

Movie Review: Wuthering Heights

The tagline of Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights*— 'Love is a force of nature'—is almost too good. As a selling-point, it is best not dwelt upon. It tells you what it does not want you to know: this is not an entertaining film (paint dries with the force of nature). Like nature, the 'love' of this film is curious and compelling but without romance. There is no sadness or joy, no redemption. The love between Catherine and Heathcliff is not between souls, they share no closeness, it is the love of instinct and physical necessity. In other words, Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* is completely without charm, seemingly oblivious to its audience; it cannot be liked or disliked. The film may well frustrate and it may well absorb, but it will evoke neither revulsion nor delight.

This is the second Brontë adaptation to have been released this year and it is certainly the more interesting. Cary Fukunaga's *Jane Eyre* was decorous and dull, its conservative approach operated on the baffling premises that 'accuracy' and 'faithfulness' are virtues, and that films need virtues. Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* is far from decorous. It is not befuddled by literary deference.

As is evident from her two previous films, *Red Road* and *Fish Tank*, Arnold is drawn to barren and impoverished environments. She is interested in how much people mean to each other when they have nothing but each other. She is wonderful at conveying moments of grace, the delicate and erotic moments when her weak and lost characters are held in the safety of another's care. We see this in *Fish Tank* when the injured Mia is carried in Connor's arms; in another scene, he gently undresses her for bed. There are similar moments in *Wuthering Heights*, most enduring for me is when the young Catherine takes Heathcliff riding and the graceful physicality of the horse mediates the desire between them.

What *Wuthering Heights* does not share with *Fish Tank* is a sympathetic protagonist. Whereas Mia's innocence—compassion, hope, naivety—distinguish her from the wilderness of her environment in *Fish Tank*, in *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff is a part of the wilderness—it is his environment. He is a laconic character whose selective use of language brings to mind Caliban's boast: 'You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse.' Heathcliff has no private life; his suffering, rage, and yearning are palpable but inexpressive (without rhetoric). He is animal-like; we see him slaughtering animals with the same attentiveness and indifference of an animal. On the occasion of his baptism, he runs from the church and Catherine follows.

Instead of a conscience Catherine and Heathcliff have instinct. They are not overthrown by passion, there is nothing so transcendent as that. What they are to each other is a matter of survival, it is hell without the glamour. Their play is mixed with violence and their tenderness touches on savagery. There is no drama to their desire.

When the older Heathcliff returns to Catherine, he gives up on both his wish to take revenge against his abusers and his intention to commit suicide. He no longer wants to arrange his life into stories, Catherine's physical presence eclipses such civilized notions. Meaning is only meaningful from a distance. And despite their new material comfort, these older characters still seem neither lost nor at home, still in the wild, blind to their security. They seem hardly to register the existence of Catherine's husband; jealousy does not play a part. Catherine and Heathcliff can experience acute abandonment but try as they will, they do not have the imagination for jealousy.

Love as a force of nature does not go very far as a story. Insofar as the film seems not to have been made with the audience in mind, it seems not to have been made at all. The film's neglect of the audience is not a priestly form of acknowledgement either, the film is simply unaware. Indeed, where the film jars are with the entrance of the older Catherine—the actress is too pretty for the part. She takes the characters out of the animal and into the aesthetic and thereby makes the audience present. Beauty always seems like it is for us; that is what it is.

Arnold's 'style' has been called 'realistic', but in *Wuthering Heights*, it is more impressionistic; it is a dream-like film. It draws no distinction between inside and out—the weather is seemingly indiscriminate, the characters are quiet but without thought—between night and day, between past and present. Arnold's landscape is not sublime and it is not beautiful. The dialogue is sparse and the sounds are diegetic. Nothing is added. And all this is turned on its head as the film finishes.

If the film can have a spoiler it is this: there is a song at the end. Having made no attempt to ingratiate us for two hours, the film leaves us malleable and keen for a bit of dictatorship. As Marcus Mumford's plaintive voice sings over flashbacks of Catherine and Heathcliff together, I fell for it instantly; here was something to mourn for. It was only then I thought, 'I like this film,' and just like that you are released.