Time, tide and narrative: adapting chronology in Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World

Time, Tide and Narrative: Adapting Chronology in *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*.

By Jeremy Strong

Introduction

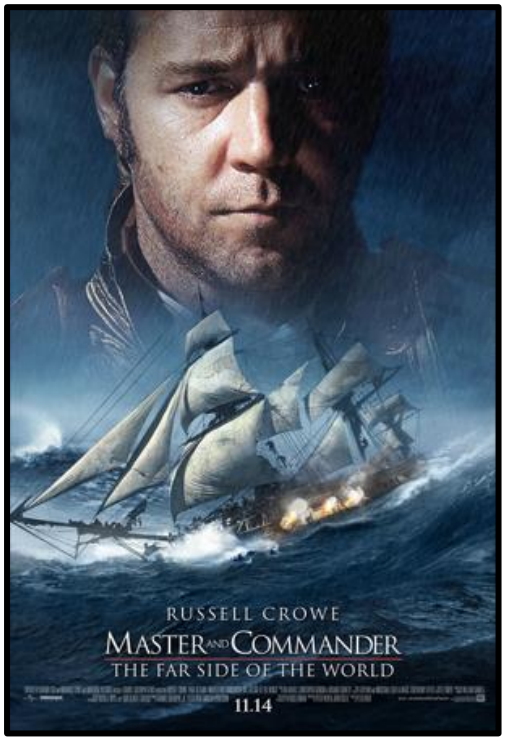

Figure 1. © 2003 20th Century Fox, Miramax Films and Universal Studios. Wikpedia.

This paper is concerned with the 2003 film *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, directed by Peter Weir, screenplay by John Collee and Weir[1], and with the book – or more accurately – *books* from which it is adapted. The film's source material comes from novelist Patrick O'Brian who, between 1969 and his death in 2000, wrote 20 completed novels, plus one unfinished work, featuring Royal Navy Captain Jack Aubrey and his friend Stephen Maturin – physician, natural philosopher (what we nowadays term a 'naturalist') and spy. Their mostly maritime adventures start in 1800 during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars – a conflict that provides the backdrop for most of the series – through to the 1820s and the independence movements of South America. Hence, there appears to be a broad equivalence in duration between the time taken for their production and the portion of history they address. Equally, and this theme will occupy much of the present study, a certain chronological fluidity is also at work throughout the series; a canon for which the term *Roman Fleuve* (or 'river' novel) is especially apt. Whilst no single text manifests a glaring temporal anomaly, taken as a whole it is apparent that numerous factors including the age of characters, aspects of their backstory, and especially the cumulative duration of several epic sea journeys do not cohere. It is not the object of this paper to treat this distortion as a failure. Rather, it is to focus on how the single screen adaptation engages with this aspect of its literary predecessors.

Adapting Time

The film's title alone is, for anyone tolerably well acquainted with the novels, a clear signal that 'something is up' in respect of narrative order, of sequence. For *Master and Commander*

is the title of the first novel in the series – published 1969, set 1800 – while *The Far Side of The World* – published 1984, set 1812 – is the tenth. In the first, readers encounter the principal characters for the first time, as indeed that duo initially encounters each other. Aubrey is promoted from Lieutenant to the rank named in the title, Maturin undertakes his first journey as ship's surgeon, and several of the key characteristics that recur in subsequent works are introduced. In *The Far Side of The World*, Aubrey is a senior Post-Captain, Maturin has covertly served Naval Intelligence for at least a decade, and many of the series' recurring qualities, tropes, and motifs are firmly established. Which version then – of time, of characters, of situation – will the compound-titled film present? As it transpires, neither of them, exactly. Over images of a square-rigged ship – the HMS *Surprise* - at early dawn, a series of opening titles orient viewers (and, perhaps, re-orient readers) to the temporal and narrative settings of the new text. Off the coast of Brazil, it is 1805 (almost a midpoint between the novels). England and France are at war, Napoleon is master of Europe, 'Oceans are now Battlefields' and we see that Aubrey's Admiralty orders are to intercept the French Privateer *Acheron* en route to the Pacific.

For the film to be a success *on its own terms* there was a particularly salient virtue to this adapted version. In the novel *The Far Side of the World* the key historical context is the war of 1812 between Britain and the USA. The Surprise's quarry is not the French *Acheron*, but the American Navy's *Norfolk*, a vessel sent to prey on British whaling ships. The film's substitution thus re-locates the narrative premise from a largely-forgotten conflict in British minds, to one more likely to chime with audiences' grasp of history. (And the opening titles anyway provide an adequate *précis* for movie-goers). More importantly, and especially pertinent to the film's financial prospects, this change meant that American viewers were not expected to root for British protagonists ranged against Americans. As A.O. Scott observed wryly in his review for the *New York Times*, 'The spectacle of British imperial self-defense has been made more palatable for American audiences by a discreet emendation of the literary source'. (Scott. 2003) French viewers – a far smaller potential market – were presumably expected to lump it. In terms of a potential global audience, viewers with prior knowledge of O'Brian's novels would not, of course, form the key market. Though, for a business in which pre-release 'buzz' is critical, and a media landscape in which the approbation of fan-based social networks is sought, such viewers can form an influential segment whose expectations generally require attending to. Rather, the film would be expected to attract the bulk of its audience based on the (more or less) regular line-up of

