

H-France Review Vol. 7 (September 2007), No. 115

**Martine Beugnet and Marion Schmid**, *Proust at the Movies*. Aldershot, UK and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2004. 261 pp. Color and black-and-white illustrations, filmography, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-75463541-4.

**William C. Carter**, *Proust in Love*. New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 2006. xiv + 252 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$26 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 0-300-10812-5.

**Richard Davenport-Hines**, *Proust at the Majestic: The Last Days of the Author Whose Book Changed Paris*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006. 358 pp. Sources, index. \$24.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN-10: 1-58234-471-X.

Review by Patrick M. Bray, Indiana University.

Over the last few decades, as twentieth-century French literary studies in the United States diversified into francophone studies, film studies, and contemporary and cultural studies, the scope of academic work on canonical twentieth-century French literature has narrowed to the point of focusing on major movements such as surrealism and on a handful of major authors, by far the most prominent of whom is Marcel Proust. [1] Proust alone can still inspire single-author monographs and, indeed, there is a bewildering quantity of books on Proust destined for a specialized, academic public. Proust's prominence in literary studies, however, is inversely proportional to the number of his readers among the general public, for whom Proust is at best a recognizable name associated with a cake baked in the form of a shell, and now available at Starbuck's. The gap between notoriety and actual knowledge, between dropping a reference to the madeleine at a dinner-party and spending months or years in order to reach *Le Temps retrouvé*, has motivated publishers and authors eager to enlighten the busy or the lazy. The best of the *grand public* books (such as Roger Shattuck's *Proust's Way*) seek to guide the (future) reader through the difficult labyrinth of Proust's novel by providing encouragement along with instruction. [2] The worst (in the style of *How Proust Can Change Your Life*) offer a replacement for the original, reducing the complexities of the novel into easily digestible sound-bites. [3] Three recent variations on the "Proust-and-X" theme, *Proust at the Movies*, *Proust in Love*, and *Proust at the Majestic*, each manage to add something new, for specialists and neophytes alike, to an understanding of Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu*.

The most compelling of the three works is Martine Beugnet and Marion Schmid's *Proust at the Movies*, published in 2004 in the Ashgate series, "Studies in European Cultural Transition." Its price tag of \$99.95 signals clearly that the publishers are not marketing this book to the general public, but rather, pitching it to a dedicated academic audience including specialists of cinema not familiar with Proust and Proustians curious about cinema. The work is co-authored by a film scholar (Beugnet) and a Proustian (Schmid), both lecturers at the University of Edinburgh. Beugnet and Schmid find a good balance in their multi-disciplinary approach, engaging intelligently with Proust's work and cinema while keeping their work accessible to newcomers. Their book analyses every major film adaptation of Proust's novel, and provides, as well, a brief look at Proust's influence on avant-garde film practice.

The first chapter, "Proust and the Cinema," offers an intelligent introduction to the place of cinema in Proust's work and life, a summary of the film and television adaptations of the *Recherche*, and a jargon-free theoretical exploration of the representation of time in literature and cinema. The most difficult

aspect for anyone, whether scholar or filmmaker, working on the relationship between Proust and cinema is that Proust's novel denounces cinema as an art form incapable of representing reality or the true nature of time. The rejection of conventional narrative, the unequalled length of the novel, the complexity of detail, all seem to corroborate the Proustian narrator's dismissal of cinema in favor of his "superior" novel. Beugnet and Schmid address this problem head-on, convincingly explaining the larger context in which Proust was writing. They show, for example, that Proust, despite divining the potential of cinema as hinted by certain passages in the *Recherche*, had little or no direct knowledge of the movies: "To understand why Proust had such reservations about the cinema, one needs to acknowledge one simple fact: he never set foot in a cinema in his lifetime" (p. 11). Yet, as they point out, his novel is in many ways highly cinematic--or rather, cinema is highly Proustian in its relation to time. The authors evoke different theorists of the novel and of cinema (in particular, Gilles Deleuze on Proust and cinema)[4], in order to reconcile Proust to the cinema as well as to create a framework with which to critique adaptations of the *Recherche*. They propose that adaptations not be judged by an outmoded and, at any rate impossible, criteria of "fidelity" to the original, but rather by how "film directors attend, as did Proust with his writing, to the specificity of their chosen medium, with its distinct signifying systems" (p. 49).

