

CHAPTER ONE



It Wasn't Like That in the Book . . .

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The idea for this piece grew out of a discussion with an English Department colleague on the 1993 film version of *The Age of Innocence*. This colleague had enjoyed the film and had found it attractive but added, “Of course it’s not nearly as complex or subtle as the book.” I’d thought the film was a masterpiece and had actually—and, I felt, daringly—said so in print; I’d also admired the novel for many years, though perhaps not so extravagantly. I’m not setting my judgment up as being more accurate (whatever that may mean) than my colleague’s, but the exchange led me to reflect, not just on the matter of adaptation from literature to film, but also on the adequacy of a training in literature for dealing with film and, from the other corner, the adequacy of a training in film for dealing with literature. In Victoria where I come from, at least, it is now common for year 12 secondary school literature courses to offer one or more films as texts to be taught by trained English teachers. To the best of my knowledge, no comparable cinema studies course throws in a novel to be taught by trained teachers of film. I think “convergence among the arts” (in Keith Cohen’s memorable and resonant 1979 phrase in *Film and Fiction*) is a desirable ideal but that it probably involves a kind of training different from what has been common hitherto.

On a related point, the other impetus for this paper came from Australian novelist Helen Garner's review of the latest film version of *Anna Karenina*, which she began by referring to "a class of literature that, by its very nature, is not adaptable to the screen" (1997, B27). What, I wondered, did she mean? That, in this case, it won't be Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*? Or her idea of Tolstoy's Anna? Or that such a classic, by its very nature, is beyond the resources of film? Filmmakers, in such cases, are out of their league, she asserted. Her claim that a great novel's "central energy source" is its "narrative voice" may be unexceptionable, but she goes on to insist that "nothing available to mainstream cinema . . . can translate the authority of that voice" (1997, B27), and here she is simply ignoring—or ignorant of—the nature of film narration, to which this paper will return, and its capacity for asserting its own authoritative voice. The review reminded me of a good deal of middle-class, middle-brow criticism, even from someone as distinguished as Dilys Powell, who wrote of David Lean's *Oliver Twist* that it is "careful in the preservation of the skeleton of Dickens's book (since skeleton is all a film has time for)" (1948, 334). There is at work here little sense that film may have at its command narrational strategies as potentially subtle and complex as those of any other narrative or dramatic mode, and such thinking has led to the perpetuation of such myths as "second-rate" fiction is easier to adapt to the screen.

Forty years ago, in his pioneering work *Novels into Film* (and the titles of such books, my own included, are depressingly similar), George Bluestone (1957) wrote of the overt compatibility but secret hostility between novel and film; in the intervening decades nothing has happened radically to challenge this perception. And when I talk to colleagues about film versions of novels or read the sort of criticism I've just been quoting, I am sometimes reminded of the late James Agee, who wrote in 1946 that he had the idea that many serious-minded people wanted movies to offer more elevated themes or "a good faithful adaptation of *Adam Bede* in sepia, with the entire text read offscreen by Herbert Marshall" (he of the mellifluous tones) (216). It's as if they want film to be more like literature and are oblivious to what might make film cinematically exciting. In this way, I suspect that a training in literature doesn't simply fail to provide an understanding of how a film is working. I think it goes further, and more damagingly, to set up a sort of Leavisite evaluative judgment, a high culture/popular culture hierarchy, in which film inevitably comes below/behind the literary text. For such evaluations, the film is only really valuable as it approximates the precursor literary text.

I have to say that my experience is that those of us with a literary training are far more likely to hold forth about film, especially in relation to adaptation, than are the film-trained to lay down the law about literature. Most no-

