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SCREEN**

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# I

BRIAN McFARLANE

## Reading film and literature

Perhaps no aspect of filmmaking has been so thoroughly canvassed at every level, from cinema-foyer gossip to learned academic exegeses, as the matter of adaptation of literature into film. It is not as though adaptation is the only kind of relationship that might exist between film and literature, but it is the one that most persistently preoccupies the theorist, the critic, the reviewer, the buff, and the ordinary filmgoer alike. No one feels too awed by it to be willing to risk judgments about the latest adaptation, usually to the film's disadvantage; nor do theorists regard the subject as too simple to engage their attention.

So, to start, I should like to do what I can to dispose of some of the shibboleths that hover about the discourse, both popular and scholarly, relating to film-literature connections. First, it shouldn't be necessary after several decades of serious research into the processes and challenges of adaptation to insist that "fidelity" to the original text (however distinguished) is a wholly inappropriate and unhelpful criterion for either understanding or judgment. It may be that, even among the most rigorously high-minded of film viewers confronted with the film version of a cherished novel or play, it is hard to suppress a sort of yearning for a faithful rendering of *one's own vision of the literary text*. My italics are intended to highlight the impossibility of such a venture: that every reading of a literary text is a highly individual act of cognition and interpretation; that every such response involves a kind of personal adaptation on to the screen of one's imaginative faculty as one reads. And how is any film version, drawing on the contributions of numerous collaborators, ever going to produce the same responses except by the merest chance?

In fact one might reasonably have assumed that the "fidelity" factor no longer needed to be addressed in writing about film and literature. By this I mean not only fidelity as criterion but also the very notion that this particular critical battle needs to be refought. Virtually all the books devoted to the subject of adaptation, dating back to George Bluestone's pioneering study,

*Novels into Film* (1957), have refuted the efficacy of judging the merits of film versions of literary texts by this standard. Nevertheless, one still finds the concept being not merely dismissed but discredited at length. Perhaps this means that the authors of such works have not adequately surveyed the critical field of recent decades; perhaps it also means that no amount of serious discourse ever really disposes of the discontent expressed in "It wasn't like that in the book."

The second misconception, and at this stage the more important one, is that film makes fewer demands on the imagination than a book does. This kind of thinking is based – erroneously, in my view – on the belief that coming to terms with a continuous narrative involving a set of characters operating in a given time and place enjoins a greater effort on the part of the reader than it does on that of the viewer. There it all is, exponents of this view will say, up there on the screen, leaving little for us to have to work on, whereas on the page we have to "translate" those lines of black marks that constitute words, phrases, clauses and sentences into conceptual images. In carrying out this "work," more of our intellectual and emotional resources will necessarily be called into play, and – there is perhaps a touch of Puritanism here – the very effort required will be good for us.

However, it may be just as persuasively argued that in coming to serious terms with a film, much more is being required of us. It is not just a matter of allowing all the perceptual stimuli film offers us to wash over us, any more than the intelligent reading of a book asks no more than that we skim the lines for the gist of the plot. The film, if it is to make any serious impact on us, will require that we pay attention to the intricate interaction of *mise-en-scène* (what is visibly there in the frame at any given moment), the editing (how one shot of a film is joined-to/separated-from the next) and sound (diegetic or non-diegetic, musical or otherwise). Each of these three categories of film's narrational arsenal has numerous subdivisions, and a full response to the film will ask the viewer, at various levels of consciousness, to take them all into account, sometimes separately, more often in concert. There are two utterly different semiotic systems at issue here, and I want to claim that there is at least as much at stake in the informed response to the codes at work in film, both cinema-specific and extra-cinematic codes, as there is in the acts of visualization and comprehension enjoined on the reader.

