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which the play only hints at. Louis Jouvet as the Baron dominates the film, descending into the social depths and helping organize a collective undoing of Kastylyov, the capitalist landlord. Despite the gloomy theme, the murder, jailing, deaths by sickness and suicide, Renoir's version overflows with a general warmth evident in the airy setting by the Marne and the relaxed direction of actors who breathe languidly between their lines.

Did Gorki mind such an interpretation? We can never know, since he died a few months before its premier. But he did give Renoir his imprimatur and looked forward to seeing the completed version, this despite the fact that in 1932 he declared that the play was useless, out of date, and unperformable in socialist Russia. Perhaps these statements were the insincere self-criticism which that important year elicited from many Russian artists. I prefer, however, to take Gorki at his word. More far-sighted than most theorists, let alone most authors, he realized that *The Lower Depths* in 1932 Russia was by no means the same artwork as *The Lower Depths* in the France of the Popular Front. This is why he put no strictures on Renoir assuming that the cinéaste would deal with his play as he felt necessary. Necessity is, among other things, a product of the specific place and epoch of the adaptation, both historically and stylistically. The naturalist attitude of 1902, fleshing out the original plans of Zola, gave way to a new historic and stylistic moment, and fed that style that Renoir had begun elaborating ever since *La Chienne* in 1931, and that despite its alleged looseness and airiness in comparison to the Gorki, would help lead European cinema onto the naturalist path.

This sketch of a few examples from the sociology of adaptation has rapidly taken us into the complex interchange between eras, styles, nations, and subjects. This is as it should be, for adaptation, while a tantalizing keyhole for theorists, nevertheless partakes of the universal situation of film practice, dependent as it is on the aesthetic system of the cinema in a particular era and on that era's cultural needs and pressures. Filmmaking, in other words, is always an event in which a system is used and altered in discourse. Adaptation is a peculiar form of discourse but not an unthinkable one. Let us use it not to fight battles over the essence of the media or the inviolability of individual art works. Let us use it as we use all cultural practices, to understand the world from which it comes and the one toward which it points. The elaboration of these worlds will demand, therefore, historical labor and critical acumen. The job of theory in all this is to keep the questions clear and in order. It will no longer do to let theorists settle things with a priori arguments. We need to study the films themselves as acts of discourse. We need to be sensitive to that discourse and to the forces that motivate it.

1984

BRIAN MCFARLANE FROM NOVEL TO FILM

BACKGROUNDS

Brain McFarlane has written extensively on Australian and British film, including editing many anthologies and encyclopedias devoted to the subject. *An Autobiography of British Cinema* (1997) provides a first-hand history of British film through interviews with key figures in the industry. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (1996), from which the following is excerpted, examines the alterations to which a literary text is subject during the process of adaptation, and locates the sources of such transformation in narrative constraints, studio requirements, and the filmmaker's vision (or revision) of the book's intent. McFarlane currently teaches film history at Monash University in Australia.

Everyone who sees films based on novels feels able to comment, at levels ranging from the gossipy to the erudite, on the nature and success of the adaptation involved. That is, the interest in adaptation, unlike many other matters to do with film (e.g., questions of authorship), is not a rarefied one. And it ranges backwards and forwards from those who talk of novels as being 'betrayed' by boorish filmmakers to those who regard the practice of comparing film and novel as a waste of time.

The filmmakers themselves have been drawing on literary sources, and especially novels of varying degrees of cultural prestige, since film first established itself as preeminently a narrative medium. In view of this fact, and given that there has been a long-running discourse on the nature of the connections between film and literature, it is surprising how little systematic, sustained attention has been given to the processes of adaptation. This is the more surprising since the issue of adaptation has attracted critical attention for more than sixty years in a way that few other film-related issues have. Writers across a wide critical spectrum have found the subject fascinating: newspaper and journal reviews almost invariably offer comparison between a film and its literary precursor; from fan magazines to more or less scholarly books, one finds reflections on the incidence of adaptation; works serious and trivial, complex and simple, early and recent address themselves to various aspects of this phenomenon almost as old as the institution of the cinema.