torious, perhaps, among the former—the literary-trained—was F. R. Leavis, who described the idea of filming *Women in Love* as “an obscene undertaking” (quoted by Christie, 1969, 49). He was, of course, speaking sight unseen. It’s partly, perhaps, a matter of the older discipline’s being wary about according equal status to the newer one; it may also be something to do with the huge popularity of cinema, which perhaps makes it seem dubious as a basis for study comparable with literature. On that matter, incidentally, it has always seemed to me curious to hold the belief that it is easier to produce a work of art which pleases many than it is to produce one which will please only the few. At the risk of this chapter’s containing something to offend everyone, I’d add that, as for the film-trained of today, they are often quite ignorant about literature, and indeed about the other arts in general, but, apart from, say, the reviewers whose favorite novel has been filmed in ways displeasing to them, they tend to limit themselves to the area in which their training has equipped them to recognize such qualities as complexity and subtlety. There are, though, younger film reviewers sometimes ready to court favor by expressing a hip impatience with, say, Shakespeare or Jane Austen, which leads them, almost as a reflex action, to prefer Baz Luhrmann’s film *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* or Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless* to more orthodox adaptations of classic literature.

Our training in literature equips us to read complexity and subtlety in novels (I’ll stick to novels mainly for this chapter). We are trained to do more than to read for “mere” narrative, though, speaking as one who has recently read and taught *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Woman in White* in a melodrama course, I have to say I don’t think there is anything “mere” about narrative in the sense of referring to that skill that carries us breathless from one set of events to the next. We have been taught to be attentive to matters like how point of view is created: for example, to the different kinds of purchase on events which a first-person or omniscient author or a Jamesean “central reflector” allows us: how character is revealed by and precipitates action, how thematic concerns are articulated through character and action in collaboration, how to read—in more modern terminology—sometimes conflicting discourses of, say, gender and class. As a result of all this serious study of how literature works and means, we’re unlikely to see *Pride and Prejudice* (the novel) as no more than a “merry manhunt” or “a picture of a charming and mannered little English world which has long since been tucked away in ancient haircloth trunks” as the *New York Times* reviewer described the MGM film of nearly sixty years ago (Crowther, 1940, 191).

The attitude of literary people to film adaptations of literary works is almost always to the detriment of the film, only grudgingly conceding what

film may have achieved. My contention is that their training hasn't taught them to look in film for riches comparable to those they find in literature and that, in consequence, their filmgoing experience, especially when adaptation is in question, tends to seem thin by comparison. When viewing the film version of a novel or play they know, they want to find in the film what they valued in the literary work, without asking whether this is the sort of thing film can do. They are too often not interested in something new being made in the film but only in assessing how far their own conception of the novel has been transposed from one medium to the other. One hears such comments as "Of course, she [i.e., Gwyneth Paltrow] is not Emma," with little thought for what this might mean in the context of a move from the merely representational mode to what Barthes (1977) calls a "mode of the operable" (89). She is not whose Emma? I suspect there is a yearning for fidelity, not just among those with a literary training, but among quite wide sectors of the filmgoing public, without any real concern for how much fidelity is either possible or desirable—or what it might mean. And such thinking begs the question that there is such a thing as a "true" or fixed meaning for a literary text—for any sort of text for that matter. A certain kind of literary training seems also locked into a mimetic approach which sees divergence from realist expectations as some kind of failure. If you want the same experience (and believe you can have just that experience twice) that you had in reading the novel, why not simply reread the novel? It's much more likely to produce the desired effect. Fidelity is obviously very desirable in marriage; but with film adaptations I suspect playing around is more effective.

The discourse on adaptation is perhaps more enduring and pervasive than any other in relation to filmgoing. When we come out of a cinema, we rarely hear people saying, "What sophisticated control of the *mise-en-scène*" or "Did you notice the poetic use of lap dissolves?" It is, however, quite common to come out of a cinema after viewing an adaptation or to engage in casual conversation about it afterward and to hear such comments as "Why did they change the ending?" or "She was blonde in the book" or, almost inevitably, "I think I liked the book better." It is a subject on which everyone feels able to have an opinion, and most opinions, from the casually conversational to exegeses in learned journals, still tend to foreground the criterion of fidelity, whether in explicit terms or by tacit assumption. One such account in a scholarly journal is Nicola Bradbury's essay on the film version of *The Europeans* in *Essays in Criticism*. Speaking of one episode, she writes, "It is not, quite, a picture from James's novel, though it is thoroughly Jamesean in tone, and excellent cinema" (Bradbury, 1979, 299). By which she seems to mean, in her next sentence, that "every aspect of setting, action, dialogue, charac-