Third, there has been a pervasive suggestion that some sorts of literature are more susceptible to screen adaptation than others. The Australian novelist Helen Garner, reviewing Bernard Rose's 1997 version of *Anna Karenina*, claims that there is "a class of literature that, by its very nature, is not adaptable to the screen."<sup>11</sup> She goes on to suggest that, in such cases, filmmakers are simply out of their league. Her assertion that they lack the

capacity to reproduce the "narrative voice" of the original assumes that "narration" in the cinema is no more than incidental voice-over, and fails to grasp that it is the work of film not to replicate the narrating voice of the novel but to find its *own* voice through its own means. The novel, she goes on to say, "can bound through time and space" in ways, she implies, that film can't. She appears not to have thought about the way film can dart from present to past, from here to there, with an immediacy perhaps unparalleled by any other art form.<sup>2</sup> There is, in such views as these, a breath-taking failure to recognize the specificities of the two semiotic systems involved, and simply an implied argument that the newer one should find ways of replicating the achievements of the earlier. Complex and difficult novels and plays are not unamenable to film adaptation, but require the most intelligent and resourceful talents to address the task. No one is denying that to think of adapting *Finnegan's Wake*<sup>3</sup> may call for more obvious cinematic ambition than to take on *Death on the Nile*, but that is not to deny that appropriate ways to tackle it exist.

Fourth, to repeat a clause from the opening paragraph: adaptation is not the only kind of relationship that might exist between film and literature. By this I mean that there is a small but attractive body of films that engages with literature in ways other than conventional adaptation. A film such as Gavin Millar's beautiful and undervalued *Dreamchild* (1985) offers film versions of some scenes from *Alice in Wonderland* but is just as much a study of the relationship between the author, Lewis Carroll/Charles Dodgson, and the real-life Alice; a reflection on age and how it changes perceptions, and a series of explorations of the very nature of narrative. The same kind of connection between the literary creation (*Peter Pan*) and its real-life inspiration underpins *Finding Neverland* (2004), and Stephen Daldry's (adaptation of Michael Cunningham's) *The Hours* (2003) is a sort of fantasia of themes deriving from *Mrs. Dalloway* and its author, Virginia Woolf. Modern-set versions of *Emma* (Amy Heckerling's *Claresless*, 1995) and *Henry IV Parts I and II* (Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, 1991) suggest that the directors had more on their minds than careful adaptation of Jane Austen and Shakespeare: their interest seemed to lie primarily in how far works of earlier centuries might be made to seem relevant to later generations in settings and times far removed from those in which they had their origins. Such films, as well as Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1999), drawing on Austen's diaries and a post-colonial reading of the history of the period as well as on the novel itself, all offer recognition of ways in which the interests of literature and film might fruitfully mesh.

Two anecdotes from my recent experience may serve to highlight some of the recurring problems that accrete around the study of the relations between

than the critics are in appraising the filmed results. It may therefore be more helpful to consider what film and literature have in common than either to require film to "reproduce" the experience of the book (however doomed an enterprise that might be) or to insist simply on the autonomy of the film.

To take novels first: these are the most numerous adapted. It would involve more monumental research than is appropriate here to establish exact comparative figures, but even a casual look at the British Film Institute's database, *Film Index International*,<sup>5</sup> confirms this. In the brief synopses accompanying every film listed, the word "novel" in relation to source occurs 2,549 times; similar references to plays occur 1,598 times, to short stories 118 times and to poems 112 (and many of the latter refer to short and/or experimental films). These figures are by no means infallible: there may be many more instances of all of these literary forms if one were (insanely) to count up all the references to the sources in the credits given for each film, for which no search mechanism is readily available. My point is that these figures, rough as they may well be, serve to confirm one's impression that it is the novel above all which has absorbed filmmakers' attention among possible literary sources.

Why should this be so? What have film and the novel in common that so attracts filmmakers to try their hand at rendering in audio-visual moving images what the novelist has achieved in words on the page? Clearly they have not been inhibited by Bluestone's famous assertion about the novel and film being "overtly compatible, secretly hostile."<sup>6</sup> Reduced to the sparest terms, what they share is "narrative"; what seems likely to keep them at arm's length is "narration." By "narrative" I mean here a series of events, sequentially and/or consequentially connected by virtue of their involving a continuing set of characters. By "narration," in this brutally simplified terminology, I imply all the means by which the narrative has been put before reader or viewer. It is, in this reading, narrative that makes the two mediums seem compatible, whereas it is in narration that their secret hostility may lie.