I want to [draw] attention to some of the most commonly recurring discussions of the connections between the film and the novel.

381

CONRAD, GRIFFITH, AND 'SEEING'

Commentators in the field are fond of quoting Joseph Conrad's famous statement of his novelistic intention: 'My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the powers of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make to see.'¹ This remark of 1897 is echoed, consciously or otherwise, sixteen years later by D. W. Griffith, whose cinematic-intention is recorded as: 'The task I am trying to achieve is above all to make you see.'² George Bluestone's all-but-pioneering work in the film literature field, *Novels into Film*, draws attention to the similarity of the remarks at the start of his study of 'The Two Ways of Seeing,' claiming that 'between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image lies the root difference between the two media.'³ In this way he acknowledges the connecting link of 'seeing' in his use of the word 'image.' At the same time, he points to the fundamental difference between the way images are produced in the two media and how they are received. Finally, though, he claims that 'conceptual images evoked by verbal stimuli can scarcely be distinguished in the end from those evoked by nonverbal stimuli,'⁴ and in this respect, he shares common ground with several other writers concerned to establish links between the two media.

By this, I mean those commentaries that address themselves to crucial changes in the (mainly English) novel toward the end of the nineteenth century; changes that led to a stress on showing rather than on telling and that, as a result, reduced the element of authorial intervention in its more overt manifestations. Two of the most impressive of such accounts, both of them concerned with ongoing processes of transmutation among the arts, notably between literature and film, are Alan Spiegel's *Fiction and the Camera Eye*⁵ and Keith Cohen's *Film and Fiction*.⁶ Spiegel's avowed purpose is to investigate 'the common body of thought and feeling that unites film form with the modern novel,'⁷ taking as his starting point Flaubert, whom he sees as the first great nineteenth-century exemplar of 'concretized form,' a form dependent on supplying a great deal of visual information. His line of enquiry leads him to James Joyce who, like Flaubert, respects 'the integrity of the seen object and . . . gives it palpable presence apart from the presence of the observer.'⁸ This line is pursued by way of Henry James who attempts 'a balanced distribution of emphasis in the rendering of what is looked at, who is looking, and what the looker makes of what she [i.e., Maisie in *What Maisie Knew*] sees,'⁹ and by way of the Conrad-Griffith comparison. Spiegel presses this comparison harder than Bluestone, stressing that

though both may have aimed at the same point—a congruence of image and concept—they did so from opposite directions. Whereas Griffith used his images to tell a story, as means to understanding, Conrad (Spiegel claims) wanted the reader to "see" in and through and finally past his language and his narrative concept to the hard, clear bedrock of images.¹⁰

One effect of this stress on the physical surfaces and behaviors of objects and figures is to deemphasize the author's personal narrating voice so that we learn to read the ostensibly unmediated visual language of the later nineteenth-century novel in a way that anticipates the viewer's experience of film, which necessarily presents those physical surfaces. Conrad and James further anticipate the cinema in their capacity for 'decomposing' a scene, for altering point of view to focus more sharply on various aspects of an object, for exploring a visual field by fragmenting it rather than by presenting it scenographically (i.e., as if it were a scene from a stage presentation).

Cohen, concerned with the 'process of convergence' between art forms, also sees Conrad and James as significant in a comparison of novels and film. These authors he sees as breaking with the representational novels of the earlier nineteenth century and ushering in a new emphasis on 'showing' how the events unfold dramatically rather than recounting them.¹¹ The analogy with film's narrative procedures will be clear, and there seems no doubt that film, in turn, has been highly influential on the modern novel. Cohen uses passages from Proust and Virginia Woolf to suggest how the modern novel, influenced by techniques of Eisensteinian montage cinema, draws attention to its encoding processes in ways that the Victorian novel tends not to.