movie elements including star(s), genre, director etc. that can be conveyed in trailers, posters and surrounding publicity. Nonetheless it is worth noting that what one might call the adaptation's 'American turn' was especially relevant for an author whose literary reputation and book sales had been dramatically enhanced by a late-career boost when the novels were re-launched in the U.S. in the early 1990s. In particular a very positive profile in a May 1993 edition of the *New York Times Magazine* had helped the author – then nearly eighty – make multiple bestseller lists with his latest addition to the series, *The Wine Dark Sea.* Given O'Brian's marked popularity in the U.S. through the decade preceding, it would have been perverse for the adaptation to pursue one of the storylines in which Americans are, if not exactly the villains, at least 'the opposition'. In effecting this change the adaptation may substantially have altered the terms of the particular novel, but in doing so – in making Napoleon's forces the enemy – it better aligned the movie with the general condition of the series as a whole.

Indeed, it is my contention here that *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* is as much an adaptation of the totality of the Aubrey/Maturin novels as it is of *The Far Side of the World*, the single novel from which a broad pattern of events is loosely derived. Furthermore, it will be argued that this is facilitated by a key characteristic of O'Brian's novels – the scheme of recurrences, repetitions and similarities across and within works; an aspect of his writing that, in turn, divides responses to his *oeuvre*. For the devotee of O'Brian's work – and they inspire much devotion – the novels are remarkable for their sustained portrayal of a central friendship, their close observation of ship-board life and many other aspects of historical accuracy, for vividly-drawn action and attention to quotidian detail, repeated anecdotes and naval maneuvers, moments of pathos and comedy, and general transcendence of the supposed limits of the historical novel genre. For the gainsayers, the works are excessively repetitive; a litany of rigging, masts and sails in which Aubrey and Maturin either chase or are chased by other vessels in a procession of seemingly-equivalent 'adventures' terminated only by the author's demise. Rather than focusing on different aspects of the novels, it is apparent that readers with contrasting opinions are responding to much the same properties, but valuing them very differently.

In her essay 'Franchising/Adaptation' Clare Parody argues for the existence of a variant of adaptive practice in which the engagement is not with a single text, but a wider corpus:

> ‘Even where an adaptation announces one specific franchise instalment as its source, its operations are unavoidably structured in relation to the entire franchise multitext, because any instalment is constantly speaking to the others, extending them, completing them, reframing them, and drawing on them for meaning and effect.’ (p. 212)

Although the types of transmedia textual groupings she describes – *The Lord of The Rings, Batman, Star Wars, Harry Potter, James Bond* – are in many respects radically different to O’Brian’s stories (and we can be certain the author would have loathed the notion of the ‘Franchise’ as much as he would have been baffled by the concepts of trans/multi, and inter-mediality) in other ways the similarities are marked. Something O’Brian’s work and this adaptation patently *share* with the franchise adaptations Parody discusses, is the fact of the central plank of what is adapted being not so much ‘story and coterminously character’ (p. 214) as what she terms ‘*world-building’*. As well as applying neatly to the contents and mythology of a Gotham City, a Middle Earth, or a Galaxy far, far away – that is, to the grist of Science Fiction and Fantasy – world-building fits very well O’Brian’s detailed, steadily-accreted, evocation of a particular historical setting, and the subsequent effort to convey that world on screen. Just as other franchises gather their ancillary and spin-out texts that expand and explain that world, so the Aubrey/Maturin novels have not only their own enormous scale, but have also acquired glossaries and companions, including *Patrick O’Brian’s Navy: the Illustrated Companion to Jack Aubrey’s World; A Sea of Words: A Lexicon and Companion for Patrick O’Brian’s Seafaring Tales*, and *Lobscouse & Spotted Dog: Which It’s a Gastronomic Companion to the Aubrey/Maturin Novels.* Equally, in terms of differences with conventional franchise adaptations, it is evident that, of the Aubrey/Maturin stories, it is the original novels that exert the greatest influence and tend to be regarded as definitive. Of appearances in other media (appearances which, of course, grow and shape that world) there is only the single screen adaptation to date, a handful of radio adaptations, and several versions by different narrators of the entire series as audio books, some abridged, some not. By way of comparison one might point to the many film versions of James Bond stories and (even with big-name writers such as Sebastian Faulks and Jeffery Deaver brought in for recent novel re-boots) of the tendency for the movies, rather than the books, to be seen as the main event.

