

Adam's Anarchy: *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* Reconsidered

SLIDE - Title

The approach I'm going to take in this paper is partly historical and partly analytical. I want to overturn the widespread assumption that the transition from studio shooting to location shooting in British fiction cinema was spearheaded solely by angry-young-men films at the end of the fifties and start of the sixties: films like *Room at the Top* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. To do this I want to focus on a slightly earlier film – *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* from 1958, a melodrama set on a country estate in the Regency era, in contrast to the social realist films I've just mentioned, which have post-war urban settings. My analysis is going to focus on how landscape and architecture are deployed in *The Gypsy and the Gentleman*. My argument is that in its rich response to country-estate locations, *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* should be seen as a landmark of both British location shooting and the history of the country-house on screen.

The Gypsy and the Gentleman was directed by an American, Joseph Losey, who had fled the persecution of left-leaning Hollywood directors conducted by the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities earlier in the decade. It's often émigré directors like Losey who have brought fresh perspectives on the country house – think also of Peter Medak with *The Ruling Class*, Stanley Kubrick with *Barry Lyndon*, and Michael Lindsay-Hogg – the first of two directors to work on the 1981 version of *Brideshead Revisited*.

SLIDE - Actors

For those of you who haven't seen it, *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* is about two gypsies, a woman called Belle, played by Melina Mercouri, and a man called Jess, played by Patrick McGouhan: sexual and criminal partners. Jess pushes Belle to seduce a landed gentleman called Deverill, played by Keith Michell. Belle marries Deverill, but discovers he is broke. Jess and Belle then plot to deprive Deverill's sister of her inheritance, by locking her up in a lunatic asylum.

The film has been derided and neglected because of weaknesses in its plotting and performance, as well as its stereotyping, but it deserves to be reconsidered at a time of growing interest in the history of British cinema's production design.

SLIDE – Title and Chimney-piece

The image here will give you a flavour of the film. That's Deverill, the gentleman, and in the chair is the gypsy, Belle.

The 'Adam' of my title is Robert Adam, whose architecture and style are pervasive in the film's mise-en-scène. This is a set built to look like a room designed by Adam. Adam was an eclectic architect, who often transposed classical features onto his decorative work, but his work was nonetheless characterised by a rationalised order. *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* brings a melodramatic anarchy into contact with his style. Anarchy as a dramatic, compositional and thematic device becomes a rich resource, utilised to subversive effect. In this image, the composition is split: the corner of the wall in the centre, edge of the chimney-piece and the candelabra all work to divide the image in two. On the left is a rationalist design: a chimney-piece in Adam's style. On the right is melodramatic passion and, pointed to by the back of the chair, a painting of the exterior of a country estate. Dialectics between

architecture and landscapes, and between melodrama and realism, are at the core of the film's style. Losey said the studio gave him the script for a weak melodrama and he brought to this a contrary aesthetic, namely the realist detail of period mise-en-scène, particularly location work. However, melodrama in fact arises from out of the film's landscape and transforms the way we see its architecture.

SLIDE – Thomas Rowlandson, *Register Office for the Hiring of Servants, 1800-1805*

To work against the script's melodrama, Losey says he and the production designers studied Thomas Rowlandson's work to capture what Losey calls 'the smell' of the Georgian and regency eras. This is one of the pictures that they looked at. As in many of Rowlandson's pieces, architecture recedes to form a faint background. So this image can help us understand how Rowlandson may have influenced costume, and perhaps even character, colour and drama, but the other aspect of the film, its strong emphasis on architectural style seems to have derived from elsewhere: that is, from Losey's interest in location shooting and detailed research on potential locations.

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Losey's earlier British films had largely been studio-bound, as was typical at the time. He later complained of the constraints imposed on him by Rank Studios, but for *Gypsy*, they offered him a high budget and allowed him to do far more location shooting than was conventional, filming between June and September 1957.

SLIDE – Map

He ended up using four country estates for different settings in the film, which I've identified through my research. Shardeloes in Buckinghamshire portrays the main setting, Deverill Court, and Swakeleys appears as a lunatic asylum. Hatfield House's grounds and outbuildings appear for various parts of London, and Broomfield Hall's bridge is used in a chase sequence at the end.

The close grouping of these locations, all just north of London, owes more to careful scheduling and budget control than to an interest in the local. Losey's later country estate film, *the Go-Between* is very much a film about Norfolk, but *Gypsy* tends to generalisation about geography. It is more concerned with picturesque classicism as a mode of architecture than with a sense of locality.

SLIDE – Shardeloes, Leadbetter and Adam

The exterior of Shardeloes appears several times as Deverill Court. Stiff Leadbetter worked on the house first, but died before he could complete his work and Robert Adam took over, introducing many of his own interventions, designing the classical portico and a stable block to the right of the front.

SLIDE – *Gypsy*: Repton and Adam

The portico and stable block are key locations in the film, as is the landscape garden, which was 'improved' by Humphrey Repton in 1793-94.