DICKENS, GRIFFITH, AND STORYTELLING

The other comparison that trails through the writing about film and literature is that between Griffith and Dickens, who was said to be the director's favorite novelist. The most famous account is, of course, that of Eisenstein, who compares their 'spontaneous childlike skill for story telling,'¹² a quality he finds in American cinema at large, their capacity for vivifying 'bit' characters, the visual power of each, their immense popular success, and above all their rendering of parallel action, for which Griffith cited Dickens as his source. On the face of it, there now seems nothing so remarkable in these formulations to justify their being so frequently paraded as examples of the ties that bind cinema and the Victorian novel. In fact Eisenstein's discussion of Dickens's 'cinematic techniques,' including anticipation of such phenomena as frame composition and the close-up, is really not far removed from those many works that talk about film language, striking similar analogical poses, without giving adequate consideration to the qualitative differences enjoyed by the two media.

¹Joseph Conrad, Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (J. M. Dent and Sons: London, 1945), 5.

²Quoted in Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), 119.

³George Bluestone, *Novels into Film* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), 1.

⁴*Ibid.*, 47.

⁵Alan Spiegel, *Fiction and the Camera Eye: Visual Consciousness in Film and the Modern Novel* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976).

⁶Keith Cohen, *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

⁷Spiegel, *Fiction and the Camera Eye*, p. xiii.

⁸*Ibid.*, 63.

⁹*Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. xi-xii.

¹¹Cohen, *Film and Fiction*, 5.

¹²Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, ed. and trans. Jan Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949); 196.

Later commentators have readily embraced Eisenstein's account:

Bluestone, for instance, states boldly that 'Griffith found in Dickens hints for every one of his major innovations',¹³ and Cohen, going further, points to 'the more or less blatant appropriation of the themes and content of the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel.'¹⁴ However, in spite of the frequency of reference to the Dickens-Griffith connection, and apart from the historical importance of parallel editing in the development of film narrative, the influence of Dickens has perhaps been overestimated and under-scrutinized. One gets the impression that critics steeped in a literary culture have fallen on the Dickens-Griffith comparison with a certain relief, perhaps as a way of arguing the cinema's respectability. They have tended to concentrate on the thematic interests and the large, formal narrative patterns and strategies the two great narrative-markers shared, rather than to address themselves, as a film-oriented writer might, to detailed questions of enunciation, of possible parallels and disparities between the two different signifying systems, of the range of 'functional equivalents'¹⁵ available to each within the parameters of the classical style as evinced in each medium.

As film came to replace in popularity the representational novel of the earlier nineteenth century, it did so through the application of techniques practiced by writers at the latter end of the century. Conrad with his insistence on making the reader 'see' and James with his technique of 'restricted consciousness,' both playing down obvious authorial mediation in favor of limiting the point of view from which actions and objects are observed, provide clear examples. In this way they may be said to have broken with the tradition of 'transparency' in relation to the novel's referential world so that the mode and angle of vision were as much a part of the novel's content as what was viewed. The comparisons with cinematic technique are clear, but paradoxically, the modern novel has not shown itself very adaptable to film. However persuasively it may be demonstrated that the likes of Joyce, Faulkner, and Hemingway have drawn on cinematic techniques, the fact is that the cinema has been more at home with novels from—or descended from—an earlier period. Similarly, certain modern plays, such as *Death of a Salesman*, *Equus*, or *M. Butterfly*, which seem to owe something to cinematic techniques, have lost a good deal of their fluid representations of time and space when transferred to the screen.

ADAPTATION: THE PHENOMENON

As soon as the cinema began to see itself as a narrative entertainment, the idea of ransacking the novel—that already established repository of narrative fiction—for source material got underway, and the process has continued more or less unabated for ninety years. Filmmakers' reasons for this continuing phenomenon appear to move between the poles of crass commercialism and high-minded respect for literary works. No doubt there is the lure of a pre-sold title, the expectation that