It is necessary at this stage to acknowledge that O'Brian is a decidedly *under*-studied author. Whilst a loyal readership, textual re-versioning, and spin-out texts point to a popular (and by no means un-informed[2]) reception, this has generally not been matched with academic attention. Although significant exceptions exist, such as Dean King's excellent 2000 biography of the author, several illuminating essays by Rick Simmons, an earlier essay in *Coriolis,* and an intriguing recent book by Michael Leigh Sinowitz (2014) he has been widely ignored. Late in O'Brian's lifetime appeared the edited collection *Patrick O'Brian: Critical Appreciations and a Bibliography* (Cunningham, ed. 1995) which, whilst it offers some genuinely useful and insightful material, tends at times toward hagiography. O'Brian himself acknowledged that by choosing to work in the medium of the historical novel he was writing in a 'despised genre' (ibid. 21) that has generally evaded scholarly esteem and scrutiny. By contrast, established canonical literature and contemporary literary fiction have conventionally been interpreted as the proper province of academe, though it is to be hoped that the increasing recent popularity of the genre as whole – *inter alia* the works and adaptations of Philippa Gregory and Hilary Mantel – may prompt an expansion in academic interest. Relatedly, it is also significant that the film did not emphasise its status as an adaptation. Whilst the connection to O'Brian's works would have been apparent to readers already familiar with them, the film offered no link or reference to O'Brian in the titles, nor any of the other devices that commonly suggest a work's origins in a book. Developed and made only after O'Brian's death, the movie, whilst simultaneously reflecting a real enthusiasm for the novels, evidently did not wish to chance being perceived by wider audiences as a 'bookish' film but rather as an action-packed spectacular drama. As will be discussed later, with a substantial budget of a reputed $150,000,000 to recoup before moving into profit, *Master and Commander* needed to be understood by audiences as a popular blockbuster in the vein of *Gladiator* rather than as literature-on-screen.

Time and Again

The novels' handling of time is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the domain in which repetitions, cycles, and parallels are most foregrounded. The routine of ship-board life, of glasses turned, bells rung, meals eaten, noon observed and announced, watches summoned and dismissed, is an omnipresent characteristic of the novels. Punctuated by intervals of intense action as well as by sections where an elision or summary covers several weeks' sailing, the reading experience is a type of *succumbing* both to the strictures of naval life as well as to the

vagaries of wind and tide. Sometimes swift progress is made, at others none at all. Virtually all the novels contain a sequence – a hymn to blue-water sailing – in which the ship has settled into a steady routine. In these enumerations of the many facets of the ship's regular doings the events described are not particular instances or variations but representative iterations. For a reader who has consumed previous works in the series they confirm, along with countless other analogies, the return to the known properties of the antecedent works, to the consolation and reassurance of the familiar. In *The Far Side of The World* the narrative reaches this juncture as the *Surprise* approaches the Cape Verdes:

> 'The ship had settled down to the steady routine of blue-water sailing: the sun, rising a little abaft the larboard beam and a little hotter every day, dried the newly-cleaned decks and the moment it appeared and then beheld the ordered sequence of events – hammocks piped up, hands piped to breakfast, berth-deck cleaned and aired, the new hands piped to the great-gun exercise or reefing topsails, the others to beautifying the ship, the altitude observed, the ship's latitude and her progress determined, noon proclaimed, hands piped to dinner, the ceremony of the mixing of the grog…….' (p91)

Albeit that it has far less time at its disposal, a regular two hours' duration compared to the several thousands of pages that comprise the novels, the adaptation delivers an equivalent impression. Having introduced audiences to those elements that make up naval routine, subsequent montage sequences overlaid with music indicate their multiple repetitions though days and nights of sailing. Whilst the deployment of such a well-established cinematic device for conveying the passage of time is to be expected, the film's pattern of repetition in respect of *non*-montage scenes is more notable. The reader of O'Brian, drawn to the film, would certainly have anticipated that any number of familiar parts should be included: dinner with officers around the gunroom table; music in the Captain's cabin – Aubrey with his violin and Maturin his cello; the Ship's company mustered on the deck for divine service. These and several other scenes identifiable as canonical must-be-included elements are not merely present on screen, but are presented *more than once*.

This generates within the film the same sense of time (altered, circular, suspended) that marks the series of novels. The intention to double-shot the movie with signature O'Brian components from across the series is evident in the adaptation containing *both* an icy passage past Cape Horn *and* a sweltering sojourn motionless in the doldrums. It is patently at work in

including the sequence where Maturin trepans the injured Joe Plaice before an audience of disbelieving sailors (an operation also practiced elsewhere in the series) and in transplanting from another novel altogether the ruse of rigging false lights to escape a chasing enemy. The young midshipman Blakeney who loses an arm appears to be a minor role much expanded in the transition from page to screen, yet might also be regarded as an effort to include another character from several of the later works, Reade, who loses an arm but goes on to flourish under Aubrey's tutelage.

