

## Rest in Pieces

Adrian Martin



All things considered, it's possible to imagine that we are moving toward a reign of the adaptation in which the notion of the unity of the work of art, if not the very notion of the author himself, will be destroyed.

– André Bazin, "Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest" (1948)

*45 Minutes From Edith Wharton*: that body of American literature named "Wharton" as a site you can visit, a street you can walk or take a train to, a *monument*. But a monument to what? That's always the question. Even more so, the question of our collective, trained will to *monumentalize* such works of culture and their venerable authors.

The specific work in question is Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence* (published 1920, set in the 1870s). But Steve Fagin does not set out to *adapt* this novel in any way, shape or form. To address it, yes. To circle it. Surround it. Question it. Stalk it, even. To treat it as a cultural site (across, literally, its many editions) and also, in a virtual-cubistic sense, an imaginary *space* that one can inhabit and poke around in. To unsettle its foundations, its comfortable drift into history, including media history.

Fagin does not *represent* chosen scenes from the book. For him, across the decades of his artistic practice, it's never of matter of representation, mimesis,

verisimilitude. No *re-creation* of another, hallowed work; only its re-invention – in pieces. Tableaux, block-scenes, digital chunks.

Literature and cinema (or any of cinema's latter-day video & digital mutations): this relationship should not be for the sake of smoothly *conveying* the former into the latter, solely for the purpose of extending a work's market-reach. Why bother with that? Read an old book, see a new film: use your precious time and your brain wisely, there's no need to *duplicate* these texts across media, and even less need for any of us to police how faithful (or otherwise) the adaptation turns out to be. As if duplication was ever a possible thing, to begin with.

I had a dream while writing this text. Edith Wharton's initials – *EW* – became a kind of giant, glowing, flickering, fluorescent neon sign that metamorphosed in its meaning in the moments I gazed at it: *EW* stopped meaning Edith Wharton and instead signified *Entertainment Weekly*. Or, as I used to watch it on TV in the 1980s, beamed direct from the USA to Australia: *Entertainment This Week*. This dream was telling me something!

I retain a tele-memory of *EW*'s 1993 coverage of the release of Martin Scorsese's version of *The Age of Innocence* ("that horrible movie", as Mia Fowler glancingly refers to it in *45 Minutes*). Winona Ryder gushed that she needed a special "historical coordinator" for her role as May Welland, to ensure that none of her spontaneous postural gestures, hand movements or facial expressions gave out the "wrong" modern meaning. "It's like, if I put my hand on my hip as I'd normally do, I'm saying to Newland, 'Just fuck my brains out, OK?'. Maybe that would have been a good intervention.

Fagin wages war against a certain, ghastly practice of *modernization* of 'the classics'. In fact, I well recall, from decades ago, a conversation with him wherein he railed against the likes of The Wooster Group for, at the time, always returning to 'the classics' (old and more recent: Chekhov, Eugene O'Neill ... ) for their supposedly avant-garde repertoire. But the trend back then is piddling compared to what goes on today: a deluge of 'woke' *modernization*, inserting (often by force, and clumsily) 'progressive' elements, perspectives, characters and situations that never existed in the original source. A trend that *45 Minutes from Edith Wharton* adroitly punctures in its passing evocation (in monologue) of "an adaptation of Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence* as a musical with an 'upstairs downstairs' twist ... the next *Hamilton*".



Monologue, reading aloud, recitation, performance: these are some of the varied modes that Fagin deploys. There are also improvised games, fragments of sets, drawings (and erasures) on a chalk board, and a constantly mobile digital space that is somewhere between a drawing-room and a gallery, stuffed with surreal objects & images that poke further holes in the skein of modernized representation

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Wharton's novel stakes out a particular 'turf', a plotted territory of physical and social space, defined by strict, fine-grain hierarchies of class, status, privilege, wealth, gender, entitlement, vocation, cultural affiliation, hobby, family ties, and every other imaginable demarcation-line. Fagin's opening tableau, in which writer Constance DeJong (sitting amidst the mobile digital room-space already mentioned) reads from Chapter 6 of Wharton's book. It's a passage that lays out the dizzying system of some of these hierarchies in the New York world that the author so meticulously reported on and captured.

