

## Picturesque Irony: *Brideshead Revisited* as an Artist-Programme

No other film or television programme has portrayed a country estate in such detail, and at such length as the 1981 television serial *Brideshead Revisited*. Crucially, one location was used for the main setting, Brideshead Castle. The crew visited this location - Castle Howard - three times. About five hours of the total 13-hour running time of the serial was filmed at Castle Howard.

The serial was adapted from Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel. For those of you who don't know them, both novel and serial are about a middle-aged man in World War Two called Charles Ryder who remembers his 20 year relationship with a landed Catholic family. As a young man, he falls in love with the charming Sebastian Flyte, who takes him to his family's country pile, Brideshead Castle and later introduces him to his family. As Charles is befriended by Sebastian's mother, Sebastian succumbs to alcoholism. Charles breaks off contact with the family. He later falls in love with Julia, Sebastian's sister, but loses her when she returns to Catholicism. During this period, Charles paints for the family, at first as an amateur landscape artist and later as a paid professional architectural painter.

The novel contains brief passages describing Brideshead Castle: the novel's house and landscape architecture are pastiches. Indeed, Jeffrey Heath has argued convincingly that the novel's theme is the 'operation of divine grace' through 'inauthentic' architectural features. My paper will contend that something entirely different is achieved by the serial. In order to do this, I am going to analyse the serial's landscape style and its representation as Charles as an artist.

The serial is partly an exploration of a country estate as an entity: the interior of the house is seen in relation to the landscape and all of the ornamental structures in the grounds. On the one hand, there is a documentary inclination in this: the serial engages with the meaning of Castle Howard's landscape architecture, as well as the history of the house and the Howard family. The serial is a much an adaptation of Castle Howard as it is an adaptation of Waugh's novel.

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On the other hand, the depiction of the house is tightly integrated into the narrative. The estate is seen in all four seasons of the year: this has a metaphorical function, in that the Arcadian section of the plot takes place in summer, while the harshest experiences endured by Charles occur in autumn and winter. Charles's narrative arc as an artist is placed in relation to that of the landscape: moral decline is measured by the shift from summer to wintry images that reveal abrasion. Castle Howard's Temple of the Four Winds is depicted in a summery glow in episode two, but in episode 10 different light conditions and camera placements reveal the weather-beaten condition of the temple. Over its 11 episodes, the serial conveys a sense of what John Dixon Hunt describes as the *longue durée* of gardens: their shifting forms over time.

Essential to *Brideshead's* style, then, is its engagement with a single location. It is this that makes the film's aesthetic references accessible, because the viewer can visit Castle Howard and consider the way the serial engages with its landscape architecture.

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In this respect, it contrasts with Stanley Kubrick's 1975 film, *Barry Lyndon*, which linked shots of Castle Howard to shots of Stourhead to form a single fictional setting. Kubrick seems to parody the way films often create fictional geography from different locations.

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*Brideshead*, on the other hand, follows the example of Joseph Losey's 1971 film, *The Go-Between*, which broke new ground by focusing on one main country estate location. Losey used window shots to stress the aesthetic and socio-economic continuity between interior and exterior. *Brideshead* uses such shots for more poetic effect, such as here where Castle Howard's Atlas Fountain is visible behind Sebastian. The fountain, with its globe held aloft by Atlas, represents pagan endurance. The shot suggests that Sebastian carries the fountain's mythic associations into the house. The open doors also confer a sense of aeration on the scene, which is lost when the house enters cooler seasons, as the doors are shut and Charles's relationship with Sebastian deteriorates amidst the suffocating presence of Lady Marchmain.

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It's worth remembering how such shots made *Brideshead* look different from most period drama on television in the 1970s, which usually featured interiors shot in a studio on video and exteriors shot on location on 16mm film: as for example, here, in a television play called 'In Craven Arms' on which some of *Brideshead*'s crew worked. The mixture of location and studio, 16mm and video often led to optical contrasts between scenes, which the more inventive programme makers would use to their advantage. Conversely, in *Brideshead*, interiors and exteriors are blended.

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*Brideshead* owed its look as much to Arts Television as to period drama programmes. Arts programmes often led the way in adopting film for televisual purposes in the 1950s and 1960s. In the early 1960s Ken Russell's dramatised documentary films on the lives of composers and artists, for example, popularised on television the neo-romantic imagery of landscape as inspiration, often placing the artist in a landscape location chosen for its importance in the life of the artist. Later in the decade, the arts documentary serial *Civilisation*, which also consisted solely of location filming, broke new ground by studying artworks *in situ*. *Brideshead*'s exploration of various features in a country estate owes much to *Civilisation*'s emphasis on the spatial context of the artwork. *Brideshead* combines the complex long-form storytelling of the 1970s period drama serial with the iconographical inclusiveness of *Civilisation*.

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However, *Civilisation* also placed emphasis on observational fidelity, through its use of 35mm film. In contrast, like most filmed drama at the time, *Brideshead* was shot on 16mm. The more visible grain of 16mm was often put to good use in social realist television drama, to produce a visual grittiness which echoed the dramatic grittiness. It is apt in an entirely different sense in *Brideshead*. It adds a texture like that of a Monet painting to the

programme, appropriate to the theme of a painter attempting to catch and preserve fleeting moments. The programme makers heighten this effect in the blow-ups used in the end credits.