The adaptive scheme of mining the entire series, rather than just *The Far Side of the World* and *Master and Commander* for material for the adaptation is evident in a host of expressions, exchanges and scenes that are culled from elsewhere in the Aubrey/Maturin novels. The "lesser of two weevils" pun derives from *The Fortune of War*, and Bonden's awed summary of Maturin's medical eminence (that he is "a physician {..not…} one of your common surgeons.") comes from *Desolation Island*, while "There's not a moment to lose!" crops up in virtually every novel and is here used twice by Aubrey and once by Maturin; the latter evidently relishing the opportunity to deliver an injunction that he is more generally obliged to hear and attend to. The elegant silver device for toasting cheese that is seen being used by Aubrey's grumbling steward Killick, actually makes its literary appearance later in the series' chronology, in *The Nutmeg of Consolation.* While Aubrey's favorite meal, "soused hog's face", is served him by Killick in one of many sentences of dialogue that commences with that character's signature "Which.." In this respect, the film may reasonably be interpreted as a vessel for such 'favorite' elements from across the 21 works; an interpretation that certainly accords with our knowledge that director Weir's engagement with the source material included an exhaustive reading of the canon (Richard King. 2003). Other properties of the adaptation might well be interpreted by viewers as chiming with an even broader compass of maritime narratives. These include the ill-luck that follows the Marine Captain's attempt to shoot an albatross, inadvertently hitting Maturin, and the images of an isolated Aubrey testing his crew's loyalty in his perilous and seemingly monomaniacal pursuit of the *Acheron*; motifs that conjure Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Melville's *Moby Dick* respectively.

Men and the Sea

It is notable that several contemporary reviews made reference to the all-male world of H.M.S *Surprise* and of the film, as though this condition was an accurate or adequate reflection of O'Brian's Aubrey/Maturin series. A.O. Scott characterizes it as being 'in the best war-movie tradition {…} in essence a study of male camaraderie under duress.', and Peter Bradshaw's *Guardian* review notes that 'there can't be many films with nary a single member of the fair sex among the company.' (Bradshaw. 2003) While such responses are entirely apt to the film, they also demonstrate one of the inevitable limitations of an adaptation that attempts to distil elements of a multi-novel series into a single, new, text; for women are by no means absent from the twenty one novels. Though Aubrey may rail against the notion of women aboard as being not conducive to discipline and good order, O'Brian frequently included female characters as centrally-important figures in the ship-board sequences. Narratively, Aubrey's firm contrary opinion provides useful grist for his author to test and thwart him with unwanted female passengers, rescues and stowaways. The fact of Aubrey's notion of this particular aspect of naval discipline being at odds with his otherwise ardent nature – for he is by no means disinclined to female company in general – is also a frequent source of the humor that marks the novels. This is particularly evident in the scene in *The Ionian Mission* where Aubrey's junior officer William Babbington appears in a sloop with a large party of rescued women, originally from the island of Lesbos. Their origin prompts the strictly accurate but deeply wilful report that "They are all Lesbians." (1993b. 285). An astonished Aubrey expostulates:

> "Upon my word, William, this is coming it pretty high. Thirty-eight wenches at a time is coming it pretty high." (ibid. 286)

Major female presences in the novels, and aboard ship, include the American intelligence agent Louisa Wogan whom Maturin dupes into conveying false information in the course of an epic sea journey in *Desolation Island,* and Clarissa Oakes who travels from Australia to England in the fifteenth novel, titled *The Truelove* in the U.S.A but elsewhere published as, simply, *Clarissa Oakes.* Even more significantly, many of the novels devote a considerable amount of time to the activities of Aubrey and Maturin on land, including their relationships with cousins Sophie Williams and Diana Villiers whom they, respectively, marry. *Post Captain*, the second novel in the series and an instalment that heralded the author's willingness to devote considerable page-time to events on *terra firma,* involves a degree of

romantic competition between Aubrey and Maturin over Diana that very nearly culminates in a duel. Sophie, her two sisters, and cousin Diana comprise a household presided over by the 'vulgar, pretentious, ignorant' (O'Brian. 2007. 43) Mrs Williams, who wishes to see her daughters married well and for their dazzling cousin not to poach upon or otherwise jeopardize their marital prospects. The early Nineteenth Century setting, attention to the dynamics of courtship and marriage, and in particular the significance of the arrival of an eligible Post Captain, are among the features that have led many to observe the 'striking resemblance to Austen's work' (Simmons. 2004. 170) of *Post Captain* and the Aubrey/Maturin novels as a whole. Indeed, O'Brian's enthusiasm to flavor his writing with gestures to Jane Austen may be discerned in prose that significantly pre-dates the appearance of his most celebrated duo. *The Unknown Shore* (1959), his second sea novel, commences with an opening that patently relishes its Austenian tone:

