

LIMITATION AND SUPERIORITY OF FILM TO FICTION

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Abstract

De Witt Bodeen, co-author of the screenplay for Peter Ustinov Billy Budd (1962) claims that: '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'.¹ On this note I am going to introduce Alice Walker's novel The Colour Purple which increased fame and notoriety in 1985 with the release of the film adaptation, directed by Steven Spielberg. But the same story is quite different in fiction and the novel since the screenplay writer of this film Dutchman Menno Meyjes, who had the disadvantage of being white and male disregards the use of non-standard dialect which is the vein of the novel through which the protagonist Celie communicates. In this novel Walker shows the racism and oppression of black women by men of their own race the film version also depicts the same with a different aspect. In the present paper I am going to show how both mediums are related and their limitation.

Keywords: Film adaptation, selective interpretation, non-standard dialect, racism, oppression of black women by black men.

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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. Film-makers' 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.

In light of the success of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker was approached about Hollywood's making a film out of her novel. At first she did not like the idea of somebody else telling her story, but she eventually was persuaded by Quincy Jones. Walker also was aware that a larger African American audience would watch the film than read the novel. Steven Spielberg was called in to direct.

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 film-maker. 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 fantasy'.² Despite the uncertainty of gratification, of finding audiovisual images that will coincide with their conceptual images, reader-viewers persist in providing audiences for 'somebody else's fantasy'. 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 which might just as easily be rendered in another. In this regard, one is reminded of Anthony Burgess's cynical view that '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'.³ And perhaps there is a parallel with that. Whatever it is that makes film-goers want to see adaptations of novels, and film-makers 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 1927-8, 'more than three fourths of the awards for "best picture" have gone to adaptations . . . [and that] the all-time box-office successes favour novels even more'.⁴ Given that the novel and the film have

been the most popular narrative modes of the nineteenth and twentieth century's respectively, it is perhaps not surprising that film-makers 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 pre-tested stories and characters, without too much concern for how much of the original's popularity is intransigently tied to its verbal mode.

But the same story is quite different in fiction and the novel since the screenplay writer of this film Dutchman Menno Meyjes, who had the disadvantage of being white and male disregards the use of non-standard dialect which is the vein of the novel through which the protagonist Celie communicates. In the novel Walker shows the racism and oppression of black women by men of their own race. As Walker explains, to have Celie speak in the language of her oppressors would be to deny her the validity of her existence; Her being is affirmed by the language in which she is revealed, and like everything about her it is characteristic, hard-won, and authentic.

The major difference between the film and the novel is, unsurprisingly, the alteration of the narrative structure. In the novel, we learn Celie's story through the letters she writes to God. In the film, there are no such letters, and a different connection with God is created. Walker has commented, "Though it hurt to see in Spielberg's film that Celie ceases to be a writer, which she is to her very soul, when I had sat down to recreate her, it bored me to make her a writer, and so I thought of something else"⁵ The film excludes Celie's relationship with God, which sidelines her journey of self-reflection. Thus it is difficult to understand how Celie has fought her way through life without the cathartic and educating experience of the way she tells her story. We are left unsure about why Celie evolves, and it is a shame to see the expulsion of this very important key spiritual dimension, particularly since the title refers to a scene where God's good creation is invoked.

Shug is also rather different in the film. Throughout it, she tries to please her father, who is a preacher, unhappy with the choices his daughter has made. This really does change the novel, for Shug was the very independent and autonomous female who did what she wanted. Her relationship with Celie is also made less explicit. There is no scene where Shug educates Celie about sex. Walker herself admits that "In the movie, all the women kiss each other, making the kiss between Celie and Shug less significant"⁶

Criticism of the film from the public has been similar to the criticism received by the novel. Many African Americans have believed that the film attacks the black community because of the negative portrayals of several characters and of significant

elements in Celie's society. Rather than educating America about the troubling issues it raises, these critics have focused on the idea that the film would cause hatred towards blacks and black community more generally.

Walker has said different things at different times when asked about the film. One response that perhaps sums up her feelings is that "I was able to critique the film rather for its virtues than its flaws. Sometimes I would simply say, 'I love the film.' Other times I would say, 'I have mixed feelings.' Occasionally I would say, 'It is a child with at least three parents: it looks like all of them.' Most frequently I said, 'Remember, the movie is not the book'" 7

In view of Charlie Redmayne CEO, Harper Collins UK an established publishing house, 'An author's more brilliant than a filmmaker-an author creates worlds in your mind's eye.'⁸He further says that the book is one of the great art forms. When you see a movie of one of your favourite books, you invariably come out saying, it wasn't as good as the book-that's because the brilliance of an author, able to create an imaginary world in your mind's eye, is much stronger than what a filmmaker can do.

Some writers have proposed strategies which seek to categorize adaptations so that fidelity to the original loses some of its privileged position. Geoffrey Wagner suggests three possible categories which are open to the film-maker 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';⁹ (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 film-maker, rather than infidelity or outright violation';¹⁰ and (c) analogy, which must represent a fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art'.¹¹ 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'.¹² 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'.¹³ 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 *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. There are many kinds of relations which may exist between film and literature, and fidelity is only one-and rarely the most exciting.

The more one considers the phenomenon of adaptation of novel into film the whole history of the reliance on the novel as source material for the fiction film--the more one is drawn to consider the central importance of narrative to both. Whatever the cinema's sources--as an invention, as a leisure pursuit, or as a means of expression--and whatever uncertainties about its development attend its earliest years, its huge and durable popularity is owed to what it most obviously shares with the novel. That is, its capacity for narrative. By the time of Edwin Porter *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), in which scenes set in different locations are spliced together to tell a story, the cinema's future as a narrative art was settled, and no subsequent development of its techniques has threatened the supremacy of that function.