respectability or popularity achieved in one medium might infect the work created in another. The notion of a potentially lucrative 'property' has clearly been at least one major influence in the filming of novels, and perhaps filmmakers, as Frederic Raphael scathingly claims, 'like known quantities . . . they would sooner buy the rights of an expensive book than develop an original subject.'¹⁶ Nevertheless most of the filmmakers on record profess loftier attitudes than these. DeWitt Bodeen, coauthor of the screenplay for Peter Ustinov's *Billy Budd* (1962), claims, 'Adapting literary works to film is, without a doubt, a creative undertaking, but the task requires a kind of selective interpretation, along with the ability to recreate and sustain an established mood.'¹⁷ That is, the adaptor should see himself as owing allegiance to the source work. Despite Peter Bogdanovich's disclaimer about filming Henry James's *Daisy Miller* ('I don't think it's a great classic story. I don't treat it with that kind of reverence'¹⁸), for much of the time the film is a conscientious visual transliteration of the original. One does not find filmmakers asserting a bold approach to their source material, any more than announcing crude financial motives.

As to audiences, whatever their complaints about this or that violation of the original, they have continued to want to see what the books 'look like.' Constantly creating their own mental images of the world of a novel and its people, they are interested in comparing their images with those created by the filmmaker. But, as Christian Metz says, the reader 'will not always find *his* film, since what he has before him in the actual film is now somebody else's phantasy.'¹⁹ Despite the uncertainty of gratification, of finding audio-visual images that will coincide with their conceptual images, reader-viewers persist in providing audiences for 'somebody else's phantasy.' There is also a curious sense that the verbal account of the people, places, and ideas that make up much of the appeal of novels is simply *one* rendering of a set of existents that might just as easily be rendered in another. In this regard, one is reminded of Anthony Burgess's cynical view, 'Every best-selling novel *has* to be turned into a film, the assumption being that the book itself whets an appetite for the true fulfilment—the verbal shadow turned into light, the word made flesh.'²⁰ And perhaps there is a parallel with that late nineteenth-century phenomenon, described by Michael Chanan in *The Dream that Kicks*, of illustrated editions of literary works and illustrated magazines in which great novels first appeared as serials. There is, it seems, an urge to have verbal concepts bodied forth in perceptual concreteness.

Whatever it is that makes film-goers want to see adaptations of novels, and filmmakers to produce them, and whatever hazards lie in the path for both, there is no denying the facts. For instance, Morris Beja reports that, since the inception of the Academy Awards in 1927–28, 'more than three-fourths of the awards for 'best

¹⁶Frederic Raphael, 'Introduction,' *Two for the Road* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967).

¹⁷DeWitt Bodeen, 'The Adapting Art,' *Films in Review* 14, no. 6 (June–July 1963): 349.

¹⁸Jan Dawson, 'The Continental Divide: Filming Henry James,' *Sight and Sound* 43, no. 1 (Winter 1973–74): 14; repr. in part as 'An Interview with Peter Bogdanovich' in G. Peary and R. Shatzkin (eds.), *The Classic American Novel and the Movies* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1977).

¹⁹Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 12.

²⁰Anthony Burgess, 'On the Hopelessness of Turning Good Books into Films,' *New York Times*, 20 April 1975, p. 15.

¹³Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, 2.

¹⁴Cohen, *Film and Fiction*, 4.

¹⁵David Bordwell's term, in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 13.

picture' have gone to adaptations . . . [and that] the all-time box-office successes favour novels even more.²¹ Given that the novel and the film have been the most popular narrative modes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively, it is perhaps not surprising that filmmakers have sought to exploit the kinds of response excited by the novel and have seen in it a source of ready-made material, in the crude sense of pretested stories and characters, without too much concern for how much of the original's popularity is intransigently tied to its verbal mode.

THE DISCOURSE ON ADAPTATION

On Being Faithful

Is it really 'Jamesian'? Is it 'true to Lawrence'? Does it 'capture the spirit of Dickens'? At every level from newspaper reviews to longer essays in critical anthologies and journals, the adducing of fidelity to the original novel as a major criterion for judging the film adaptation is pervasive. No critical line is in greater need of reexamination—and devaluation.

