

## REVIEWS

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**Steven H. Gale, *Sharp Cut: Harold Pinter's Screenplays and the Artistic Process*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003**

Even though Harold Pinter might be better known as a playwright rather than a screenwriter, there is no denying that his cinematic input, with over twenty screenplays to his credit, is indeed impressive. Surprisingly enough, however, this very aspect of Pinter's artistic activity has not been paid sufficient critical attention over the years. Steven H. Gale, a scholar and Pinter's devoted admirer, felt particularly obliged to fill in this void. In *Sharp Cut: Harold Pinter's Screenplays and the Artistic Process* he endeavours an extremely thorough study on altogether twenty film scripts, among them Pinter's adaptations of his own dramas (*The Caretaker*, *The Basement*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Homecoming*, and *Betrayal*), as well as screenplays adapted from other writers' works (e.g. *The Servant*, *Accident*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*).

Given that Pinter's films were rarely examined as films by drama scholars and his screenplays only analysed in their published written form, Gale's decision was to study each screenplay simultaneously with its film version (Gale ix). Therefore, instead of merely alluding to particularly selected scenes, he offers the reader an extremely thorough comparison of the two. It is thus possible to scrutinize the whole complex process of adapting a literary work to screen with all the alternations from the initial draft to the end product. Consequently, each chapter constitutes the actual synthesis of different media Pinter operates within: cinema, theatre, and literature.

The undeniable advantage of Steven H. Gale study is its innovatory structure. Whereas previous critics used to group the screenplays according to whether they have been filmed or not, or classified them as adaptations of Pinter's own plays versus those of other writers,<sup>1</sup> *Sharp Cut* places them

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<sup>1</sup> This is the case of Joanne Klein's monograph on Harold Pinter's films.

in chronological order from 1963 to 2000. This manner of organisation serves to emphasise the intended aim of the author. As the very title suggest, Steven Gale's goal has been to explore the creative process of writing screenplays and movie making. The readers are therefore able to trace certain progress in Pinter's work as a scriptwriter, his growing awareness of various cinematic techniques, such as editing, camera angles, as well as his involvement on the set. Additionally, they may observe Pinter's shifting interest in certain themes during different periods of his career, which Steven H. Gale traces with an inspiring accuracy.<sup>2</sup>

To make his study complete and provide more complex insight into Harold Pinter's evolution into a professional screenwriter, Gale, quite unconventionally, has decided to include chapters devoted to the published but never filmed screenplays of: *The Proust Screenplay (Remembrance of the Things Past)*, *Victory*, and *Lolita*, even though for many critics a film script is not a separate artistic entity, and should not therefore be analysed in isolation.

Each chapter is preceded by detailed credit information, such as the cast, the date of release, the awards, the running time etc. What is more, various illustrations; publicity photos, and manuscripts carefully selected by the author additionally enrich the whole study. Even though the structure of each chapter is quite similar, Gale skilfully avoids the repetitive pattern, as he adjusts the contents and chronology within each chapter to the specificity of the material and often makes interesting digressions as regards the adapting process and various interrelations between the separate artistic media. For example, in the chapter on *Reunion*, he describes how the film makers were confronted with the problem of extending the source material by additional subplots and themes, as the source material, a novella, was in fact too short for a film.<sup>3</sup> Equally captivating is the debate, aroused by *The Birthday Party*, mainly how a screen version of a drama could possibly influence its subsequent staging.

The actual length of chapters within the book varies. This, however, does not seem to result from the variable capacity of the source materials

<sup>2</sup> Gale's analysis skilfully shows how certain themes recur in Pinter's work, regardless of whether these are his own plays or somebody else's novels. According to Joanne Klein, this similarity is not coincidental as Pinter selected such primary sources that "held a common ground" with his original work as a dramatist (185). For example, the notion of a room or a house, which stands for safety but can at any time be easily violated (*The Pumpkin Eater* and *The Last Tycoon*), the struggle for dominance presented by various games of sport (*The Servant*, *Accident*, *The Go-Between*), as well as taboo relationships (*The Servant*, *Accident*, *The Go-Between*, *Lolita*, and *The Comfort of Strangers*).

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough, in majority of adaptations quite the reverse process, that of compressing, is required.

and, consequently films, but rather from the author's personal preference. To illustrate, his immense interest in *The Servant* is reflected by the substantial length of the chapter in question (almost sixty pages), as compared with the significantly shorter remaining parts. Such disproportion occasionally leads to certain overgeneralizations, as in the case of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* where the author too hastily rejects the significance of changes between the script and the film, especially that they might alter the perception of the main characters and their motivation. Similarly, adaptations of Pinter's own dramas are rather superficially dealt with, especially in terms of plot.

What may also seem slightly controversial about *Sharp Cut*, especially in view of the collaborative aspect of film making is the label "Pinter's films" that the author frequently uses. Despite the abundant documentary sources quoted, such as letters, drafts, rewritings, notes, as well as interviews, etc. it is still quite debatable to what extent each film is Pinter's accomplishment and what is to be attributed to the director, montage etc.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this problematic issue is recognized in several chapters, e.g. in the case of *Accident* Gale admits that "how much of the cinematic quality and techniques . . . can be attributed to Pinter and how much . . . to Losey is problematic" (Gale 95). Similarly, he suggests that the fact of publishing the screenplay of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in the original version, not the one directly taken from the film, somehow reflects Pinter's dissatisfaction with his script being "tinkered with by others", so that it ceases to be his product anymore (Gale 241). This debate is also extended over drama, where, as in Gale notes, it is equally hard to determine who the author of the play is, given the coexistence of various editions of the same play, each with changes or deletions made either by its publisher or author (see: *The Caretaker*). Eventually, the question of authorship is tackled in one of the final chapters entitled: "The Creative / Collaborative Process".

Despite certain slight drawbacks, which may as well be attributed to the excessiveness of the analysed material, *Sharp Cut: Harold Pinter's Screenplays and the Artistic Process* is a great contribution, not only for those interested in Pinter, but also in the area of cross-media studies as it skilfully captures the specifics of three fields: drama – predominantly cantered on a dialogue, film operating with visual images and literature with its inherent narrative voice and structural complexity. What is more, it also constitutes a reliable source material as far as film adaptations are concerned,

<sup>4</sup> According to the so called *auteur theory* it is the director who, similarly to an author in case of literature, has the ultimate say in creating a film, especially its final version (Wollen 47).

since it provides relevant theoretical discussion alongside with specific palpable examples, the readers can refer to. It also lifts the need for the much desired discussion of cultural context in approach to analysing adaptations and, as such, deserves a first-class recommendation.

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