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Charles tries to catch moments in paint, but his naive paintings of Brideshead Castle ironically end up becoming markers of change. In a mural he paints in 1923, he characteristically exaggerates the scene, placing Sebastian at the end of a rainbow, as if he were a pot of gold. When a milieu of Tory 'politics and money' has invaded Brideshead Castle in 1936, two of the invaders parody Sebastian's posture in the mural, their left hands on their hips. This is a more subtle, but no less sacrilegious act of iconoclasm than the naked women chalked and pasted over the same mural by soldiers in 1944. Charles's aestheticisation of Sebastian and the landscape is violated in both cases; his attempt to preserve an instant ironically provides the means for change to register itself, while he is punished for his hubristic effort at imposing his fantasy on the Flytes' landscape.

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The paintings themselves, however, are not Impressionist, but Neo-Romantic, in the way they combine fantasy and English landscapes. Felix Kelly, a minor Neo-romantic painter who began exhibiting his work in the 1940s, was employed to produce Charles's paintings. In the scene where Charles paints the first mural, the production designer Peter Phillips introduced Kellyesque *mise-en-scène* to heighten a parallel between Charles and Kelly. Like Charles, Kelly also had a long friendship with an aristocratic family, the Howards of Castle Howard. Again, a documentary impulse can be detected here. In its tale of a painter emotionally damaged by his relationship with a landed estate, the programme satirises Kelly's relationship with the owners of the location, Castle Howard.

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What happens to Charles? The programme charts a moral decline in his character through his transformation from painter to narrator. It does so partly through the paintings and partly through landscape.

The landscapes in Waugh's novel are often picturesque. Put simply, rather than, say, geometric shapes and open views, the picturesque landscape typically consists of rugged shapes, winding rivers and roads and – crucially – partial concealments provided by unclipped trees.

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We see Waugh's picturesque sensibility emerging as he revised the novel between its serialisation in a magazine and its publication in book form. When the house is first described in the magazine version, Charles announces that 'at last, half a mile ahead of us, inevitable but unexpectedly splendid, prone in the sunlight, grey and gold against a screen of bosage, shone the dome and columns of an old house.' In the book version, partial concealments are introduced to this passage, increasing the sense that the sight is a revelation: Charles describes a 'new and secret landscape' opening, in which the house is amid the bosage, not against it.

Compare this with the moment when the house is first shown in the television adaptation. I'm going to show a clip from that scene now.

## **CLIP**

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Waugh's picturesque composition is displaced; here Army vehicles fulfil the pleasing concealment effected by the boscage in the novel. Charles is often partially hidden in the landscape by the vehicles and at one point is lost by the camera. Picturesque semi-concealment is used to make an obscure figure of Charles. This distance from Charles's image detracts from the immediacy of the voiceover. This is a doubly ironic picturesque: it not only distances the viewer from the protagonist, but uses camouflaged military objects rather than trees to do so.

The voiceover is intimate in its confessional tone, but not in its choice of extravagant metaphors: the turning-off-the-wireless simile declares an incongruous aversion to the radio. The audience listens to this narrator on television complaining about broadcast sound. The narrator is therefore placed at one remove from us. Furthermore, when he says 'an immense silence followed', the diegetic soundtrack contradicts him, with noises from lorry engines and horns threatening to drown out both him and the score. Ryder is either an unreliable narrator or solipsistic and out of place.

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Instead of picturesque occlusion, the shots in Charles's youth depict a summery perspicuity. For instance, there is no picturesque irony when the young Charles first sees the house. The cinematography sensitively evokes the young Charles's feelings. His first sight of the house is depicted using a telephoto lens: distance is considerably flattened and the house seems within reach. The next shot, however, counters any sense that he has fetishised the house as an icon of landed wealth. He says he should like to meet Sebastian's family, only to be told he can't, as they are in London, dancing. The shorter lens for this shot makes the Castle barely visible. It is as if he has associated the house with the family: the absence of the family suddenly makes the house seem distant. After all, Charles is in need of a family - he has no mother and his father is something of a lunatic.

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It is art that he finds at Brideshead first, however. Charles emphasises the estate's formative role in his erudition: 'It was an aesthetic education to live within those walls...This was my conversion to the Baroque.' He says this as we see the young Charles walk into the house's Great Hall. He gazes upwards to see the dome, at the centre of which is *The Fall of Phaeton*, a recreation of a painting that the Venetian Baroque artist, Giovanni Pellegrini, executed for the Howards. As Erwin Panofsky points out, the Italian Baroque involved reconciliation between factors that had been in conflict previously: exterior and interior, 'neopagan humanism' and ascetic 'Christian spiritualism', 'ideal beauty and reality'. Charles reproduces these characteristics in ersatz form. His murals depict the estate's ornamental buildings on the interior walls of the Garden Room (Castle Howard's Garden Hall), introducing pagan Neo-romanticism to a Catholic house. His painting of the temple - which I showed earlier - is at

once realistic and fantastical, with Sebastian as ideal beauty: the proverbial pot of gold. The Baroque is intrinsic to the programme's articulation of his friendship with Sebastian.