In an earlier study<sup>7</sup> when trying to avoid the subjectivism and impressionism that seemed to bedevil the comparative analysis of novel and film, I used Roland Barthes's taxonomy of narrative functions, accepting his dictum that "A narrative is never made up of anything other than functions: in differing degrees, everything in it signifies."<sup>8</sup> This still seems to me a useful starting point, since it enables a division into those functions of the antecedent text which are conducive to *transfer*, because not dependent on the literary mode (e.g. events, pure information), and those which, intransigently tied, in Barthes's nicely mysterious term, to "the writing" (e.g. matters relating to characterization, "atmosphere"), will require of the filmmaker *adaptation proper*. If, that is, the filmmaker wants to achieve an equivalence in his/her

film and literature. In a discussion of Martin Scorsese's glorious film version of *The Age of Innocence* (1993), a colleague of literary background claimed to have liked the film but added "Of course it's not nearly as subtle or complex as the novel." At stake in such a remark are again the semiotic differences *and* the fact that the colleague's literary training had equipped her to recognize subtlety and complexity in the verbal medium but not in the film. In a novel these qualities will be the result of the dextrous, nuanced use of words; in a film, they will derive from the interaction of those aspects of *mise-en-scène*, sound and editing in play at any given moment. The cross-over from the reading of literary texts to the "reading" of a film is more problematic than my colleague had assumed – and notice how this term "reading" is still much used for film, both strengthening the tie to the earlier medium and implying its primacy.

The other anecdote that struck me concerned a woman who had brought Hans Andersen's stories, "The Little Mermaid" and "The Ugly Duckling," to read to her grandchildren. She was taken aback and disappointed to be told that they knew that story because they'd seen a film or video version of it. The source of her disappointment seemed to lie in the ingrained notion that the written word not merely preceded but (invariably) outranked the audio-visual moving image. Was she really expecting these small children to respond to the quality of the prose and, if so, is there never an occasion when the images on the screen might be just as effective? And, effective for what? The point here is that, if she was mainly concerned with bringing the *narrative* to the children's attention, the result might just as easily have been achieved by their exposure to the film. Did those story-tellers at the time of the rise of printing fear that the oral tradition would be lost to the book – and that the new medium, with its capacity for endless replication, would inevitably be inferior in what it required of the imagination and intellect?

There is not much point in merely insisting that a film is a film, whether or not it is adapted from a literary source, and that the latter is of no consequence when it comes to our response to the film. The fact is that filmgoers simply *are* interested in how filmmakers have gone about the business and art of transposition from one medium to another – and that this transposition and the processes involved constitute a phenomenon of continuing interest to large numbers of people. This alone would make the relations between film and literature worth serious study, as would the ongoing fascination for filmmakers of literature, whether novels, short stories, plays, or – less often – poems. There is plenty of evidence of this fascination: many of the most popular and most highly regarded films have their roots in literature of one kind and at one level or another.<sup>4</sup> And those filmmakers are, more often than not, more deferential in their attitude to the works they are adapting

medium for such literary effects, as distinct from scrapping them altogether in the interests of a freer retelling of the adapted fiction. Essentially, those elements of the novel most readily susceptible to transfer exist at the deeper levels of the narrative: the events that reveal or are caused by the implication of characters or which may be more arbitrary than that suggests; the mythic resonances that a narrative may echo or set up; the psychoanalytic patterns which may be exemplified in the chain of events; or the "character functions" (villain, hero, helper etc.) identified by Vladimir Propp in his study of Russian folktales.<sup>9</sup>

In terms other than theoretical, it is probably true to say that for many (most?) people the attraction common to novel and film is that both create "worlds" and "lives" in more amplitude and with potentially more regard for representational realism in their detail than the other literary forms. Drama and poetry (to be referred to below) are more obviously constrained by formal and stylistic characteristics. In semiotic terms, it is perhaps true to say that, in the novel and immeasurably more so in the film, the gap between signifier and signified is narrower than it is in drama and poetry. We expect in novel and film a sense of the "real," a potent sense of diagesis that keeps us aware of the minutiae of a world that is going on beyond the page or the screen's frame. In both cases the imagination of the consumer is kept active in creating this world, whether by a conceptualizing based on the words given on the page or by a conceptualizing based on the diverse *perceptual* information taken in while watching the screen and listening to the soundtrack.

