'Downton Abbey' Is Entertainment, but 'Brideshead Revisited' Was Art

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The '80's reigning aristo-soap has endured culturally. Today's, while diverting, won't.

Downtown Abbey is entertainment. Its illustrious predecessor in television mega-success about the English upper class, Brideshead Revisited, is art. This distinction between entertainment and art helps explain the decline in Downton this year—it is simply not as entertaining. For those, who have a chance to see the Brideshead DVD (of the 30-year-old series) its power as art is undiminished.

This entertainment/art schematic was used, early in his career, by Graham Greene to describe his own work. To oversimplify slightly, Greene's entertainments, like The Confidential Agent and Ministry of Fear, were well-plotted mysteries, espionage thrillers, and psychological melodramas aimed at stimulating emotion more than the mind. His more serious "novels," like The Power and the Glory or The Quiet American—his art—were aimed at both.

This useful, if not precise, distinction between entertainment and art occurred to me as I began watching the third season of Downton Abbey. Like millions of Americans (and Brits), I found the first two seasons great fun—a superb entertainment with its multiple stories, opulent sets, and remarkable character acting. It never made me reflect on
much, but I was eager for the next week to see what would happen. Sadly, I have begun, like others, to find this year's version less enjoyable (see James Parker in The Atlantic and a recent New York Times review). The plot twists ever more sharply, threatening to careen over the cliff of credibility. The characters remain largely unchanged, even as they find themselves in a Britain changed by the Great War. The main drama of seasons 1 and 2—will Lady Mary and Matthew Crawley find destiny with each other—loses its poignancy, wit, and vibrancy. Downtown still entertains: Season 3 isn't a bust. But it shows its age, because by no stretch of the imagination is it art that asks important questions the viewer can't shake off.

Brideshead Revisited, to which Downtown is compared, does deserve that more exalted word. Both Brideshead and Downtown, of course, are about aristocratic English families, living in grand houses which give the series their names. And, in their creation of a world of wealth and class, photographed down to the last detail, they appear similar.

But Brideshead Revisited, the 1981 television series, is drawn from Brideshead Revisited, the novel, written by Evelyn Waugh in 1944 when he was on temporary leave from the army. Indeed, the original screenplay by John Mortimer was largely junked and the final version, because of the time pressures, drew heavily—often word for word—from the book's evocative, razor-sharp dialogue. Waugh, initially a wicked novelist of manners, had converted to Catholicism in the 1930s. The novel, a distinct change in style and subject, was an elegiac account of an elegant but dysfunctional Catholic family, the Marchmains, as seen through the eyes of Charles Ryder, a son of the middle class. He is befriended by the youngest son, Sebastian, at Oxford in the early 1920s and is drawn into—and mesmerized by—the 20-year drama of a family struggling with faith and grace, rebirth and death, innocence lived and innocence lost, and love both sacred and profane.

Just as Downtown began to captivate current television audiences, I happened, serendipitously, to reread Brideshead and then watch re-mastered DVDs to see again what engrossed a huge and loyal audience three decades ago. Here are some of the differences that indicate why the televised Brideshead may be no more enjoyable than Downtown at its best but causes much greater and deeper reflection.

The story of Brideshead is told through the narration of Charles Ryder looking back on his involvement with the Marchmains when, in 1944, his military unit is, surprisingly, posted to Brideshead in preparation for war. The tone is nuanced, ironic, and wistful, both mercilessly objective and deeply involved, with the duality of passion experienced and sadness for what has been lost. The sun-dappled, wine-filled memories of Oxford are replaced by Ryder's middle-aged reflection that he is "homeless, childless, middle-aged, loveless...." There is, of course, nothing in Downtown comparable to the complexity of the narrative voice in Brideshead. Rather, there are the incessant shifts of view from the story of one character to another, facing soap-operatic problems and dilemmas that, in most instances, are overcome.
The ideas at the core of *Brideshead* are the role of faith and of God’s grace in the earthly lives of his servants. Although the Marchmains are aristocratic, the series is not so much a meditation on class as on religion. There is relatively little upstairs-downstairs. There is a great deal about the how religion can distort—and can save—lives. Waugh is conservative, anti-modernist, and strongly Catholic (and had political beliefs that would be an anathema to many today). But he was foremost a novelist. The television series, closely reflecting the book, is about very human struggles with the fearsome power of religion—to reject or embrace it—told in a compelling way (whatever one's view about faith or Catholicism). There are no deeper themes in *Downton*. The ideas of the time—class distinctions, the horror of war, Irish nationalism, the emerging rights of women—are just simplified and stylized bits of kaleidoscopic narrative, used more to move the story along than to explore their complexity and meaning.

With one exception, the main characters in *Brideshead* grow and change, with multiple dimensions that are not just a response to external events but are driven from within. The exception is Lady Marchmain who, as a devout and dogmatic Catholic, causes the dramatic arc of the three main characters and exemplifies the good and ill of religion. She drives Sebastian to self-destructive alcoholism and a fall from aristocratic grace to a menial job in a North African monastery with child-like religious piety. Her daughter Julia rebels into the fast life of London, marriage to a non-believer, and ultimate divorce and marriage plans with Charles before rejecting him and giving herself back to religion. Charles loves both Sebastian and Julia, yet rejects Sebastian as he sinks into alcoholism and is rejected by Julia, and he himself travels a great distance from the innocence of an idealized Oxford to the gray dawn of an empty Brideshead in the Second World War. Along these arcs, all three struggle with many inner demons.

Attractive as the characters in *Downton* are, few change, and all respond far more to external challenges—an embarrassing affair, wartime injuries, a threatened loss of Downton, a false murder charge—than to internal conflicts. The Earl of Grantham is genial but clueless, his mother acerbic, his wife unfailingly kind and sympathetic, Carson stiff but loyal, Mrs. Hughes wise, Mrs. O’Brien malicious, Bates and Anna star-crossed, and on and on. The essential character of these and all the others remains largely unchanged from Episode 1, Season 1 until today. Even Lady Mary and Matthew, witty and beautiful as she is and good-hearted and idealistic as he is, don't struggle with deep internal problems or seem to stand for much.

The success of both series is due, in no small part, to memorable actors. *Brideshead* had both British greats and striking newcomers: Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, Claire Bloom, Jeremy Irons, Anthony Andrews, and Diana Quick. The diversity and excellence of *Downton’s* casting is what brings us all back week after week: Hugh Bonneville, Elizabeth McGovern, Maggie Smith, Michelle Dockery, Dan Stevens, Jim Carter, Phyllis Logan, etc. etc.

But they worked with much different material. Memories of the *Downton’s* engaging if overwrought story-telling (even with a third season decline) will, I think, always bring
back a bemused smile of enjoyment. But amid its wealth and beauty, the counterpoint of struggles and, ultimately, the sadness and even tragedy of *Brideshead* haunt us still.

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