> 'Mr. Edward Chaworth of Medenham was a well-disposed, good-natured man with an adequate fortune, an amiable wife and a numerous family:' (O'Brian. 1998. p.1)

Notwithstanding the obvious differences - of time of writing, of genre, etc. - it is apparent that one of the connecting elements between Jane Austen and Patrick O'Brian is an attention to female experience and agency in a historical context that imposed significant limits on both. The relationship between Aubrey and Sophie, including his inevitable absences and the swings of fortune that attend warfare and prize-taking, invite interpretation in terms of the marriage between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion* and her embarkation, at the novel's conclusion, upon a new way of life that offers more possibilities, and risks, than that afforded to Austen's other heroines.

Necessarily, many of O'Brian's female characters are acquainted with aspects of the human condition that do not figure in Austen's narratives. Nonetheless, they share a tangible sense of women's *jeopardy* in terms of the potential for a fall into destitution, the loss of character, and the virtual impossibility of a secure existence outwith marriage. Diana Villiers' desperate reckless endeavours to survive independently as the mistress, successively, of Canning and Johnson, two powerful men of business, recall the dangerous zest for life of *Sense and Sensibility*'s Marianne Dashwood. Though, thankfully, Villiers' eventual marriage to Maturin is a far more equitable pairing than Marianne's marriage to the aging Colonel Brandon, a resolution that Alastair Duckworth describes as 'a gross over-compensation for her misguided sensibility.' (Duckworth in Clark, ed. 1994. p.27) Of especial note in this

context is the life-story of Clarissa Oakes which she eventually discloses to a sympathetic Maturin in his role as her physician and confidante. From being orphaned, through sexual abuse as a child, to work at a London brothel and transportation to the Sydney penal colony, and eventual escape via marriage to a Midshipman, her account is a litany of damage done her by men in a world that afforded them both opportunity and impunity. What she tells Maturin is, even if unimaginable on Austen's pages, readily interpretable as the full, unspoken, horror of what might become of those who fall within the orbit of sexual predators such as Austen's Wickham or Willoughby, or of the illegitimate children such chancers might beget. Hers is, in effect, a 'what if' or alternate history of a species of women's experience absent the self-effacing efforts of a Darcy or Brandon to avert abandonment, penury and shame.

In this respect O'Brian may be said to participate not merely in a relationship with Austen's work based upon admiration and nicely-crafted asides to a knowing readership, but in a more recent tradition of critical re-reading – spanning fiction and scholarly endeavours – that has sought to understand Austen (and other authors) in terms of the intersections of gender, property and power. For example, Jo Baker's *Longbourn* (2013), which re-imagines *Pride and Prejudice* as seen from the 'below stairs' world of the servants, and takes such a critical perspective as its structuring premise. Simmons' summary of the relevance Austen's work held for O'Brian, that it influenced him 'thematically, imagistically, and "nominally," that is, in the naming of characters and vessels' (Simmons. p.175) is certainly true. However, it might usefully be extended to the observation that the Aubrey/Maturin novels simultaneously invoke Austen's world in terms and language that are recognisably *shared* with that author and systematically push beyond and unpick that world through themes, and on occasion language, that are emphatically not. Both dimensions are in evidence in *Desolation Island* where Aubrey is given command of the ill-built *Leopard*, a real-life Navy vessel that had (as Simmons notes) actually been commanded by Austen's brother Frank[3] in 1804/05. Critically surveying the leaky ship, Killick offers a pithy assessment of the "bleeding caulkers" at the Yard, men who "don't know their fucking business" (1995. p.72). One suspects that Frank (ultimately, Admiral) Austen would probably have shared Killick's view of the idle dishonest 'dockyard mateys', but would no more have used such language in his sister's earshot than might Darcy (or Elizabeth!) have countenanced deploying it on the interfering Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

With – variously – humour, sensitivity, and a critically-informed historical awareness, O'Brian deliberately sets out to explore Austen's *absences* at the same time as he acknowledges her presence, to fill the lacunae between the polite – if frequently barbed - exchanges in drawing rooms, at balls and assembly rooms, and around dinner tables. Men's lives away from women; women's (adult, sexual) lives post- and outside marriage; lived experience beyond a single social stratum; the cruelties, horrors and strictures that attended a life in uniform; and an insistent emphasis upon the functions, sensations, and limits of the human body are among the themes O'Brian's fiction pursues. In doing so, he does not mirror Austen, but, rather, treating her world as a relief print, seeks to explore and colour the spaces she left unfilled. Hence, whilst reviewers of the film who observed a 'Boys' Own' or even 'testosteroney' (Bradshaw, 2003) quality were by no means incorrect, this property of the adaptation should not be understood as the mere copy of the texts it has adapted. Rather, faced with a finite amount of screen time, screenwriter and director evidently elected to tighten the focus on particular aspects of those texts and leave others. To figure such absences in the reductive language of 'loss' or 'infidelity' serves neither the novels, the film, nor our understanding of adaptive practice and decision-making. As Deborah Cartmell observes of adaptation in general, 'inclusion usually results in the exclusion of something else.' (Cartmell. 2012. p.1). The novels remain intact, and may be re-adapted with different emphases and in different formats. (*Hornblower* has, for example, been multiply adapted both for film and television.) More interesting, perhaps, is to plumb the reasons why a particular adaptation takes the shape it does.