ter, image, and theme is interrelated”—and she might just as well be talking about the book. The film, she makes clear, is sensitive and discreet insofar as it matches James. My dissatisfaction with this approach does not stem from the idea of enjoying a particular novel more than its film version; it would be surprising if one had no preference. My dissatisfaction grows from a failure to distinguish between what one might reasonably expect to find transferable from one medium of display to another and what requires the invoking of the processes of what I call “adaptation proper.” Here, essentially, is where a literary training proves most inadequate. It is easy enough to tell, even to quantify, what narrative kernels (in Seymour Chatman’s term) or “cardinal functions” (in Roland Barthes’s term—i.e., what he deems “hinge-points of narrative,” opening up alternative narrative possibilities) have been transferred from the wholly verbal sign system to the system of audiovisual moving images. It is less easy, but a lot more interesting and rewarding, to consider how the processes of “adaptation proper” go about their business: This is where a knowledge of the strategies of film narration or enunciation becomes crucial. I mean here essentially the ways in which the three large classes of film narration—*mise-en-scène*, editing, and soundtrack, in their various subcategories—put before us the narrative events which, in their bare bones, may have been transferred from page to celluloid. To be ignorant of these is to be ignorant of how film creates meaning in those large areas which pervade a text vertically, as distinct from the horizontal causally linked chain of events.

It’s important for me to stress that merely being bold in the matter of adaptation won’t ensure a good/interesting/stimulating film, whether it outrages devotees of the precursor text or not. A recent example is Jane Campion’s *A Portrait of a Lady*. A good deal of this seems to me intelligent in its rendering of a “young woman affronting her destiny,” making a sad mess of her life, and maintaining her integrity the while. However, whenever the film’s makers set out to be bold, their efforts look so self-conscious, so determinedly filmic, in the context of the naturalism of the classical Hollywood narrative style of the rest of the film, that these “touches” seem merely disruptive. I mean the opening with a lot of young Australian women talking on screen about kissing, all done in black and white, and in no clear way related to what follows; or the home movie scenes of Isabel’s travels; or the scene in which she imagines herself sexually fondled by three men. These constitute “bold” breaks with the expected in the sense, first, that they are departures from James, which one wouldn’t on principle object to, and, second, that they challenge unproductively the validity of the dominant narrative mode of film storytelling in which they are cast. The black-and-white prologue and the

washed-out old-photographs look of the home movies offers a disconcerting break from the prevailing Technicolor, and the scene of sexual fantasizing, while arguably an objectification of what is part of Isabel's confusion, sits strangely with the rest of the film in which sexuality is suppressed and its manifestations discreetly if powerfully encoded. I would argue that these apparently bold touches have the effect of being grafted onto, rather than imaginatively integrated into, Campion's incarnation of the novel's concerns, that they are jarring rather than enriching or provocative. She has not made the really bold leap that characterizes such transformations as Welles's *Chimes at Midnight* or Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* or Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* or Alfonso Cuarón's 1997 version of *Great Expectations*. In each of these cases, what is offered is, in some sense, a radical reworking of the precursor text, a kind of commentary on its great antecedent, a new work.

But if *merely* being bold is no guarantee that the filmmaker will give satisfaction to audiences who may or may not have read the antecedent novel, neither is a slavish devotion to the original text: that is, to details of plot, character, and settings, for example. Not being bold can cripple the processes of adaptation, and one can end up with not so much an adaptation as an embalment of a famous work. I place a good deal of BBC classic serial filmmaking in this category: I know enough people loved the serialization of *Pride and Prejudice* to warrant its being run twice in Australia within a few months (though I suspect the local chapter of the Colin Firth Fan Club of having a hand in that), but it seemed to me the work of an industrious bricklayer rather than an architect, with one event from the novel remorselessly following another, without any sense of shape or structuring, without any apparent point of view on its material. By this assertion, I mean a sort of dogged reproduction, incident by incident, of the novel's narrative. In fact, the old Hollywood film may have had a surer sense of what it was up to: that is, it was a light-hearted romantic comedy, fuelled by the sorts of star presences and narrative blockages and inevitable closure that characterized the genre. The BBC's version was eminently more respectable, as if it feared criticism from the academy; it took endless pains over the look of things in early nineteenth-century England; it filled out dialogue exchanges with no doubt well-researched episodes of country dancing and authentically got-up carriages travelling through picturesque countryside; but it seemed to have nothing to say dramatically about its material, except perhaps that sexual attraction was more potent than class or wealth—and we knew that if we'd read the novel, possibly even if we hadn't. Some of the Merchant-Ivory versions of James and Forster belong in this category in my view: the decorous, undaring, step-by-step, filmmaking-by-numbers approach to the adaptation