When I write of "perceptual information" in relation to how we respond to screen narrative, I am referring to that battery of codes – some cinematic specific, some more generally cultural – that film draws on in the processes of signification. It is clear that, in responding to the stimuli offered by film, viewers must take cognizance of linguistic codes (including, for instance, the accents and tones of voice employed by actors, which will enable them to reach conclusions relating to, say, class, ethnicity, and temperament), to non-linguistic codes (in matters of musical and other sound effects), to visual codes (we don't merely look; we *see* and interpret what we see), and to cultural codes that have to do with, say, costume and décor. All of these are part of the filmgoer's responsive activity, though they are not peculiar to film. We make assumptions in everyday life on the basis of decoding such signs. Film also has its own codes: we are required to distinguish lengths of shot, distances of action from the camera, angles from which the action is viewed, the kinds of editing employed (ranging from the barely apprehended cut to the fade). These all signify differently; they are not just haphazardly chosen and they are all part of the complex business of film narration. If all this is to be taken on board, with whatever degree of consciousness, it is hard

to maintain that accessing the information of film narration is a pushover compared to the serious reading of a literary text.

Having said that both novel and film are adept in the rendering of time and place, one must make some important distinctions between the ways each goes about doing so. Novels are characteristically, but by no means exclusively, narrated in the past tense. There are exceptions, when the novelist employs a present-tense narration, though this can often seem affected after the initial surprise of the enterprise has worn off. Film, on the other hand, is always *happening* in the present tense. There is no filmic equivalent for words like "ran" or "walked": their very inflection signals an act that is complete as it is being described on the page. Film will, instead, show us characters in the act of "running" or "walking." Even when film resorts to flashback to make us aware that the action depicted is meant to be read as happening in the past, there is nothing intrinsic to the image at any given moment to make us think, Ah, this is occurring at some anterior time. Once the filmgoer is transported to this past time, every action in the narrative seems to be happening with the same degree of presentness as the actions pertaining to the sequences set at the later date.

However, film does have at its command limited means of varying the temporality of the image. There is usually no difficulty in registering the fact that the film is engaging in a flashback: any one or more of several codes may be called into play with, for example, the camera moving into close-up, or a dissolve being used, or sound from the "earlier" period being leaked in as the transition is made. That, however, is not the same as registering a past – or future – time at a given moment. To achieve this effect without the inflection of a verb to signify it unambiguously as the novelist may, the filmmaker will generally have recourse to a disjunction between image and sound. Three films from the 1940s have stayed in my mind in recent years for their approach to this matter. In Irving Rapper's *The Gay Sisters* (1942), a cynical Barbara Stanwyck is heard on the soundtrack in the "present" telling her sisters how she had some years earlier seduced George Brent to her purposes: the images of the past seduction are mutely rendered while the voice of the present continues. In David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946), Pip (John Mills) is reading a letter from Biddy and, as he reads, he hears her voice speaking the words of the letter thus summoning up the "past" in which it was written, as distinct from the present in which he is reading. In Edmund Goulding's *The Razor's Edge* (1946), snobbish Elliot Templeton (Clifton Webb) is telling Somerset Maugham (Herbert Marshall) how he will arrange for Larry (Tyronne Power) to travel to Europe in style and to meet all the right people. As his voice continues in the "present," the film cuts to a "future" in which, ironically, Larry is travelling on a messy cargo boat and talking to

directly across the *Mona Lisa's* face"<sup>10</sup> in the Louvre at the end of one chapter, then whisking us off to the Police Lieutenant's desk for the start of the next, and back again to the Louvre for the following.<sup>11</sup> Even within a chapter, Brown darts from inside a locked bank vault to "Across town, [where] Collet was standing in the Gare du Nord train terminal, when his phone rang."<sup>12</sup> There is surely something very cinematic about that kind of transition from one place to another, reinforced by a species of aural "match cut" from the turning of the key in the vault door to the ringing of Collet's mobile phone. Film, of course, is at least equally flexible about switching places. It can achieve reorientation to a new location in even less time than it takes us to read that sentence of Brown's. It is not the function of this chapter to argue the overall superiority of either medium but to indicate that, if there are some things novels can do with more facility than film and vice-versa, there is also a substantial ground that they share. This capacity, via their separate semiotic systems, to evoke place and to move us from one to another with astonishing fluidity, is one that they indubitably share. Film early embraced the representational realism of the nineteenth-century novel; the novel in the next century, in the hands of, say, James Joyce or Virginia Woolf, may be said to have absorbed some of the narrative practices of film in relation to depicting shifts in time and place.