SLIDE – Hussey etc.

This emphasis on location needs to be seen in the context of art-historical publishing. The post-Second World War era saw a huge rise in the publication of art-historical texts aimed at the general reader rather than just connoisseurs or academics. James Lees-Milne wrote the

first book on Adam for a general audience: *The Age of Adam*, in 1947. Pevsner was a key figure in popular publishing and broadcasting about architecture. His BBC radio lectures and book called *The Englishness of English Art* placed the English garden's aesthetic in a new light: he suggested it was not just exclusive to country estates, but was democratized through its application to town planning.

The Gypsy and the Gentleman democratized such aesthetics in its own way, and its representations of Adam architecture and Repton gardens were potentially readable by an audience who could draw on authors like Lees-Milne and Pevsner if they felt so inclined.

SLIDE –Panofsky

In his 1963 essay 'The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator', Panofsky offered a particularly lucid way of seeing the relationship between classicist houses and the gardens in which they often stood. It's a theory which echoes *Gypsy's* perspective on the country estate.

He says 'The English eighteenth century[...]: a severely formal rationalism, tending to look for support to classical antiquity, contrasts but coexists with a highly subjective emotionalism, drawing inspiration from fancy, nature'.

Likewise, in *Gypsy*, landscape is at first associated with highly emotive events, whereas the classicist architecture seems to stand in rationalist mockery of this melodrama.

SLIDE – Jess and Belle out of the landscape

The film makes a connection between emotionalism and landscape. The source of the film's melodramatic plot, the gypsies come out of the landscape and can live in it in a way its owners cannot. Bear in mind that stereotyped gypsies often featured as essential to the spirit of place in Georgian theories of the picturesque.

SLIDE – Shardeloes – Entrance Hall and Adamesque set designed by Richard Macdonald and Ralph Brinton, Pinewood Studios

At first opposed to this picturesque emotionalism of landscape are the exteriors designed by Adam and the interior of Deverill Court. Losey said that his location for the house was crucial, mentioning its Adam ceilings and chimney-pieces and thus leading writers to assume these were shot on location. But Losey's memory – often inaccurate – seems wrong here. The main rooms aren't, as far as I've been able to ascertain, shot on location. They certainly didn't use Shardeloes for them: they've opted to design smaller rooms, more like town house rooms, but with a much more dramatic staircase than the one at Shardeloes. Using sets for most interiors was then common practice and it matches what Losey did with subsequent films until the late 1960s. Adam was, however, clearly a key influence on the design. If the pastiche chimney-piece with its framing structure and pronounced swan-neck pediment is heavier than Adam's famous work, it is more or less in keeping with his very earliest style, which tended to be less subtle. Its excessiveness also reinforces the rationalist presence of classicism in the film.

SLIDE –Belle's legs

As Belle gradually insinuates herself into Deverill's heart, she also begins to encroach upon this rationalist space. Here, in a highly fetishistic, highly gendered shot, her legs suddenly appear, framed by the chimney-piece.

SLIDE – Vertical space in location interior: decay and dishevelment

Once Belle has won Deverill's heart, changes quickly happen to Deverill Court. It's now that location interiors appear. A lovesick Deverill is shown in a filthy nondescript servants' passage in the house. Previously, there was a rigidly hierarchical use of vertical space, with only the servants appearing in the lowest floors. But now Deverill himself begins to invade such functional spaces, indicating a breakdown of class hierarchy. A picturesque decay also seems to have entered the house.

SLIDE – Pig men

The film's spaces are not only organised by class, they are also gendered, as the shot of Belle's legs demonstrates. In many respects, though, the film is highly critical of its male characters. There's an early shot of Deverill's face framed by a piglet. He is, as this suggests, a metaphorical pig. The metaphor is picked up later, when Belle is angry with Jess for his cold manipulation of her and calls him 'pig man'.

SLIDE – Stables

And stable fronts and stableyards from the various country-estate locations play a key role in the film, reminding us that behind the refined facades of country-houses, there lurks necessarily animalism. So, villains always enter Deverill Court via the stables, shot at Shardeloes' stable block, designed by Adam. The stable front at Swakeleys is used for the front of the lunatic asylum and Deverill realises he has been fooled at the moment when he looks out on another stableyard, which was shot at Hatfield house's stableyard.

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I'm now going to show two short clips to demonstrate how the film comes to position Belle in the house and breaks down the distinction between interior and exterior. The first of these is concerned with the moment when Belle sees Jess from the window, as he arrives on the estate to assist her. In the second clip, Belle realises other gypsies are camping on the grounds of the estate.

CLIP

SLIDE – Window, interior and exterior location – power, gender (mention Pidduck?) and ontology

Julianne Pidduck has studied moments in films where women are shown at the windows of country houses, and this is an early precursor of such moments. This is the first time that we look from within Shardeloes onto the exterior. Location interiors and exteriors are thus finally joined, and thereby create an ontological connection between interior and exterior settings. This is an early example of a country house used in this way, and here it marks very effectively the sense of gendered space: Belle's point of view on the animalistic men. The shot also reveals for the first time the decay of the location itself.