of the classics, as if the aim was to placate an academy waiting with fangs bared to seize on any violation of the original. Violation, tampering: the sorts of terms used suggest deeply sinister processes of molestation.

It may be beginning to sound as if I can't be satisfied with adaptation of any kind, that I'm irritated by the merely bold and by the overreverent. I should say that this sort of captiousness is not the case and that, in relation to the latter (the close approximation in film terms of the functions of the original), fidelity to incident and character connections, to period and place, doesn't necessarily produce a poor film or a film that can't stand evaluative comparison with the novel. Peter Bogdanovich's *Daisy Miller* is a striking example of what I mean here: with one exception, admittedly an important one, it transfers all the major examples of what Roland Barthes would call "cardinal functions"; its characters are given to do what they do in the novel and almost always where they do it in the novel. Nevertheless, while observing this surprising degree of transfer, I'd say there is enough of Bogdanovich's own "commentary," making itself felt in the film's enunciatory procedures, on the action devised by James, to lead us to feel we are seeing something new. He seems to me, in adhering to the events of the novel, to provide a commentary on the nature and effects of repression, especially of sexual repression, rather than merely to reproduce the Jamesean complex fate. And one might also add that the Merchant-Ivory team achieve something similar in their adaptation of *Howard's End* when the brutalities of class oppressiveness are made so poignant.

The ideal seems to me to be, on the one hand, bold and intelligent and, on the other, determined to make something both connected to its precursor and new in itself. The film has the right to be judged as a film; then, one of the many things it also is an adaptation (it is also the product of a particular industrial system, a genre film, part of a tradition of national filmmaking, etc). That is, the precursor literary work is only an aspect of the film's intertextuality, of more or less importance according to the viewer's acquaintance with the antecedent work. In, for example, thinking about Olivier's *Hamlet*, it may be as important to have in mind the nature of British "quality" cinema, the works that accounted for its postwar prestige, its relation to the British theatrical tradition, the Freudian psychologizing of Dr. Ernest Jones, and the film noir stylistic and thematic preoccupations so common at the time, as it is to have Shakespeare's play. This is difficult for those of us trained in literature to accept: to approach a narrative mode which expends itself in, say, two hours and find in it complexity and subtlety in their own way as striking as those a novel may develop over several hundred pages and seven or eight hours of reading time. But I would claim that this does happen and

that the great works of adaptation, particularly of the classics, of works that have been valued by many people over a long period, make us reconsider the original in the light of what a later period and another sign system have made of it, bearing in mind the sorts of other influences I have talked about.

I can imagine an approach to the recent film of *The Wings of the Dove*, which lamented the loss of the extended passages of interior analysis through which James gives us access to the machinations of Kate Croy and the reluctant acquiescence of Merton Densher in her scheme for him to marry the dying Millie Theale and then inherit her vast wealth. (Incidentally, I can also imagine an approach that welcomed such losses.) The film shears away many characters, reduces others to more or less shadowy figures in the wings and focuses the hard bright light of its intelligence and compassion on the central trio. Through decisions made about cutting between faces and the interception of glances, through the framing of faces either, say, in close-up or in sustained two-shot (e.g., Milly and Kate at oblique angles from each other as, from their balcony, they overlook Venice and talk of Merton), about costume and ways of looking, moving and sitting and gesturing, the interior nature of the drama at work among these three is conducted with a rigor that even the rigorous James might have approved. The film is updated to 1910, which may occasion purist objection, but it can also be argued that it enables convincingly just that much more freedom in the representation of sexual desire as to make Kate's conflict accessible to us now. That she is strongly sexually attracted to Densher intensifies the sense of what she is compelling herself to suppress in urging him to press his intentions on Millie.