Earlier, I suggested that these two art forms also share an interest in revealing "lives" in a fullness perhaps denied to others. How? In a novel, the author can draw his/her characters through what they say, what others say about them and about what the author him/herself confides in the discursive prose, those reflections that surround what is contained in inverted commas. A novelist such as Henry James will make us more than usually privy to the inner thoughts and emotions of his characters by means of a sometimes extraordinarily detailed interior analysis, following which we may feel we know that character more intimately than almost anyone in everyday life. At the other end of the spectrum, the rigorous English novelist Ivy Compton-Burnett, whose dialogue may quite often evoke James, rarely tells the reader anything other than what the characters say to each other, so that one sometimes wonders if her true métier was the radio play. But whether it is a matter of dialogue or authorial commentary, it is *always* a matter for the reader of responding to the words on the page as the lives are revealed in their varying degrees of complexity and verisimilitude.

The film, as I've been suggesting, must draw on a battery of semiotically charged tools. There is no film equivalent for the word: if we see the word "dog" on the page, we may well have many different perceptions of what is signified; if we see on an otherwise blank screen a dog at rest, the very least it will convey is not "dog" but "this is (or 'here is') a dog." Once sound and

disreputable-looking types. These three briefly noted examples (all incidentally from films based on novels) point to how film may achieve a greater mobility in time than is often conceded, but perhaps the fact that these occasions have stayed in the mind points to the comparative rarity of the phenomenon. Films which choose to adopt other than a linear approach to narrative, like David Jones's *Betrayal* (1982, based on a play by Harold Pinter) or Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000, based on a short story by Jonathan Nolan), both of which choose to tell their stories in reverse order, starting from the present and working back to reveal motivations and causes, are no more than oddities in the history of the screen's dealings with time (they would be unusual in literary modes as well). They are not to be confused with films – or novels – which dip into the past from some accepted "present" but which will either intermittently or ultimately return to that present.

As for film's capacity to hurtle round the centuries, from the Stone Age to the Space Age, surely no other art form has managed this quite so effortlessly. Think of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968, from Arthur C. Clarke's short story) in which this racing through millennia is literally the case; think most particularly of the celebrated match cut when a hurled bone turns into a space ship aeons later. A novel will need to tell us that we are now going back or forward in time, then will probably require some descriptive prose to relocate us temporally; film may count on the informative powers of *mise-en-scène* to achieve this relocation almost on the instant. In Bruce Beresford's *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), changing American race relations over twenty-five years are signalled without any obvious verbal cue in the form of, say, a date title or calendar, but through the kinds of shifts in decor and costume, as well as in the kinds of discussion the characters engage in, that signify the passage of years. Whereas the novel will make us privy to the changing lives of the characters through their spoken words and through the discursive prose that surrounds them, the film requires us to attend to the details of the *mise-en-scène* (actors in collaboration with their physical surroundings as manifested to the viewer through camera angle, distance and movement, and lighting), and to how the editing processes and soundtrack are directing our attention.

Mobility in the representation of place is an element shared by novel and film, though they achieve it in different ways. A novel can interrupt a strand of narrative occurring in one place to offer, say, a contrasting or complementary strand taking place elsewhere. *Middlemarch* moves fluidly from provincial town to country seat to Rome and so on, and a novel as recent as Dan Brown's all-conquering *The Da Vinci Code* rackets around Europe, leaving us (if we've been sucked in) breathless before the six words "scrawled

movement and the possibility of editing are added, the ways in which lives are represented necessarily involves a complex response from the alert viewer. The anguished love of Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence* is the cause of many heartfelt moments in Martin Scorsese's version of Edith Wharton's romance, but one will suffice here to illustrate my point about the multiplicity of codes that film calls into play at any given occasion to make us privy to the lives of its characters. There is a series of poignant shot-reverse-shots as they talk at a lakeside restaurant on Boston Common. Ellen gently reproves Newland with: "You gave me my first glimpse of a real life, then you told me to carry on with the false one." The words are accompanied by her gesture of laying her hand on his, advising endurance. Then successive shots distance her, then fade her, from the screen, as the soundtrack uses Enya's version of "I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls" to emphasize the oneiric sense of loss while the editorial dissolves, in another register, enact the fleetingness and withdrawal with which the encounter is instinct. To prove the complexity of the demands made on the filmmaker by this brief scene, try listening to its soundtrack with your back to the screen or watching it with the sound turned down to nil.