In the case of *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* the textual evidence of the film itself and of those properties upon which many reviewers fastened suggests an adaptive choice to align the movie, by way of selection and omission from the source material, with a body of screen sea stories that emphasise the pressures, pleasures, and possibilities of the all-male company in a setting that mixes *in extremis* rigors with homo-social routine and ritual. Following Rick Altman's (1999) analysis of how filmic groupings come to exist and be understood in *Film/Genre,* we should recognize that this is by no means the outcome of a wish on the part of the makers to shoehorn the film into a putative 'sea story' genre, since this would likely limit the appeal and prospective audience. Rather, and in an industrial practice aimed at achieving a *breadth* of viewers, the film acquires its shape as a result of assiduous consideration of what-has-worked-before and the assembly of such elements into a new experience. Such an approach to building an audience has long been understood as centrally

important in the film business, as evidenced in this early advice from 1927: 'In every photoplay there are different highlights which when brought to the attention of different groups or classes of the community will build attention.' (Barry and Sargent. 1927. p.90) Here, these elements would include: Crowe in a manly, stirring, role that foregrounds skill-at-arms and heroic leadership (*Gladiator*); Paul Bettany as a sparring counterpoint to Crowe (*A Beautiful Mind*); Peter Weir at the helm of a period-set story (*Gallipoli; Dead Poets Society*); and a narrative that would deploy its own particular variations on a recognizable paradigm of 'men-at-sea'. Screen texts as diverse as the different versions of *The Mutiny on the Bounty, Das Boot, Dead Calm* and *The Cruel Sea* testify to the narrative possibilities afforded by the spatial 'constraints' of a ship-board story in which characters may never really escape each other, resolve and frailties are tested, and the intersection of cinematography and art direction can circumscribe viewers within a scene's claustrophobic geometry. Yet maritime stories do not have a monopoly on these features. The long-standing narrative motif of the 'Ship of Fools' – in which characters are co-located and exposed by ordeal - is employed in films as diverse as *Stagecoach* and *The Towering Inferno*, and in *Apollo 13* we see the deliberate visual contrast, as also employed in countless films of the sea, between the confines of the threatened vessel and its harried crew and the seemingly endless expanse of the hostile but beautiful medium in which they are suspended.

Cast and Crew

The character of Hollum – the thirty year-old midshipman - and the events in which he is involved are much altered in adaptation. In the novel he embarks on an ill-advised affair with the Gunner's young wife[4] which results in her pregnancy and their eventual murder by the outraged husband who commits suicide shortly thereafter. On screen there is no such relationship, but the theme of Hollom's incapacity for decisive action and unsuitability for command is effectively developed. In the sailors' minds he becomes a 'Jonah', associated with the misfortunes of their vessel and – plagued by doubt and unhappiness – he drowns himself by jumping overboard holding a cannonball. Although from the point of view of a single adaptation there is a great deal that is newly-invented in his specific portrayal, the overall effect is to condense key themes that circulate across the wider series. The common sailors' superstition, their Captain's private tendency to not discredit such beliefs, and Maturin's repeated endeavours to overturn naval traditions and ways of thinking that are not amenable to reason, can all be found across most of the canon. More pointedly, Hollum's

shortcomings (his nervousness, his want of manly virtues, his lack of a common touch) serve to contrast with the corresponding strengths in Aubrey; values which he generally manages to diffuse to those he leads.

As indicated above, the casting of Russell Crowe, who had shot to prominence in the widely-seen *Gladiator* five years previously, already brought into operation that facet of making meaning that applies to screen texts in which significance from prior roles may serve to establish equivalent significance for those that follow. That stars can 'work' in this way has long been understood as a fundamental aspect of the movie business, as Richard Maltby argues: 'The star system provided one of the principal means by which Hollywood offered audiences guarantees of predictability, while the plots in which the star persona was embedded offered a balancing experience of novelty' (Maltby, 1995. p.92). Certainly, in the case of Crowe, his portrayal of General Maximus Decimus Meridius was heavily focused not just on martial prowess and courage but especially on his credentials as a natural leader. Importing these values into the subsequent film, in tandem with exploring the failings of Hollom, allows the adaptation to convey the heft of Aubrey's capacities that the novels develop over many texts. Audiences may not have known Jack Aubrey, but there was a greater likelihood they knew Crowe and his associations. Of course, the science of casting that works so well from *Gladiator* to *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* is neither exact nor infallible. The same desire to borrow, in turn, from the later movie a sense of Crowe as nautical patriarch and hero, battling enemies and the elements from a storm-tossed deck would certainly have motivated his casting in another adaptation of sorts, Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014), a film described by Alex von Tunzelmann in *The Guardian* as an 'unholy mess'.