Discussion of adaptation has been bedevilled by the fidelity issue, no doubt ascribable in part to the novel's coming first, in part to the ingrained sense of literature's greater respectability in traditional critical circles. As long ago as the mid-1940s James Agee complained of a debilitating reverence in even such superior transpositions to the screen as David Lean's *Great Expectations*. It seemed to him that the really serious-minded film-goer's idea of art would be 'a good faithful adaptation of *Adam Bede* in sepia, with the entire text read offscreen by Herbert Marshall.'²² However, voices such as Agee's, querulously insisting that the cinema make its own art and to hell with tasteful allegiance, have generally cried in the wilderness.

Fidelity criticism depends on a notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct 'meaning' which the filmmaker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with. There will often be a distinction between being faithful to the 'letter,' an approach that the more sophisticated writer may suggest is no way to ensure a 'successful' adaptation, and to the 'spirit' or 'essence' of the work. The latter is of course very much more difficult to determine since it involves not merely a parallelism between novel and film but between two or more readings of a novel, since any given film version is able only to aim at reproducing the filmmaker's reading of the original and to hope that it will coincide with that of many other readers/viewers. Since such coincidence is unlikely, the fidelity approach seems a doomed enterprise and fidelity criticism unilluminating. That is, the critic who quibbles at failures of fidelity is really saying no more than 'This reading of the original does not tally with mine in these and these ways.'

Few writers on adaptation have specifically questioned the possibility of fidelity; though some have claimed not to embrace it, they still regard it as a viable choice for the filmmaker and a criterion for the critic. Beja is one exception. In asking whether there are 'guiding principles' for filmmakers adapting literature, he asks,

'What relationship should a film have to the original source? Should it be 'faithful'? Can it be? To what?'²³

When Beja asks 'To what' should a filmmaker be faithful in adapting a novel, one is led to recall those efforts at fidelity to times and places remote from present-day life. In period films, one often senses exhaustive attempts to create an impression of fidelity to, say, Dickens's London or to Jane Austen's village life, the result of which, so far from ensuring fidelity to the text, is to produce a distracting quaintness. What was a contemporary work for the author, who could take a good deal relating to time and place for granted, as requiring little or no scene-setting for his readers, has become a period piece for the filmmaker. As early as 1928, M. Willson Disher picked up the scent of this misplaced fidelity in writing about a version of *Robinson Crusoe*: 'Mr Wetherell [director, producer, writer and star] went all the way to Tobago to shoot the right kinds of creeks and caves, but he should have travelled not westwards, but backwards, to reach 'the island', and then he would have arrived with the right sort of luggage.'²⁴ Disher is not speaking against fidelity to the original as such but against a misconstrued notion of how it might be achieved. A more recent example is Peter Bogdanovich's use of the thermal baths sequence in his film of *Daisy Miller*. 'The mixed bathing is authentically of the period', he claims in an interview with Jan Dawson.²⁵ Authentically of the period, perhaps, but not so of Henry James, so that it is only a tangential, possibly irrelevant fidelity that is arrived at. The issue of fidelity is a complex one, but it is not too gross a simplification to suggest that critics have encouraged filmmakers to see it as a desirable goal in the adaptation of literary works. As Christopher Orr has noted, 'The concern with the fidelity of the adapted film in letter and spirit to its literary source has unquestionably dominated the discourse on adaptation.'²⁶

Obscuring Other Issues

The insistence on fidelity has led to a suppression of potentially more rewarding approaches to the phenomenon of adaptation. It tends to ignore the idea of adaptation as an example of convergence among the arts, perhaps a desirable—even inevitable—process in a rich culture; it fails to take into serious account what may be transferred from novel to film as distinct from what will require more complex processes of adaptation; and it marginalizes those production determinants that have nothing to do with the novel but may be powerfully influential upon the film. Awareness of such issues would be more useful than those many accounts of how films 'reduce' great novels.