On another aspect of the difficulties of her situation, that is the oppressiveness for a wellborn young woman in being without money, the film's *mise-en-scène* is persistently rigorous and complex in suggesting the different ways in which different settings can oppress. In London, the opening sequence on the Underground at once suggests the difficulty which impoverished lovers might experience in finding privacy: The silent journey in which their space is confined by jostling others builds up mutely a state of tension in which erotic release is finally given in the kiss in the lift. Elsewhere, Densher's rooms are located in a narrow street whose oppressive potential is created in the *mise-en-scène*: A low-angled shot stresses the daunting aspect of the slit of light between two high buildings of somber grey; color, light, and angle do the work of rendering not merely place but the *quality* of place, which, in a novel, might be done through the descriptive aspect of the discursive prose. At the country seat of Lord Mark, the aristocrat whom Kate's aunt wants her to marry, the sheer scale of the establishment, first indicated in an imposing exterior, then elaborated in shots of its overbearing interior

grandeur, is again made palpable through the agency of the *mise-en-scène*, especially in the choices made about where to put the camera and where and when to move it. All these filming decisions are in the interests of making what Lord Mark has to offer the impoverished Kate seem as impressive as possible—and his motives as questionable. When the narrative moves to Venice, the *mise-en-scène* triumphantly furthers the whole drama of duplicity. Millie Theale's innocence is seen as threatened by an ambience in which nothing is solid, where the possibilities for deceit are unlimited. Especially in matters of color and lighting, in the juxtaposing of the superficial beauties of the place with the actualities of its decay and the masquerade in which the lovers make use of disguise to pursue their liaison, the complex web of corruption is rendered in terms of image and editing. The camera—what it chooses to attend to and from what angle and distance and according to what kind of focus, whether it is still or moving, how it frames what is presented to its lens, or what information it chooses to withhold—is, in collaboration with the editor who decides on the suturing of shots to act out the director's intention, as capable of complexity and subtlety, of ensuring emotional and intellectual engagement, as the writer is on the page in the exercise of a quite other sign system.

I began by talking about *The Age of Innocence*, so it is perhaps appropriate that I should try to demonstrate what I mean by a few direct references to it. About twenty minutes into the film is a wonderful long shot of a substantial New York apartment building (possibly Mrs. Manson Mingott's) standing at a snowy crossroads, while at the other three corners there is nothing to be seen but the earliest stages of foundation digging. This shot is preceded and followed by interiors, the former at Mrs. Mingott's house and on its steps, with Mrs. Welland saying it is a mistake for the Countess Olenska to be seen going about with the raffish Julius Beaufort, and the latter over Mrs. Welland's dinner table where the discussion is about Ellen's behavior.

The shot, intrinsically stunning in its composition, colors, lighting, and angle of vision, seems at first gratuitous. As I've said, it's placed between two interior scenes thick with elegant decoration and charged social talk, and it is apparently offered without comment. In itself, though, it does constitute a comment: it reminds us that this city, with its pretensions, dicta, and assiduously preserved rituals, behaving as if its decorums were sanctioned by generations of lawgivers, is actually still in the process of being built. The mere fact of its being an extreme long shot is itself significant: it implies that if you could stand back and view the city from some detached, sufficiently distant perspective, you might get a very different view on its life from that to be had

in its socially acceptable purlieux. A single shot is, through the exercise of multiple cinematic strategies, including somberly dignified music on the soundtrack, imbued with a complexity and subtlety that cause it to stay in the mind long after the film is over. We can, of course, let it pass by without registering more than its aesthetic qualities, or not even that: I'm suggesting that, if we give it the kind of attention we expect to give the prose of a great novel, we shall be rewarded not only by its intrinsic beauty but by its commentative power as well.