Paul Bettany's portrayal of Stephen Maturin is, despite being a far more physically imposing figure than that described by O'Brian, generally successful in conveying the sense of a man broadly (if erratically) familiar with aspects of the Royal Navy but not – like Aubrey – literally *of* the service, though the film does not even begin to explore Maturin's dual character as an intelligence agent. Where the adaptation threatens to depart significantly from its literary antecedents, other than by omission, is in its portrayal of his scientific thinking as they approach the Galapagos Islands. Namely, that the dialogue appears to have Maturin as natural philosopher musing in a manner that anticipates by more than half a century the ideas expressed by Charles Darwin in *On The Origin of Species* (1859). As Maturin and Blakeney

consider animals whose form mimics that of another, or – by way of camouflage – their environment, e.g. the stick insect, Blakeney asks "Does God make them change?" to which Maturin replies "Yes, certain" but continues, "*but do they also change themselves? Now that is a question."*[5] (my italics). Whilst this theme of transformation feeds usefully into the larger narrative – later, inspired by Maturin's adapted creatures, Aubrey will make the *Surprise* appear like a whaler to lure the *Acheron* into a trap – it is an innovation that verges on anachronism and which effects a significant alteration to Maturin as originally conceived by O'Brian. Equally, evolution (though never voiced outright in the film) is a resonant analogy for the adaptive process itself and one occasionally deployed by scholars in the field of Adaptation Studies, most notably Julie Sanders (2006).

When Aubrey first mentions the Galapagos as a destination a cut immediately presents the audience with Bettany-as-Maturin thrilled at the prospect. Since, for even the most lightly-informed viewer, the Galapagos would be associated with the high proportion of endemic species observed by Darwin in the course of his journey on the *Beagle*, which in turn stimulated his theories, there is a seeming disconnect between Maturin's response and the associations 'Galapagos' might hold for a post-Darwin audience. Whilst the islands and their fauna had been documented as early as the Sixteenth Century, their status as catalyst and proving ground for one of the most potent ideas in human history, and as a place of the highest significance for a natural philosopher, had yet to be established. More broadly, it is notable that in having Maturin raise ideas that appear to eventuate in a proto-Darwinian view of species as mutable the film raises a difficulty for the character that he does not experience as a literary creation. On the page, Maturin's Catholic faith is unambiguously rendered, his occasional expostulations of "God between us and evil!" are wholly credible, and that this facet of his worldview may be reconciled with his spirit of objective scientific enquiry is perfectly consistent with his (pre-Darwin) place in history. Conversely, an understanding of the implications of natural selection and evolution is inherently difficult to reconcile with a view of Creation as divinely-ordained. Darwin struggled with the ramifications of what he had understood, was widely vilified for his ideas, and profound disagreements continue to the present day – especially in respect of school curricula - between those who espouse a Creationist account of life on earth and those who believe in evolution. To a certain extent the film sidesteps this difficulty by not highlighting Maturin's sincerely held faith, but this still leaves the wider difficulty of presenting him as a figure arguably ahead of the history of ideas. Christopher Hitchens interprets these sequences less critically than the present study

(though he is otherwise wholly dissatisfied with the film's failure to engage with Maturin's dual identity as an intelligence agent) observing:

> 'In one respect the action lives up to its fictional and actual inspiration. This was the age of Bligh and Cook and of voyages of discovery as well as conquest, and when HMS *Surprise* makes landfall in the Galapagos Islands we get a beautifully filmed sequence about how the dawn of scientific enlightenment might have felt.' (Hitchens. 2003)

However, for this reader, the film's encouraging us to think that, were it not for Maturin's discovery of the *Acheron* and subsequent abandonment of all his specimens to hurry back with the vital news, he might well have been the 'discoverer' of evolution instead, is a liberty too far, albeit an entertaining one. Yet, in a filmic sense, Bettany's portrayal of a naturalist on the verge of a great idea, reflecting on the significance of a flightless cormorant and a marine iguana did evolve into a fuller and more conventional rendering of Darwin. For in 2009 the actor played the lead role in *Creation*, a Darwin biopic, also scripted by John Collee[6]. The Galapagos/Natural History sequences in *Master and Commander* may be said to have evolved into the later film, the 'natural selection' of movie business forces allowing that element to flourish and adapt into a distinctly different entity.

