

**The Rocky Terrain of British Novel Adaptations:
Review of Dianne F. Sadoff,
*Victorian Vogue: British Novels on Screen***

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**Dianne F. Sadoff, *Victorian Vogue: British Novels on Screen*
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Combining close textual analysis, historicism, and film studies, Dianne F. Sadoff presents heritage film as “smarter about and more embedded in history than its critics have alleged” (xi). Sadoff argues for complexities within the nebulous genre that demand its release from opponents’ insistence on heritage culture as inherently conservative, something many liberal or progressive neo-Victorian artists and authors will find comforting. While she acknowledges the genre’s ties to conservative politics, she maintains that film adaptations of (mostly) 19th-century British novels deserve further scholarly attention and that heritage film, as an adaptive mode, must be considered with attention to such films’ multiple intersections with history. Drawing on Frederic Jameson, Linda Hutcheon, Julie Sanders, and Vincent Leitch, among many others, Sadoff describes adaptations as unique texts that seek to resolve specific cultural anxieties at distinct moments in time – the moment of a source text, already embedded in that work, and the moment of adaptation. That historicised interpretation shows the complexity of heritage film is a potentially simplistic argument; there are, after all, so many adaptations and of quite different varieties. Yet there is such vast territory covered in *Victorian Vogue* that the value of reading the monograph comes less from Sadoff’s overarching argument than from her analyses of particular adaptations. For neo-Victorian scholars, the challenge will be to sift through the dense work for its gems, many of which lead to more intriguing questions than answers.

Victorian Vogue treks through the landscapes of film, literature, and history as the author considers an expanse of adapted works from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf, and film adaptations spanning almost 70 years. Sometimes exhilarating, Sadoff's analyses carry the reader along as she dives into the depths of one or another particular favourite, but it is occasionally unclear where one has resurfaced. With its necessary attention to literary analysis, film interpretation, and the historical contexts (social and formal) of her wide-ranging primary texts, *Victorian Vogue* can also be an exhausting journey. One might expect the book, spanning, as it does, such a range of texts, to be cursory (and often it is), but Sadoff manages depth in her multi-pronged approach through thematised chapters (heritage culture, fidelity aesthetics, horror, sex on screen, and queer narratives) and a layering of analyses that allows for the sort of generalisation that the work's space demands. Nevertheless, almost every chapter could readily develop into its own book, and readers are left to adapt the work into more adventurous arguments implied by Sadoff but forsaken for the seemingly more pressing task of establishing heritage films' ideological complexities. I expect the book to be used more than read, as researchers mine chapters ripe with potential to take the field beyond readings and into formal considerations of the different forms of neo-Victorian adaptations, or as they argue for the political ambivalence of particular icons of Victoriana to recuperate from the past.

With heritage culture as the real Victorian element under investigation, Sadoff's analysis begins with the popular but obviously pre-Victorian Jane Austen as the foundation from which to argue against assumptions about heritage film politics. With a diverse and abundant base of Austen adaptations (in TV and film, 1940-2005) from which to draw examples, Sadoff readily claims the multiple readings possible in heritage film. Sadoff's dismissal of purely Victorian texts within a work named after the period identifies the slipperiness of "Victorian" within popular imagination and the blending of eras that results from a general interest in heritage culture. Unsurprisingly, fidelity to a source text is quickly admitted as impossible and, in her second chapter, Sadoff identifies the social (and financial) value in altering texts for a contemporary audience. Her use of Brian McFarlane's method for dissecting narratives and adaptations (of romantic fidelity) is an excellent model for those analyzing the subtle shifts of even seemingly close adaptations. Despite the author's insistence on the

impossibility of perfect adaptations, she has limited space for remakes and re-mediations, such as *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling 1995) and Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1999). The former are never fully distinguished from adaptations and the latter become important more as metafictional allegories that satirise the desire for 'faithful' adaptations than as their own complex form of textual repurposing. While Sadoff acknowledges the potential problems of adaptations that are so loose as to be unrecognizable to most viewers, no boundaries are established.

Victorian Vogue's final three chapters and epilogue continue to encounter the postmodern excitement of border crossings. In her third, Sadoff explains how Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) have addressed concerns about bodily technologies and global economics. Her readings here often seem familiar or overly allegorical. More illuminating, particularly for neo-Victorianists, is Sadoff's treatment of what she terms "morph aesthetics," generic blending necessary for Victorian horror films as they strive to entice female viewers, negotiate industry censorship, and still terrify. The author notes that the social relevance of such frights can be simultaneously overturned by the seeming distance of period film, staving off anxiety about technologically aided reproduction and the permeability of boundaries with steam powered machines and top hats. But whether an antique veneer actually displaces social anxiety remains a topic for further consideration in the field.

Concerning themes indicated, though only superficially explored, earlier in the book, Sadoff's fourth and fifth chapters manage to cover surprisingly new ground. The fourth chapter, on adapting Henry James's writing to millennial audience expectations regarding sex, highlights the potentially contradictory position of heritage romances as both ennobling and erotic. Here, Sadoff's argument relies on her knowledge of film production and industry, and it stands out as a tight but thorough analysis, the only chapter that allows enough space for the intricacies it examines, while leaving other 'juicy' topics (albeit in a different sense), such as anachronism, to future scholarship. Complexly postmodern in their self-reflexivity and mixing of genres, the James adaptations that Sadoff describes succeed only as they are able to indulge the audience with celebrity skin. Sex and nudity seem the one authorial infidelity in heritage

culture that contemporary audiences not only allow but desire. That is, if the sex is straight.

Sadoff's analysis of queer adaptations in the fifth chapter demonstrates the all too common straightening out of such narratives and the book begins to perform a sort of queerness. Arguing for a politics of sentiment, the author includes sources and adaptations that break the monograph's previously unstated criteria for heritage film and include adapted plays, biopic and *avant-garde* adaptations, and clearly post-Victorian narratives. In the end, Sadoff posits self-reflexive Wildean adaptations as performing a drag of high culture, a description fitting for many, though not all, neo-Victorian creations. All anachronisms are at least a little temporally queer and the adoption, or adaptation, of past styles in order to critique contemporary norms has a decidedly camp appeal. Whether that has political value depends on whom you ask.

One of my early concerns with the monograph is its frequently unclear sense of each source's and each adaptation's audience (at times British, at others American; sometimes bourgeois, sometimes mass). Sadoff indirectly addresses this problem of audience reception in her epilogue, which focuses on mass cultural and global adaptations in the twenty-first century, an appropriately broad follow-up to the complexities of queer heritage film. Although short and only able to briefly discuss a range of topics, Sadoff does focus on reception in relation to the constraints of industry market forces – for Hollywood, independent cinema, and global cinemas – a critical concern underlying her project to ensure historicism of heritage film. While the book as a whole does not thoroughly engage several topics important to the formal role of temporal adaptations, including anachronism, re-mediation, and intertextuality, Sadoff does make the case for the complexity of heritage film, providing a solid foundation from which to further explore the formal terrain she leaves unmapped. The author ends her monograph with anecdotes about the reception of different source texts throughout space, the logical complement to her prioritisation of time. As a factor of reception that presumably no one would question, the analysis of cross-cultural reception thus brings into focus what Sadoff's work has so aptly argued, via heritage film, for all neo-Victorian works: it is situated among distinct cultures, divided by time if not always space, and as such it must be contextualised.