The second example I want to draw attention to occurs even earlier in the film. The passage begins at the opera at the moment when Mrs. Julius Beaufort traditionally rises from her seat (in a box of course) to go home to receive her guests for the Beauforts' annual ball. A series of shots is joined by dissolves to remove Mrs. Beaufort at the usual moment from the opera to her waiting carriage to her home and to show the opulence of a home which can afford to have a large ballroom for use only once a year. Each successive dissolve signifies a lapse of time and a further stage in the preparation for the ball, over a period of days, perhaps weeks, before the night itself. The dissolves not merely link the shots but also comment on their interconnectedness: The first, for instance, gets Mrs. Beaufort from the opera house into her waiting carriage, as well as gives us a sense of the relative weight which these New Yorkers attach to high culture and high society—the latter wins hands down in any sort of competition for serious attention. This sequence of brief shots linked/separated by dissolves is accompanied by the narrator in ironic voice-over (and drawing on Edith Wharton's own words) drawing attention to the habits of the natives, then homing in on the Beauforts' pretensions in particular. The three shots of the ballroom itself represent the stages by which it is transformed from dust-sheeted emptiness to the gleam of readiness to the culminating moment of the orchestra's playing "Radetsky's March" as the dancers approach the camera with the exhilarating confidence of people absolutely assured of their place in society. The dissolves themselves act as signifiers of time passed, of time collapsed between three specific points, bringing us up to the moment of the dancing. And following the shots of the orderly dance, viewed in long shot from a high angle, to make the full formality of the occasion clear, the camera cuts to a close-up of the gentlemen's identical gloves awaiting later collection, a further point mutely made about the formality and conformity of this sample of New York society. I've deliberately chosen a moment of no particularly crucial importance to the narrative to show how the film's narrational resources can be marshalled in the interests of economical storytelling.

I'll finish by referring to a brief, much later extract, which is important to the film's main narrative line and in which, characteristically of this film, the visual and the aural work together in intricate ways, mediated by the subtlety of the editing. The scene dissolves from Ellen's stepping into the sunlit street to meet Newland, then dissolves again to the lakeside tea table, where in a series of alternating medium close-ups the situation between the two would-be lovers is revealed. This gives way to a tighter alternation of each seen over the shoulder of the other, a way of stressing the inextricable connection between the two and tightening the tension between them, and there is then a brief alternation between their hands touching on the table and the previous set of shots in which the camera looks over the shoulder of one at the other. In the two dissolves that follow, she first vanishes from the scene leaving him deserted, then he vanishes while the camera stays briefly and poignantly on the empty verandah and the voice of Enya on the soundtrack sings the famous song of a dream of love's tenacity, "I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls." That it is no *more* than a dream is reinforced by its being the aural link between this segment and the next, which returns us to thriving New York. The solitary building I showed of the earlier extract is now no longer isolated (the *mise-en-scène* effortlessly but unobtrusively making a point about material progress) and an army of uniformed businessmen, in top coats and bowlers held on against the wind, moving in slow motion, makes with visual eloquence Wharton's—and Scorsese's—point about the conformity which Newland will now find hard to escape. As the song on the soundtrack ends, he emerges from this anonymous crowd.

The three categories of narrational strategies—*mise-en-scène*, editing, and soundtrack—work together to imbue these two transitional sequences of shots with a complexity and subtlety which I think ought to have satisfied my colleague if her training had equipped her to look for these in film and to read the distinctive grammar of the medium. There is a good deal of overlap in areas of intellectual and affective response to a novel and to the film derived from it, but these responses are, of course, the result of two different processes of articulation. It may seem uphill work, but I think it is important for those of us involved in both film and literature to urge more strongly the dropping of a high culture/popular culture hierarchy or even dichotomy, the abandoning of the fidelity approach in favor of a more productive invoking of intertextuality, and the attention to what makes for such qualities as subtlety and complexity in film rather than complaining of the loss of what is peculiar to literature. Film is perhaps so easy to enjoy that it becomes even easier not to notice that a lot is going on.

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