

Waugh on Film

In 1929, Evelyn Waugh wrote that film was “the one vital art of the century,” an accolade he would later qualify. While he came to believe that cinema had “taught [novelists] a new habit of narrative,” he concluded that this was “perhaps . . . the only contribution [it was] destined to make to the arts.”

Although Waugh provocatively overstates his case, I can see the partial justice of his observation. Just consider the screen adaptations of his novels. In almost every instance, his books are more genuinely cinematic than the films they have inspired. Adaptations of *The Loved One* (1965), *Brideshead Revisited* (1981), *Scoop* (1987), *A Handful of Dust* (1988), and *Sword of Honour* (2001) all have their merits, but, with the partial exception of *Handful*, none of them has the filmic verve of the original texts. Waugh’s novels, especially the earlier ones, have the snap and flash of well-made films. They astonish us with the literary equivalents of breezy montages, splicing together the most unlikely images. In *Vile Bodies*, a young woman looks down on a weirdly miniaturized English landscape from a single-engine airplane and vomits into a paper bag; the next moment, we are at the bedside of another young woman dying from injuries sustained in a reckless car race through this same landscape. In *Handful of Dust*, we watch as a spoiled English aristocrat moistens her mascara by spitting into it; we are then plopped down into the Amazonian wilderness where Indian women prepare a fermented drink by chewing cassava roots and spitting the juices into a hollow tree trunk. Waugh delighted in abruptly linking the civilized with violence and savagery, suggesting that, beneath the daily surface of modern life, they were never far apart.

Waugh was also a master of the telling close-up. In *Decline and Fall*, he mocks the upperclass’s tolerance of adultery with two “significant details,” as he liked to call them. A middle-aged gentleman returns home one evening to discover the tall hat of his wife’s young lover on the hall table. Lest he encounter the lothario on the staircase, he retreats to his library to smoke a cigar. When he finally hears the lover descend the stairs and let him-

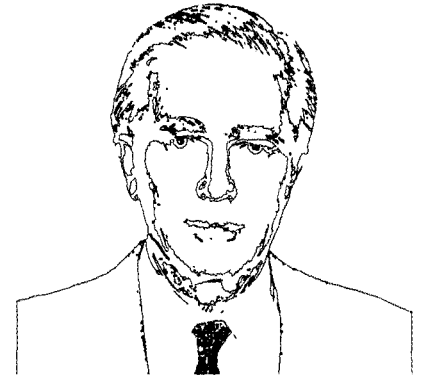
self out the front door, the cuckold goes up to his wife, leaving behind his cigar smoldering in an ashtray. Without a word of explanation, Waugh tells us all we need to know with the contrast between the younger man’s potentially tall hat and the husband’s discarded cigar.

Of all the films made of Evelyn Waugh’s fiction, perhaps the one that least keeps pace with his cinematic imagination is “The High Green Wall,” a teleplay based on Waugh’s “The Man Who Liked Dickens.” This is the 1933 short story that he would transform into the unsettling conclusion of his 1934 novel, *A Handful of Dust*, his most trenchant portrayal of Western man succumbing to the 20th century’s barbarous assault on civilized values. In 1954, scriptwriter Charles Jackson and director Nicholas Ray adapted the narrative for *The General Electric Theater*, the weekly dramatic series hosted by Ronald Reagan, who was then learning from GE that “progress is our most important product,” a lesson of inestimable value for the future politician.

This almost-forgotten 26-minute film has come to light once more as an exhibit in a retrospective of Ray’s films that has been making the museum rounds in Canada and the United States. Ray directed the project the same year he made *Johnny Guitar* and a year before he made *Rebel Without a Cause*, the two films for which he is best known today.

Despite the odd decision to change the story’s title, the adaptation follows Waugh’s narrative quite closely, only omitting its opening few pages, which are concerned with protagonist Paul Henty’s relations with his unfaithful wife—characters who would become Tony and Brenda Last in *Handful*. The teleplay begins abruptly with Paul stumbling sick and delirious upon an Indian tribe in the Amazon wilderness. Under the tribesmen’s care, he is nursed back to health only to discover that their village’s half-caste chief, Mr. McMaster (Mr. Todd in *Handful*), intends to hold him captive for the rest of his life.

I saw “High Green Wall” when it first aired. I was 12 at the time and had never heard of Waugh or Ray (not that I was inquisitive about matters of authorship then).