Modern critical notions of *intertextuality* represent a more sophisticated approach, in relation to adaptation, to the idea of the original novel as a 'resource'. As Christopher Orr remarks, 'Within this critical context [i.e., of intertextuality], the issue is not whether the adapted film is faithful to its source, but rather how the

²¹Beja, *Film and Literature*, 80.

²⁴M. Willson Disher, 'Classics into Films', *Fortnightly Review*, no. 124 (December 1928), 789.

²⁵Dawson, 'The Continental Divide', 14.

²⁶Christopher Orr, 'The Discourse on Adaptation', *Wide Angle* 6, no. 2 (1984): 72.

²¹Morris Beja, *Film and Literature* (New York: Longman, 1979), 78.

²²Agee on Film (New York: McDowell Oblonsky, 1958), 216.

choice of a specific source and how the approach to that source serve the film's ideology.²⁷ When, for instance, MGM filmed James Hilton's 1941 bestseller, *Random Harvest*, in the following year, its images of an unchanging England had as much to do with Hollywood anti-isolationism with regard to World War II as with finding visual equivalents for anything in Hilton. The film belongs to a rich context created by notions of Hollywood's England, by MGM's reputation for prestigious literary adaptation and for a glossy 'house style', by the genre of romantic melodrama (cf. *Rebecca*, 1940, *This Above All*, 1942), and by the idea of the star vehicle. Hilton's popular but, in truth, undistinguished romance is but one element of the film's intertextuality.

Some writers have proposed strategies that seek to categorize adaptations so that fidelity to the original loses some of its privileged position. Geoffrey Wagner suggests three possible categories that are open to the filmmaker and to the critic assessing his adaptation: he calls these (a) *transposition*, 'in which a novel is given directly on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference';²⁸ (b) *commentary*, 'where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect ... when there has been a different intention on the part of the filmmaker, rather than infidelity or outright violation';²⁹ and (c) *analogy*, 'which must represent a fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art'.³⁰ The critic, he implies, will need to understand which kind of adaptation he is dealing with if his commentary on an individual film is to be valuable. Dudley Andrew also reduces the modes of relation between the film and its source novel to three, which correspond roughly (but in reverse order of adherence to the original) to Wagner's categories; 'Borrowing, intersection, and fidelity of transformation'.³¹ And there is a third comparable classification system put forward by Michael Klein and Gillian Parker first, 'fidelity to the main thrust of the narrative'; second, the approach which retains the core of the structure of the narrative while significantly reinterpreting or, in some cases, deconstructing the source text'; and third, regarding 'the source merely as raw material, as simply the occasion for an original work'.³² The parallel with Wagner's categories is clear.

There is nothing definitive about these attempts at classification, but at least they represent some heartening challenges to the primacy of fidelity as a critical criterion. Further, they imply that, unless the kind of adaptation is identified, critical evaluation may well be wide of the mark. The faithful adaptation (e.g., *Daisy Miller* or James Ivory's *Howard's End*, 1992) can certainly be intelligent and attractive, but is not necessarily to be preferred to the film, which sees the original as 'raw material' to be reworked, as Hitchcock so persistently did, from, say, *Sabotage*

(1936) to *The Birds* (1963). Who, indeed, ever thinks of Hitchcock as primarily an adaptor of other people's fictions? At a further extreme, it is possible to think of a film as providing a commentary on a literary text, as Welles does on three Shakespearian plays in *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), or as Gus Van Sant does in *My Own Private Idaho* (1992), drawing on both Shakespeare and Welles. Many kinds of relations may exist between film and literature, and fidelity is only one—and rarely the most exciting.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Geoffrey Wagner, *The Novel and the Cinema* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975), 222.

²⁹Ibid., 224.

³⁰Ibid., 226.

³¹Dudley Andrew, 'The Well-Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory,' in Synda Conger and Janice R. Welsh (eds.), *Narrative Strategies* (Macomb, Ill.: West Illinois University Press, 1980), 10.

³²Michael Klein and Gillian Parker (eds.), *The English Novel and the Movies* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1981), 9–10.

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