Chapter two of *Proust at the Movies*, "Cinema as Grand Narrative: Visconti's and Losey's Planned Adaptations of *A la Recherche du temps perdu*," is the most fascinating and, for the specialist of Proust, the most heartbreaking chapter in the book, since these films had extraordinary potential both for advancing the cinematic medium and for heightening our understanding of Proust's novel. Beugnet and Schmid do an impressive job at writing the history of two failed attempts at adaptation by notable directors Luchino Visconti and Joseph Losey.[5] The authors analyze not only the business aspect of the failure to adapt the whole novel, but also and especially the film scripts, the casting, and the filmmakers' difficult decisions about how to organize such an enormous project. The issues raised by these two unfinished films help to shed light on subsequent adaptations of Proust and go to the heart of the adaptation question: if Proust's novel cannot be adapted to the screen in its entirety, directors must select particular volumes or passages which lend themselves better to cinematic expression.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters of the book each look at a conventional adaptation of a section of Proust's work, Volker Schlöndorff's *Un Amour de Swann* (1984), Raoul Ruiz's *Le Temps retrouvé* (1999), and Chantal Akerman's *La Captive* (2000). The authors begin each chapter by giving the history of the production of the film in question, then dissect the adaptation to reveal how it differs from the written text, and then finally analyze the film's unique cinematic aesthetic. Though each film received uneven praise from film critics and literary scholars (the reaction to Schlöndorff's film was particularly harsh), Beugnet and Schmid seek, methodologically, to respect the specificity of the film medium by contextualizing the choices made by producer, screenwriter, director, and actor. Although they do not approve every aspect of each film, and indeed show a pronounced preference for Akerman's work, they reveal the diversity of worthwhile cinematic approaches to Proust.

Chapters six and seven focus on films which can be termed "Proustian" without being adaptations per se. Chapter six, "Beyond Adaptation: Fabio Carpi's *Quartetto Basileus* and *Le Intermittenze del cuore*," will be a fascinating discovery for Proustians and cinephiles alike, as the Italian filmmaker remains little known and studied, either in Italy or in North America, and his works have received very little distribution (Beugnet and Schmid inform the reader that his latest film *Le Intermittenze del cuore* from 2003 still has not been released outside of Italy and the festival circuit). Carpi's highly personal films rework Proustian themes using innovative cinematic techniques. Chapter seven, "The Modernist Legacy," traces the intersections between Proust's novel and avant-garde cinema in the films of Abel Gance, Alfred Hitchcock, and Jean-Luc Godard, among numerous others. This chapter is at once too much and not enough, as it offers a tantalizing glimpse of a more ambitious intellectual project, without having enough space to develop it. The observations here thus often remain superficial or unsubstantiated. The excellent filmography and bibliography, however, will be very useful to

researchers inspired to continue Beugnet and Schmid's worthwhile endeavor.

William C. Carter follows his masterful biography of Proust, *Marcel Proust: a Life*, with an exploration of love and sex in the Proustian universe. [6] Entertainingly written (with such chapter titles as "Mighty Hermaphrodite" and "A Nun of Speed"), expertly researched, and well focused on a topic of universal interest (love and sex), Carter's *Proust in Love* delves into the mysteries of Proust's own complex love life while also analyzing the intersections between Proust's experiences and the proclamations on love by his narrator in the *Recherche*. Proust's adolescent crushes on schoolmates, his love affairs with Reynaldo Hahn and Lucien Daudet, his (surprising to some) flirtations and possible affairs with women, his financial support and frequenting of a male brothel, and his complex relationships with men from the working class are all recounted through Proust's letters and testimonies from those who knew him. Carter does not shy away from Proust's potentially more disturbing aspects, for example his mad jealousy or his alleged interest in caged rats, but, like Proust himself, seeks an understanding and, ultimately, an acceptance of all expressions of sexuality.

What emerges from Carter's book is a complex and fascinating portrait of Proust's emotional and sexual life, the diversity of which escapes preset categories. All the paradoxes of Proust's famous character Charlus, as well as those of Saint-Loup and Jupien, come to life within the context of the sexual mores of the turn of the last century. Proust's theories of homosexuality, which seem unorthodox today, reveal not only his own idiosyncratic perspective but also the theories and practices of his day. Carter's decision "to avoid weighing down the book with too many academic analyses" (p xi), has the advantage of rendering his book accessible to the broader public, as well as guaranteeing that it remain lively and enjoyable reading. However, his focus on Proust's life often eclipses a more in-depth analysis of the narrator's theories of love, though Carter respects the difference between Proust the author and the narrator of his novel. *Proust in Love* dutifully refers the intrigued reader to more detailed academic works, but given Carter's immense knowledge of Proust's life and work, this reader was left wishing that Carter himself had pushed his commentary further. Many of the anecdotes and quotations come directly from Carter's earlier (1000-plus-page) biography, albeit with new documentation and analysis. *Proust in Love* will prove useful to those new to Proust's life, to those looking for a starting point for approaching the vast subject of love in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, and to anyone looking for a good read.

The title of Richard Davenport-Hines' latest biography of Proust, *Proust at the Majestic; The Last Days of the Author Whose Book Changed Paris*, is deceptive for three reasons. First, only the initial chapter describes the late-night party thrown at the Hotel Majestic in 1922 where James Joyce and Proust met for the first and only time. Second, the rest of the book offers a more or less full biography of Proust with slightly more attention given to the last few years of his life. Finally, though Proust became an undeniably famous figure in his time, his book did not "change" Paris. Davenport-Hines' title both exaggerates Proust's book's impact on the Paris of the 1920s and understates the real influence it has had on world literature. Perhaps the biographer is not directly to blame for his title, since the work was published originally in the U.K. as *A Night at the Majestic*. [7] The idea of approaching a biography of Proust through the point of view of the end of his life is intriguing, as is the choice of the attention given to the "modernist" dinner party, but neither students of Proust nor of modernism will find much of the material here new or enlightening.