The High Green Wall (1954)

Adapted for
The General Electric Theater
Columbia Broadcasting System
Directed by Nicholas Ray
Teleplay by Charles Jackson

When I came to read *Handful* 18 years later, I was surprised to rediscover in its ending the same story I had seen dramatized as a boy. I had never forgotten Paul Henty’s fate at the hands of Mr. McMaster. The story’s simple but bizarre conceit—a civilized man held captive in the Amazon and forced to read the complete works of Charles Dickens over and over to a sentimental savage—had made an ineradicable impression on me. Coming upon its literary source at 30, I experienced a slightly uncanny case of *déjà vu* that made the novel’s ending all the more intense for me. So I was delighted to learn the film was going to be shown as part of a month-long Ray retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan.

Seeing the film again, however, was not at all the experience I had expected. My earlier enthusiasm seems to have misled me, for I found the production astonishingly dull. Ray, a self-important and decidedly limited filmmaker, must have been marking time between studio projects. His direction is perfunctory at best. There cannot be more than three camera setups, and the players seem to have been instructed to stand as close together as possible lest they break the boundaries of the drama’s cramped, low-budget set, wanly festooned with plastic fronds to suggest, however skimpily, the Amazon forest. Joseph Cotten plays Paul Henty blandly, his expression alternating almost indistinguishably between weary bewilderment and wounded nobility. To be

fair, the role as written does not afford many opportunities to do much else.

The film comes to life fitfully when Thomas Gomez appears as Mr. McMaster. Gomez plays his character quite broadly, creating a very credible obsessive with his unctuous smile and predatory eyes. He has an unnerving way of sidling up to Cotten at odd moments, his voice at once smarmy and wheedling like a particularly manipulative child who, discomfitingly, has the intimidating resources of a madly cunning adult—not to mention the loaded shotgun under his arm. When he first speaks of his passion for Dickens, his eyes fairly bulge with anticipation. It is clear that he will have his readings regardless of Paul's wishes. Unfortunately, the dramatization is so underwritten and the direction so indifferent that Gomez does not get to make good on these intimations of crazed villainy.

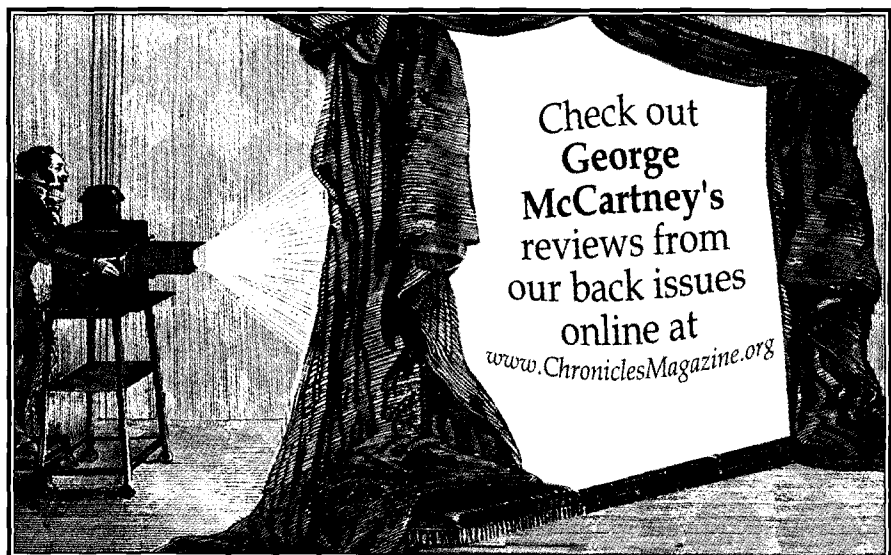
So what held my attention in 1954? As best I can piece together my initial impressions, there seem to have been four reasons I found the film so fascinating. First, the drama was radically different from just about anything else being aired at the time. There could not have been many television productions that would have allowed their protagonists' predicament to go so bleakly unresolved before the closing commercial. Second, a significant portion of this brief drama is taken up by Cotten reading *Bleak House* and *A Tale of Two Cities* to an enraptured Gomez. Cotten's deeply resonant voice and measured delivery gave the texts a stately heft I enjoyed. Charles Laughton had already trained me for such unadorned theatrics in the programs he started airing on American television in 1953 entitled, simply, *This Is Charles Laughton*. They consisted of nothing more than Laughton standing at a podium and reading stories into the camera. This disposed me to be patient with a drama that had no fights, gunfire, or chases to hold my boyish attention. (Perhaps I had a little of Mr. McMaster's mania myself.) A third factor may have been our family's 15-inch television screen, which made the drama's meager forest settings seem creepily claustrophobic to my susceptible imagination. Of course, on a full-size movie screen at the museum's theater, the film lost this accidental effect altogether. Fourth, there was the power of Waugh's original conception. After seeing the film, I was troubled intermittently for days, if not weeks. It seemed to me desperately unfair that a