Many filmic adaptations of classic literature are content, indeed deliriously happy, to reproduce these types of anthropological 'thick descriptions' of a given social milieu. But the more fanatically these milieux are researched and reproduced on screen, the more specific they become – and the further they proceed into a past rendered as distant and remote. So different, it would seem, to where and what we are now. These historic chronotopes become exotic museum pieces, fetishes of lost time. The past as a foreign country to be mapped and then sold with a tour-guide commentary implicitly or explicitly attached. And with no evident link to the present, except in the hopeful allegory opportunistically and emptily hailed by reviewers and commentators ('How relevant it is!').

Fagin has a different approach to the space-time of cultural history. I am reminded of the immortal words of German film critic Frieda Grafe, urging us "to become aware of the present in the past, and to see that established practices have been

subject to development. A critique of the present is a critique of the past that has allowed the present to come about.” As *45 Minutes from Edith Wharton* proceeds on its merry way, we see and hear the “Wharton world” simultaneously splinter apart and expand. It’s a represented world as fixed in the pages of a book or previously adapted to the screen – and thus a type of museum exhibit – but also a world that can be conjured anew, reconfigured, and explored in the present. A process that is encapsulated wonderfully in the intermittent use of a large, shop-front window that is open to the fleeting gazes of passers-by in the present-day, outside world.

This new world is arrived at and traversed in various ways, by various means of transport. In one of the scenes involving the lively improvisational byplay between Winsome Brown and Vernice P. Miller – as servants set free from their historical narrative – the news of a subway is imagined with awe. The Puerto Rican performance artist Michele Carlo pounds the pavements as she recounts the extraordinary tale of racial “kill whitey day” at the school she once attended. In another tableau of recounting, we are given a complex insight into the New York Draft Riots of July 1863 – the off-screen space, as it happens, of another epic Scorsese history-recreation, *Gangs of New York* (2002). A further reading from the book (Chapter 3) takes place in a cemetery.



Mia Fowler’s running monologues at her laptop take us somewhere else again: into the struggles of black artists to claim their own modernism, to pass on their radical pedagogies, to sovereignly play with the representation and retelling of their own historical experiences.

At all times and in all spaces – real or imaginary, stripped-down or surreal, physical or digital – Fagin weaves in striking details, gestures, manoeuvres. Geoffrey Hug’s cinematography is crisp and on the ball, following every movement.

The blackboard is on wheels, it gets flipped and hurled around. A performer speaking about historic riots never ceases arranging her magnificent hair throughout her tale. We recognize the same patch of purple lighting on a wall, uniting two different tableaux. A giant birthday-cake prop, which doubles as a stage for the actors, also contains – if you look closely enough – tiny media screens.



When we finally return to Constance DeJong, she is no longer reading aloud but offering a reflection on reading and writing, fiction and non-fiction. Writing and art need to be a bit difficult, she muses, to create a singular idiom, in order to not be so quickly and easily consumed. As she once wrote, 41 years ago: “Knowledge made to go down real easy makes you real sick.”

The humor in Fagin’s work is, all at once, conceptual and liberating, rewiring your brain in real-time. The inventiveness carries a shock of surprise; its off-center character is a poke to your sensorium. DeJong again, from ’81: “I’ll just say boo to clear the air for a moment before the demons return.” She immediately added: “It takes a while to even identify them”. Tricky devils! *45 Minutes from Edith Wharton* has exactly that effect: it scares up the trouble, it patiently identifies the demons, and then it blows them away. Before they return, as they are always poised to do. But, at least, you will be better armed to deal with them in that future which is “the past that has allowed the present to come about.”



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