With the adaptation of novels, the essential process is excision of one kind or other: either a paring down or the surgery that removes whole sections, subplots and sets of characters. The Lean adaptations of Dickens illustrate these different approaches. For the most part *Great Expectations* opts for the shaving down of the events and characters (though it does omit everything to do with the vengeful Orlick), whereas his *Oliver Twist* (1948) takes a much more ruthless scalpel to the original. In the latter, Lean hacks out (greatly to the film's advantage in terms of tightness of plotting and of keeping its protagonist before us) a great hunk of the novel's last third, in which Dickens indulges both his love of complicated relationships and his sentimental view of the life of rural retreat. In 1996, Douglas McGrath, director and screenwriter of *Emma*, was so bent on including everything that some of the material about Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill can scarcely have been comprehensible to those unfamiliar with the novel. Hossein Amini, on the other hand, took one of Henry James's most densely textured novels, *The Wings of the Dove*, and prepared a screenplay that focused powerfully on the novel's central trio. He also updated the setting by a decade in the interests of highlighting the sexual imperative underlying the novel's main action, and the 1997 result (the work also of many other very gifted collaborators) was a lean 102 minutes. No attention was dissipated in pursuing what was conceived of as subsidiary to the central action.

Plays have presented different challenges to the adapting filmmaker. Almost a cliché is the idea that they need to be "opened out," to represent

more spaces than could be conveniently suggested on the stages for which they were intended, even if this means no more than moving into other rooms in the house than that in which, in rather old-fashioned conventional plays, the action has been set on stage. The implication seems to be that because it is easier for film to move from place to place, and to imbue each with an effortlessly realistic *mise-en-scène*, then it ought to do so. As a result the claustrophobic power of a play such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966) was pointlessly dissipated by a mid-film visit to a roadhouse: the talk continued with no appreciable gain from the shift in setting.

Talk: that is what plays are about; that is virtually *all* they are about, give or take a few stage directions, until they move from page to stage, making the move from literature to theater. And "talk" is often seen as the enemy of film; it is not usually a compliment to a film to describe it as "stagy" or "theatrical." The late film and stage director Karel Reisz once dismissed a lot of British cinema as "photographed radio plays,"<sup>13</sup> implying that they stressed dialogue at the expense of the visual. It is not, however, a matter of talk *per se* that is a problem to film: the quality of the talk is one obvious criterion one would want to apply, but also how it is delivered (by actors who know how to make it *mean*), how it is shot (by a director and cinematographer who know how to reinforce and complement the meaning of the words), and what it reveals. It is as easy for the drama of crucial human interaction to be revealed in discussion at a table (as in Louis Malle's *My Dinner with André*, 1981) or in a motel room (as in *Tape*, 2002, from Stephen Belber's play and screenplay, directed by Richard Linklater<sup>14</sup>), as in more wide-ranging arenas. Words are not necessarily the enemy of the "cinematic"; they are only so if used in conjunction with that inferior filmmaking which disregards the other strategies available to the filmmaker. In even the most "realistic" play the all-but *incessant* talk constitutes a degree of stylization that is perhaps at odds with most kinds of filmmaking, but even then Malle's film showed that film can accommodate this most crucial element of dramatic literature.

Short stories offer, in some respects, problems contrasting with those of the novel. To make a full-length film, they will require expansion of existing incidents and characters or the imagining of new ones. One of the most famous of all such adaptations is surely John Ford's *Western, Stagecoach* (1939), derived from Ernest Haycox's short story, "Stage to Lordsburg," and a film so distinguished as a *film* that one scarcely spares a thought for Haycox's taut original. That Frank Perry's *The Swimmer* (1968), adapted from John Cheever's heavily allegorical story, never found significant audiences outside the art-house is perhaps partly attributable to its retaining a heavily literary sense of the metaphorical undercurrent of the swimmer's



cross-country odyssey. In Britain there were three successful "portmanteau" films based on short stories by Somerset Maugham: *Quartet* (1948), *Trio* (1950) and *Encore* (1951). Very popular at the time, these films adapted Maugham's ironic, witty tales with very little invention in terms of plot or character, but they were all skillfully written by the likes of R. C. Sheriff and Eric Ambler, and acted by matchless casts of British character actors, so that they seemed more ambitious than they were. At the time of writing, Clint Eastwood has made something very like a masterpiece from F. X. Toole's short stories in *Million Dollar Baby* (2005).