man as civilized and decent as Paul should be held captive for the rest of his life by a primitive madman. I found Paul's resignation to his fate very nearly a torment. Of course, this is just the effect Waugh wanted to achieve, especially with Paul's transformation into Tony Last in *A Handful of Dust*. Quite early on in *Handful*, Waugh makes the reader want to grab and shake Tony, to rouse his anger so that he will resist all the characters—most especially his wife—who take such scurrilous advantage of his decency. The Amazon episode is just the final and logical conclusion to which his frustrating passivity leads. My emotional response at 12 was not so very different from my feelings on first reading the novel as an adult. If this is not literarily sophisticated, so much the better. Waugh wanted his readers to feel Tony's fate viscerally before analyzing its significance.

I have no way of knowing whether Ray understood Waugh's intentions or even if he knew that "The Man Who Liked Dickens" evolved into *A Handful of Dust*. Nevertheless, Waugh's conception is so compelling that, despite the film's lackluster production, it is difficult not to react to it strongly. The museum audience included a large number of young people, undoubtedly college and graduate students. The film's early scenes provoked them to quiet snickering. I could not blame them. Blown up to theater-screen proportions, the gimcrack scenery and central-casting Indians looked quite ridiculous. As the narrative neared its conclusion, however, their tittering died out. I suspect they felt the horrible poignancy of Paul's fate, which is aptly enforced with the one truly imaginative shot in the otherwise pedestrian filming, a shot that suggests either that

Ray may have understood what Waugh meant after all or that his cameraman had a happy accident. It appears just after Paul discovers McMaster has tricked the search party that has come to rescue him. Keeping Paul drugged and out of sight, the shrewd madman sends the searchers away believing that Paul is dead. With this revelation, the screen door to McMaster's house shuts in Paul's face, and we look at him in close-up standing behind its pale, nearly invisible mesh. Cotten stares out at us, devastated. Whether intended or not, the image is richly eloquent. It speaks not only of Paul's predicament but of his character. Even more pointedly, it speaks to the character he would become in *Handful*, for Tony, more clearly than Paul, is a man long trapped by nothing so much as his commitment to the restraints imposed on him by a flimsy code of manners, the gauzy remnants of the once-substantial tradition bequeathed him by his Christian ancestors. The image of Tony trapped behind a transparent screen perfectly expresses his failure to take this tradition seriously. When Mr. Todd asks him if he believes in God, he can only answer, "I suppose so. I never gave it much thought." Such a casually unreflective agnosticism, Waugh suggests, leads Tony ineluctably into a mapless moral wilderness. Long before his Amazon misadventure, Tony's lack of faith had prevented him from tearing away the veil of secular manners and combating the modern savagery that had invaded his life in England.

This single evocative moment hardly redeems the film. It does testify to Waugh's artistic strength, however. Even in careless hands, his caustic vision manages to unsettle us.

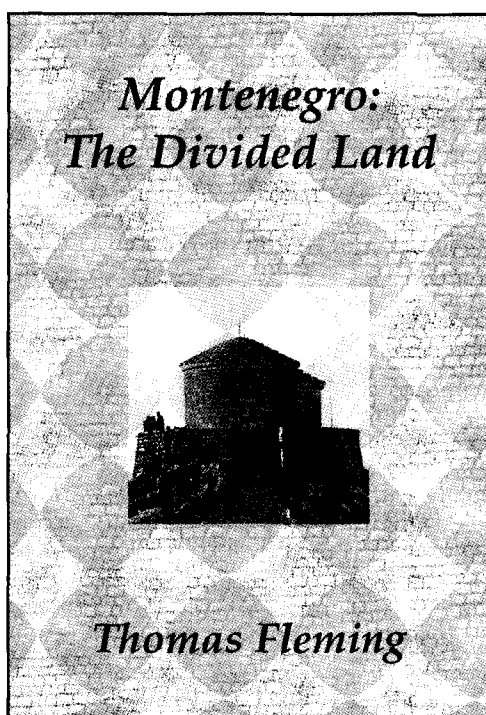


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This Time, Be Prepared

The Serb land of Montenegro is once again at the crossroads of history. The blood-soaked mountains and dramatic coastline of this small land have been fought over by Illyrians, Macedonians, Romans, Byzantines, Turks, and Venetians, and, in the 20th century, by the armies of Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Germany. In World War II, Montenegro lost more men, per capita, than any nation of Europe, and now it is the latest target of the so-called international community, which has tried to create a phony separatist movement (complete with a bogus national church) to continue the disastrous policies that have involved the United States in wars over Bosnia and Kosovo.

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