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Later, in episode two, they look down from the Baroque dome at Bridey and the agricultural fair judges, below. This kind of vertical opposition occurs again in episode three, when they look down from the dome in Marchmain House at Julia. As Bacchants, Sebastian and Charles are placed literally and metaphorically above aristocratic mundanity. The programme treats Catholicism as a theme, but it raises Bacchic paganism above all. When Charles lets Sebastian down by spending time with Lady Marchmain, he forfeits this elevated position and never regains it.

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In episode ten, a complex crane shot moves downwards towards Charles, as if to emphasise the fact that he is now earthbound. It is a descent into picturesque concealment. The Phaeton painting on the dome anticipates Charles's hubris and fall.

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The programme uses an Arcadian theme to chart Charles's guilt. The title of the first episode is 'Et in Arcadia Ego'. The saying 'Et in Arcadia Ego' - which has appeared in many pastoral tales and paintings - has been interpreted to mean either 'I too was in Arcadia' - spoken by a nostalgic being - or that 'I - meaning Death - am even in Arcadia'. In paintings stressing the latter meaning, the phrase often appears as a motto on a skull.

In the episode entitled 'Et in Arcadia Ego', Charles has a skull, but we do not see a motto. There seems little doubt at this point therefore that the title means 'I [Charles], too, lived in Arcadia'.

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A single shot in the next episode suggests otherwise. Charles and Sebastian gaze across arcadia - This was filmed across a prospect in Castle Howard's estate that garden historians have interpreted as being arranged to suggest futurity: a prospect in both senses. In this shot - death, in the form of the mausoleum peeps over the trees.

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Charles then becomes more friendly with Sebastian's mother Lady Marchmain, and Sebastian perhaps as a result becomes an alcoholic. When Lady Marchmain stands admiring Charles's drawings, the motto is visible on the skull. It is clear that Et in Arcadia Ego now means 'I [Death] am even in Arcadia'. Death is again associated with Lady Marchmain when the mausoleum appears in full during her funeral, a scene which also ends the last episode in which Charles and Sebastian are together.

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The effect of Charles's association with aristocracy and, in particular, Sebastian's family is only made fully clear in Episode 9 when we see a full exhibition of Charles's mid-1930s paintings of South America. Again, Felix Kelly was employed by the programme makers and he provided a room full of appropriately florid paintings. The camera circles in long takes around the room to reveal how, as the character Anthony Blanche puts it, 'charm has killed him'. The floridness of the paintings becomes a reflection of the aristocratic visitors to the gallery: slow dissolves superimpose details from the paintings over the visitors, as if they are tangled in the jungles depicted. It asserts that the English upper class's perception of the exotic is a home-grown fantasy, an unwitting self-portrait. Charles is shown dominated by his art, as one painting projects into the foreground and he seems to bend under the weight of the painting above his head.

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With Julia, Charles attempts to regain what he has lost, but she claims to feel pressed between time past and time future. In episode 10, we find out that Charles finished more paintings at Brideshead than we were led to believe. Indeed, we discover that he painted the mausoleum, thereby bringing death inside the house. As Julia tells Charles of her dilemma, she stands between a painting of the obelisk and one of the mausoleum. The obelisk marks the beginning of the Castle Howard: both the history of its construction and the start of its main approach. The mausoleum marks the end of the estate's landscape iconography. The past and future between which she stands is one painted and arranged by Charles.

The full implications of this become clear in the following scene, when Charles describes events in their day as acts in a play. Julia's frustration becomes apparent. She asks him why he has to see everything second hand and strikes him across the face. The scene marks the emergence of Charles the narrator: a man who can only see things second hand and who tries to impose his fantasies on Julia's family.

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Is Charles redeemed at the end? At the end of both the novel and the television serial, Charles seems to have become reconciled with the Catholicism that has taken Julia away from him. The novel ends with someone saying that he looks unusually happy. The television serial, however, gives us one last landscape scene. He drives away from Brideshead Castle, through picturesque partial concealments. Once again we are distanced from the older Charles. It appears, though, that he can finally leave the house. However, in a surprise turn, the road takes him up again and the house suddenly appears behind him. The programme's last shot gives the precedence of finality to a bleak image of Brideshead, with Ryder's jeep splashing through a dirty puddle. It is the antithesis of the novel's upbeat ending.

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It is not only the house that reappears, but a way of looking at it; this is the same camera set-up seen countless times in the serial: from Charles the soldier's first sight of the house, to frequent views of it as his relationships with Sebastian and Julia collapse. Ryder's departure is yet another return. The house/framing appears as if by chance, but the familiarity of the set-up reinforces the fact that this return is the result of design. It is not the novel's Catholic eschatology that is asserted here, nor Charles's free will. The landscape is designed to bring

him back; he is the victim of the estate's picturesqueness: a worldly, aristocratic trap set to catch an arriviste and imprison him as the estate's spirit of place.