, Ingersoll (perhaps wrong-footed by the heritage-film debates) states, entirely wrongly, that Ivory's *A Room* was negatively reviewed on its 1985–1986 release. In fact, it was praised by UK and US critics across the political spectrum, including the Communist Party newspaper the *Morning Star* (Dignam 1986) in the UK and the eminent auteurist critic Andrew Sarris (1986) in the US (Monk 2002, 187). In contrast, the critical reception of Ivory's *Maurice*—fêted at Venice, warm in the US, but peculiarly lukewarm in the UK—goes unmentioned (even though Ivory himself felt sufficiently exercised by it to file a handwritten note on the subject in his archive).

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