Time and Tide

The essential relationship between place and time is rarely thrown into bolder relief than when maritime matters are considered. The readership for this Journal, above all, needs no prompting on the significance of accurate time-keeping for solving the problem of longitude. *When* and *where* were for mariners (as they can be for creators of fictions) considerations that converge. In the author's note for *The Far Side of the World* O'Brian acknowledges that his Aubrey/Maturin series is about to require a fix, a temporal adaptation:

> '(I)t is possible that in the near future the author (if his readers will bear with him) may be led to make use of hypothetical years, rather like those hypothetical moons used in the calculation of Easter: an 1812a as it were or even an 1812b' (O'Brian, 1984. p.x)

In short, he is fast running out of Napoleonic War. The early novels in what would become the series squandered time liberally. By the fourth novel, *The Mauritius Command*, it is

already 1810 and Waterloo is only 5 years away. Elisions of many months, sometimes years, separate the events of the earlier works. As the series developed, subsequent novels and their voyages simply would not fit into the remaining space of history. This leads the author to step outside strict historical chronology, though readers are assured that he will continue to respect 'historical accuracy'. An irony attendant upon this problem and its solution is that the novels make frequent allusion to an equivalent maritime difficulty, *leeway* and 'the perils of a leeward shore'. Time and again, Maturin – who despite his erudition is often immune to key naval concepts – has to have leeway explained to him. It is a threat he encounters first-hand, it even figures in the poetry of Mowett[7], one of his shipmates:

> 'Oh were it mine with sacred Maro's art/To wake to sympathy the feeling heart/Then might I with unrivalled strains deplore/Th' impervious horrors of a leeward shore.' (O'Brian. 1993b. p.81)

Yet leeway must still be patiently re-elucidated to Maturin, a device which naturally serves to appraise the reader too. Just as a sailing vessel may be displaced from its course in the direction of the wind, and must make proper provision for that displacement, so the historical novelist cannot generally travel through the medium of narrative alone – he does so through the agency of history, conceding time throughout.

Hence, after *The Far Side of The World* a run of several Aubrey/Maturin novels appear to take place in non-time, broadly figured as the later years of the Napoleonic Wars but without the specific references that grounded earlier works. Time appears to unfold differently for different characters. Aubrey and Maturin seem to remain in their mid-thirties, though their children get older. Indeed it is notable that when the two principal characters are first encountered they are 'between 20 and 30', yet still manage to be just less than 40 in the final novel. O'Brian's sparing and generally unspecific references to their ages (as opposed to their appearance, which he frequently describes) clearly abets this sleight of hand. Of course, an elastic approach to age in which characters and actors are required to resist the passage and signs of time is familiar in the movies too. Returning to where this paper started, one can observe that the temporal relocation performed by the adaptation (1812 to 1805) is a *de facto* provision of leeway too. It left the filmmakers with a greater window of both historical and actual time in which to set and make subsequent Aubrey/Maturin movies with key cast members. The film's (invented) ending is also a deliberately sequel-inviting cliff-hanger; Aubrey discovers that the French Captain is still alive and on board the *Acheron* – now a

prize - *en route* to Valparaiso, having pretended to be the ship's surgeon when his ship was finally taken (a twist that reprises the film's running trope of subterfuge, mimicry, and adaptation of appearance). In the event, *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* performed respectably at the box office, but did not deliver the stellar returns that generally signal a franchise-in-the-making. There continue to be rumours and references to a second movie to which Crowe has publicly stated he would be amenable. Each succeeding year makes it less likely, but the film, in adopting and adapting O'Brian's own device of taking a liberty with time, left itself the opportunity.

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Endnotes:

[1] Screenplay available online at http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Master-and-Commander.html , though there are significant variations to the final film.

[2] Posts and comments concerning Aubrey/Maturin on the dedicated facebook group – for example – are variously recondite, learned and witty.

[3] Both Austen's brothers were naval officers who achieved flag rank after her death.

[4] A character who had figured in earlier versions of the screenplay but was eventually removed – at Weir's request – on the grounds that her story would distract viewers' attention from the film's core relationship, the friendship between Aubrey and Maturin. Collee stated "in the early drafts, we actually did have a woman who seemed completely central to the story, but later proved redundant."
http://www.norwichfilmfestival.co.uk/john-collee-interview

[5] The 1805 date would also pre-date Lamarck's 1809 *Philosophie Zoologique* in which he postulates a theory of 'soft' inheritance.

[6] Interestingly, Collee has, like Maturin, a dual professional identity. A physician-turned-screenwriter (he studied Medicine at Edinburgh University) several of his projects are notable for their scientific content, including the medical drama *Paper Mask* (1990) and *Walking With Dinosaurs* (2013).

[7] The first two lines of Mowett's/O Brian's poem are actually borrowed from William Falconer's 'The Shipwreck'.