SLIDE – Gilbert Benthall, Letter, *Country Life*, 6th December 1956

Just before the film was made, there was a campaign to save Shardeloes, publicised in *Country Life*. The house was not lived in, it was somewhat dilapidated and it had been suggested that it could become a plastics factory. A letter about the campaign noted that

‘Beneath the exterior stucco was exposed pointed brickwork, which clearly showed that the stucco was a later addition.’

The atavistic decay of the location is therefore worked into the spatial plotting of the film, and it becomes a metonym for the neglect of the house by its careless gambling owner Deverill and the attack on the house’s order by Belle and Jess.

SLIDE – Blacking boots and pictures gone – anarchic joy in the collapse of the estate, gender distinctions, and class distinctions

However, the film is not reactionary in this respect. The decay of the house is not presented as a tragedy. The anarchic heart of the film – and I suspect what attracted the Communist director Losey to this project – comes precisely at the moment when there’s no money left. The pictures and books are missing: they’ve been sold to pay Deverill’s debts. Class and gender divisions have collapsed. Deverill blacks his own boots and pretends to be a butler, waiting on Belle. There’s an atmosphere of joyful play at this moment, which is lost as soon as they decide to steal his sister’s inheritance.

SLIDE – Window shot - Disciplining the landscape

The other clip is even more remarkable, beginning as what seems to be a pure landscape shot and then drawing back to reveal that this is shown from a location interior. The shot offers a temporary alignment with Belle, as we share her optical perspective at first, but then withdraw to see her express with her riding crop a desire to discipline the landscape by throwing out the other gypsies.

SLIDE – Adam and anarchy – Belle wrecks the dining room by Adamesque fireplace

This moment marks a shift from Belle’s earlier inclination to destroy the estate, wrecking ornaments in a display of anarchy against the order of the Adamesque chimney-piece.

SLIDE – The other gypsies attack – more anarchy and destruction

But her assuming the role of lady of the manor to turn the other gypsies off her land brings further destruction on the estate, as the gypsies come for revenge and destroy remaining paintings and ornaments. Landownership and control is a vicious circle: whoever gains the power becomes an oppressor and invites an anarchic response.

SLIDE – Bedroom screened off, revealed, entered by camera

The major change brought to the house, however, is the penetration of melodrama into its rationalistic space. When we first see Deverill’s rooms, the bedroom is screened off. The morning after his first night with Belle, the screen has been removed and we look into, but do not enter the bedroom. Once the plot to steal his sister’s inheritance has advanced and Deverill becomes an ambivalent figure, paralysed by alcoholism and divided loyalties, the camera fully enters the bedroom.

SLIDE – Swakeleys: the country house as a lunatic asylum

By the final conflict, the blurring of rationalism and emotionalism is complete. The use of a country-house location, Swakeleys, to play a lunatic asylum, alone tells us how we should view the estates and their owners. But the film goes one step further, by dramatising anarchic action against the Dutch gables. The violent desire to own land emerges against modernised classical pediments: it is as if the violence of Ancient Rome has appeared to haunt classicist architecture.

SLIDE – Adamesque anarchy – bridge destroyed and Robert Adam, *Design of a Ruinous Bridge for the Garden at Sion (1763-65)*

The climax was shot using Bocket Hall's Bridge, designed by James Paine, although it is very similar to Adam's bridge at Kedleston. Belle and Jess crash into the side of the bridge, breaking it, and fall into the river. A detailed studio set and an expensive matte shot are intercut so you can see the damage close up and in extreme long shot. The order and symmetry of classicist architecture is ultimately broken by melodramatic plot. It's as if the filmmakers were influenced by Robert Adam's own capriccio of a picturesquely ruinous bridge: the film finally collapses the distinction between emotionalist landscape and classicist architecture that marked its early scenes.

The unprecedentedly extensive use of country-house locations throughout helps to ground Losey's historical materialist perspective on the country estate. But Losey nonetheless also draws on melodrama, studio sets and an optical shot as rich resources for subversion.

So, to conclude, what was the legacy of *The Gypsy and the Gentleman*? There are several films and television programmes I could refer to, but here are some key examples:

SLIDE –*The Ruling Class*

The Ruling Class, like *Gypsy* would use a country-estate location as a mental hospital to make a similarly blunt political point.

SLIDE –*The Go-Between and Brideshead Revisited*

Losey himself went on to refine his historical materialist perspective on the country house, shooting *The Go-Between* entirely on location and using many window shots to link interior and exterior spaces, suggesting aesthetic and ideological connections that work outwards from the house across the landscape. And Michael Lindsay-Hogg and Charles Sturridge developed this mode of shooting to produce a highly complex television version of *Brideshead Revisited*, though without the Marxist rhetoric of Losey's work.