On May 18, 1922, Sydney and Violet Schiff, wealthy socialites who wanted to be patrons of the arts, gave a dinner party at the Hotel Majestic and invited Picasso, Diaghilev, Stravinsky, Joyce, and Proust, among countless others. Davenport-Hines gives an exhaustive and exhausting account of all those present, complete with brief biographies and lists of each guest's annoying quirks. The much-anticipated encounter between Joyce and Proust, whom the author considers as rivals for the title of greatest modernist author, is more than disappointing since the two hardly spoke at all. Joyce comes off as awkward and jealous, while Proust seems for once at a loss for words. Davenport-Hines includes all of

the embellished accounts of the meeting written by contemporaries, and it becomes obvious that the literary possibilities of the dinner at the Majestic far exceed its reality. The book attempts to recreate a sense of Paris during the 1910s and 20s, as well as to give an idea of high European modernism, and readers may enjoy the amusing anecdotes of Proust's contemporaries.

The remainder of the book focuses on several aspects of Proust's life, such as his views on class relations and snobbery, his homosexuality, and his obsession with the writing of his novel. The sections of the book dedicated to the Schiffs and their relentless courting of Proust during the final months of his life are a distraction, since the book portrays them as even more disagreeable than it does James Joyce. However, there are many fascinating accounts in the book, notably concerning homosexuality, where the commentary is often more empathetic and less analytical than that of Carter's *Proust in Love*. The most moving and well-written section of the book is dedicated to Proust's death and funeral, where taxi-drivers, society ladies, and the literati all mourned the passing of the author whose book conquered time. *Proust at the Majestic*, though uneven in its depictions of Proust and his work, is a nicely written book that offers a glimpse into the incredible world of artists and thinkers who crossed paths with Proust in the Paris of the 1920s.

These three books testify to the enduringly vibrant interest in Proust's work and life by both the academic (*Proust at the Movies*) and the popular (*Proust in Love* and *Proust at the Majestic*) reading publics. These books remind us that, if other French writers have been unable to enter into the popular imagination (it is, thankfully, impossible to think of publishing a book entitled "Malraux in Love" or "Claudel at the Movies"[8]), it may be because Proust's work transcends not just time but also distinctions of literary genre and high and popular culture. Perhaps the best guide to Proust's thought and the "Proustian experience" will always remain *A la Recherche du temps perdu*.

## NOTES

[1] A look at the program of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century French and Francophone Studies Colloquia over the last five years confirms the diversifying of the field in U.S. French departments, with roughly one quarter of the panels dedicated to French literature before 1970, one quarter to francophone literature, and the other half to film, contemporary literature, and cultural studies. Proust, unlike other canonical writers, consistently inspires one or two dedicated panels, as well as several additional papers. The number of dissertations with Proust's name in the title is equally revealing. A search on Proquest (UMI Dissertation Abstracts International) for Ph.D. dissertations completed over the last ten years gives the following results: Proust 86 (the number jumps to 108 when "à la Recherche du temps perdu" is included in the search), Sartre 77 (including a large number of philosophy theses), Camus 59, Duras 59, Beauvoir 33, Gide 23, Robbe-Grillet 17, Colette 16, Valéry 15, Claudel 14, Breton 12, Malraux 5, Mauriac 3, and Barrès 2. Obviously, these statistics do not reflect dissertations which have chapters on authors without mentioning them in the title, but the overall trend is telling.

[2] Roger Shattuck, *Proust's Way: A Fieldguide to In Search of Lost Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001). Other useful guides to Proust's work include the MLA's *Approaches to Teaching Proust's Fiction and Criticism*, eds. Elyane Dezon-Jones and Inge Crosman Wimmers (New York: Modern Languages Association of America, 2003) and the more expensive and more expansive *Cambridge Companion to Proust*, ed. Richard Bales (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[3] Alain de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1997).

[4] Gilles Deleuze's *Cinéma 2* rethinks cinematic time through the paradoxically anti-cinema philosophy of Henri Bergson. Though Deleuze, author of *Proust et les signes*, makes few explicit connections between Proust and cinema, Beugnet and Schmid demonstrate how Deleuze's film theory reveals the affinities between cinematic time and memory and the Proustian novel (*Cinéma 2. L'image-temps* [Paris: Minuit, 1985]; *Proust et les signes* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964]).

[5] The screenplays for both films may be of interest to Proust scholars: Suso Cecchi d'Amico and Luchino Visconti, *A la Recherche du temps perdu. Scénario d'après l'œuvre de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Persona, 1984); Harold Pinter, *A la Recherche du temps perdu. The Proust screenplay* (London: Grove Press, 1978).

[6] William C. Carter, *Marcel Proust: A Life* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

[7] Richard Davenport-Hines, *A Night at the Majestic: Proust & the Great Modernist Dinner Party* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).

[8] Manoel de Oliveira's 1985 version of Claudel's *Soulier de satin* does have a kind of mythical quality among cinephiles, though it has rarely been screened due to its 410-minute length.

Patrick M. Bray Indiana University pbray@indiana.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Review* Vol. 7 (September 2007), No. 115

ISSN 1553-9172