The novella, pitched somewhere between novel and short story, is probably the filmmaker's obvious material: not long enough to need laborious pruning, not so short as to require much new invention. See for instance, Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961, based on *The Turn of the Screw*) and Peter Bogdanovich's *Daisy Miller* (1974), notable examples of adaptations of novellas by Henry James, the latter film almost a cinematic transliteration of the original. Adaptations from poetry are, unsurprisingly, thin on the ground, and are of minimal interest as adaptations, since they require so much elaboration of incident and setting and character to add up to a feature film. Those that have attracted filmmakers at all have been narrative poems like Alice Duer Miller's famous wartime poem-novella, "The White Cliffs" (glossily and expansively filmed by MGM in 1944), Longfellow's "Hiawatha" (filmed without distinction in 1952) and "The Wreck of the 'Hesperus'" (filmed in 1947), Browning's "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" (the 1972 British film is really based more on the legend than the poem), A. B. Patterson's "The Man from Snowy River" (filmed in 1982, the most popular Australian film to that date), and Alfred Noyes's "The Highwayman" (unrecognizably filmed in 1951). Derek Jarman's *The Angelic Conversation* (1985) puts Shakespeare's sonnets to some unexpected uses. Personally, I'm waiting for someone to realize that Milton's *Paradise Lost* contains a wonderful story told in language of surpassing grandeur; if ever there was a challenge to filmmakers, this is it.<sup>15</sup>

The incidence of adaptation of literature into film continues unabated as I write. Those who repudiate the notion of "fidelity" as an evaluative criterion when talking about the relations between film and literature can bolster their case by invoking the far more productive notion of intertextuality. The way we respond to any film will be in part the result of those other texts and influences we inescapably bring to bear on our viewing. We need to have in mind, for instance, the parameters of cinematic practice at the time of the film's production, the proclivities of the film's director and writer, the auras that attach to the film's stars. When we turn to a film adapted from literature, or in some other way connected to a literary text or texts, we need to realize

and allow for the fact that the anterior novel or play or poem is only one element of the film's intertextuality, an element of varying importance to viewers depending on how well or little they know or care about the precursor text. For instance, is it more productive to think of *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) as an adaptation of Booth Tarkington's novel or as an Orson Welles film? Surely, at the very least, as both. The 1992 version of *Howards End* similarly needs to be considered not just as a version of E. M. Forster's novel but also as a Merchant Ivory production and as an example of 1990s British "heritage cinema": the other texts one may have in mind in considering it are as likely to be, say, the film of *Room with a View* (also from Forster), *Remains of the Day* (1993), *Carrington* (1994) and *Shakespeare in Love* (1999), all films with some kind of literary/heritage connection.

One last point on the subject of intertextuality seems worth noting. We are used to the idea of viewing an adaptation in the light of what we know of its literary forebear, but it also needs to be kept in mind that the reverse process is also a possibility. To read a novel after seeing a film version of it will inevitably color one's response. An adaptation that has "worked" for a viewer may well be one that has, at least for the time of viewing, displaced the original from one's mind; but to go further I would propose that it is possible that one's later reading of even a novel one has known well can be crucially influenced by the film text. In my own case, I can now no longer read *Women in Love* without seeing, in the character of Gerald Crich, not Lawrence's blond Nordic god but the burly, saturnine figure of Oliver Reed in Ken Russell's film (1969). Not only does the film itself, described – sight unseen of course – by F. R. Leavis as "an obscene undertaking," seem to me one of the great British films, but Reed's performance, his mad macho image subdued to the demands of the tightly controlled Gerald, and to the general sense of his being involved in circumstances more intellectually taxing than he was used to, was the high-water mark of his career. However he arrived at it, his Gerald has for me effaced Lawrence's in all subsequent re-readings of the novel.

No one is suggesting that viewer-readers will not have opinions about whether they prefer the film or the novel. Opinions, though, are private reactions that don't necessarily forward the discourse about film and literature. It is almost certainly more productive to consider the relations between the two as another example of what Keith Cohen has resonantly characterized, in his discussion, *inter alia*, of Impressionist painting, Henry James's "central reflector" technique in the novel, and the cinema, as "the process of convergence" among the arts.<sup>16</sup> More recently, Grahame Smith's "story about Dickens's role in the emergence of film, a narrative of consciousness across different media and across time"<sup>17</sup> reinforces one's sense of the myriad

ways in which literature and film might be seen, if not as siblings, at least as first cousins, sometimes bickering but at heart having a good deal of common heritage. Recent films about a composer (*De-Lovely*, 2004, constructed around Cole Porter's music), an architect (*My Architect*, 2004, a son's search for the inspiration of his father, the architect Louis Khan), and an artist (*Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 2004, a study of Vermeer in the grip of art and erotic tension) hint at film's ways of addressing and colluding with other art forms. The literature-film connection may be closer than any of these others: and the most helpful discourse surrounding this may be one which, respecting the specificities of each, is concerned to explore how they deal with each other, rather than which came first and which is "better" than the other.

## NOTES

- 1 *The Australian Review of Books*, October 1997.
- 2 As an adapted author herself (*Monkey Grip*, *The Last Days of Chez Nous*), she should have known better.
- 3 In fact adapted by Mary Ellen Bute in *Passages from "Finnegan's Wake"* in 1965.
- 4 As long ago as 1979, Morris Beja claimed that "more than three-fourths of the ... [Academy Awards] for 'best picture' have gone to adaptations ... [and] that the all-time box-office successes favour novels even more." *Film and Literature* (New York: Longman, 1979), p. 78.
- 5 My copy of this CD-Rom is dated 1998.
- 6 Bluestone, *Novels into Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 2.
- 7 Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press/OUP), 1996.
- 8 Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (1966), in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977), p. 73.
- 9 V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1927), trans. Laurence Scott (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1968).
- 10 Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) (London: Corgi Books, 2004), p. 169.
- 11 *The Da Vinci Code* reads like a novel desperate to become a film, with its frantic alternations of place and chapter-lengths that feel like film segments. (It did, of course, become a film in 2006, directed by Ron Howard.)
- 12 Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, p. 247.
- 13 Interview with the author, London, 1992.
- 14 Linklater's romances, *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*, also reveal a director with faith in words.
- 15 Since writing this, I have learnt that Derek Jarman was at one point "engaged in discussions about a possible film version of Milton's epic." Rowland Wymer, *Derek Jarman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 133.
- 16 Keith Cohen, *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), Part One, "Convergence."
- 17 Grahame Smith, *Dickens and the Dream of Cinema* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 13.

## 2

TIMOTHY CORRIGAN

Literature on screen, a history:  
in the gap

Perhaps more than any other film practices, cinematic adaptations have drawn the attention, scorn, and admiration of movie viewers, historians, and scholars since 1895. Indeed, even before this origin of the movies – with the first public projections of films by Auguste and Louis Lumière in France and Max and Emil Skladanowsky in Germany – critical voices worried about how photography had already encroached on traditional aesthetic terrains and disciplines, recuperating and presumably demeaning pictorial or dramatic subjects by adapting them as mechanical reproductions.<sup>1</sup> After 1895, however, film culture moved quickly to turn this cultural anxiety to its advantage, as filmmakers worked to attract audiences with well-known images from books now brought to life as *Cinderella* (1900), *Gulliver's Travels* (1902), and *The Damnation of Faust* (1904). The plethora of cinematic adaptations in recent decades and the flood of scholarship responding to these films – films like *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), Bollywood's version of Jane Austen's novel, and scholarly projects like Robert Stam's back-to-back anthologies *A Companion to Literature and Film* (2005), *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (2005) and critical study *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic and the Art of Adaptation* (2005) – indicate that the practice of adaptation and the disciplinary debates about it remain as lively and pressing as ever.

Adaptation describes, of course, multiple textual exchanges besides those involving film. Literary and theatrical works have regularly adapted historical chronicles; paintings have adapted theatrical or literary scenes, and music has converted literary figures into audio motifs and scores. The movies have themselves often turned to other sources than literary texts to adapt to the screen. Early Japanese films inherited the figure of the benshi, an actor commenting on the action on the screen or stage, from Kabuki theatre, and these films often found models for spatial compositions in ukiyo-e prints whose dramatic flat surfaces and planes would often draw attention away from the human figures in them. Even music has a significant tradition within