Christian Metz, discussing film narrativity, writes: 'Film tells us continuous stories; it "says" things that could be conveyed also in the language of words; yet it says them differently. There is a reason for the possibility as well as for the necessity of adaptations.'¹⁴ He goes on to consider the 'demand' for the feature-length fiction film, 'which was only one of the many conceivable genres',¹⁵ but which has dominated film production. "Going to the movies" is going to see this type of story.'¹⁶ Whatever other uses the cinema might have found, it is, as Metz suggests, as a story-teller that it found its greatest power and its largest audience. Its embourgeoisement inevitably led it away from trick shows, the recording of music halls acts and the like, towards that narrative representationalism which had reached a peak in the classic nineteenth-century novel. If film did not grow out of the latter, it grew towards it; and what novels and films most strikingly have in common is the potential and propensity for narrative. And narrative, at

certain levels, is undeniably not only the chief factor novels and the films based on them have in common but is the chief transferable element.

If one describes a narrative as a series of events, causally linked, involving a continuing set of characters which influence and are influenced by the course of events, one realizes that such a description might apply equally to a narrative displayed in a literary text and to one in a filmic text. Nevertheless, much of the dissatisfaction which accompanies the writing about films adapted from novels tends to spring from perceptions of 'tampering' with the original narrative. Words like 'tampering' and 'interference', and even 'violation', give the whole process an air of deeply sinister molestation, perhaps springing from the viewer's thwarted expectations relating to both character and event. Such dissatisfactions resonate with a complex set of misapprehensions about the workings of narrative in the two media, about the irreducible differences between the two, and from a failure to distinguish what can from what cannot be transferred.

To begin with the last point: there is a distinction to be made between what may be transferred from one narrative medium to another and what necessarily requires adaptation proper. Throughout the rest of this study, 'transfer' will be used to denote the process whereby certain narrative elements of novels are revealed as amenable to display in film, whereas the widely used term 'adaptation' will refer to the processes by which other novelistic elements must find quite different equivalences in the film medium, when such equivalences are sought or are available at all.

Roland Barthes has defined the essence of a narrative function as 'the seed that it sows in the narrative, planting an element that will come to fruition later--either on the same [narrative] level or elsewhere, on another level', ¹⁷ going on to claim that, 'A narrative is never made up of anything other than functions: in differing degrees, everything in it signifies.' He distinguishes two main groups of narrative functions: distributional and integrational and, though he is not concerned with cinema in this discussion, this distinction is valuable in sorting out what may be transferred (i.e. from novel to film) from that which may only be adapted. To distributional functions, Barthes gives the name of functions proper; integrational functions he calls indices. The former refer to actions and events; they are 'horizontal' in nature, and they are strung together linearly throughout the text; they have to do with 'operations'; they refer to a functionality of doing. Indices denotes a 'more or less diffuse concept which is nevertheless necessary to the meaning of the story'.¹⁸ This concept embraces, for instance, psychological information relating to characters, data regarding their identity, notations of atmosphere and representations of place. Indices are 'vertical' in nature, influencing our reading of

narrative in a pervasive rather than a linear way; they do not refer to operations but to a functionality of being.

The most important kinds of transfer possible from novel to film are located in the category of functions proper, rather than that of indices, though some elements of the latter will also be seen to be (partly) transferable. Barthes further subdivides functions to include cardinal functions (or nuclei) and catalysers.

Cardinal functions are the 'hinge-points' of narrative: that is, the actions they refer to open up alternatives of consequence to the development of the story; they create 'risky' moments in the narrative and it is crucial to narrativity ('the processes through which the reader . . . constructs the meaning of the text'¹⁹) that the reader recognizes the possibility of such alternative consequences. The linking together of cardinal functions provides the irreducible bare bones of the narrative, and this linking, this 'tie between two cardinal functions, is invested with a double functionality, at once chronological and logical'.²⁰ These cardinal functions, or, in Seymour Chatman's terms, kernels 'narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events'²¹, are, as I shall show, transferable: when a major cardinal function is deleted or altered in the film version of a novel (e.g. to provide a happy rather than a sombre ending), this is apt to occasion critical outrage and popular disaffection. The film-maker bent on 'faithful' adaptation must, as a basis for such an enterprise, seek to preserve the major cardinal functions.

However, even if the latter are preserved in the filming process, they can be 'deformed' by varying the catalysers which surround them. Catalysers (in Chatman's term, satellites) work in ways which are complementary to and supportive of the cardinal functions. They denote small actions (e.g. the laying of the table for a meal which may in turn give rise to action of cardinal importance to the story); their role is to root the cardinal functions in a particular kind of reality, to enrich the texture of those functions: 'their functionality is attenuated, unilateral, parasitic: it is a question of a purely chronological functionality', ²² in Barthes's words. Unlike the 'risky moments' created by cardinal functions, the catalysers 'lay out areas of safety, rests, luxuries';²³ they account for the moment-to-moment minutiae of narrative.

In so far as these functions, whether cardinal or catalysing, are not dependent on language, in the sense that they denote aspects of story content (actions and happenings) which may be displayed verbally or audio-visually, they are directly transferable from one medium to the other. Among the integrational functions, which Barthes subdivides into indices proper and informants, only the latter may be directly transferred. Whereas the former relate to concepts such as character and atmosphere, are more diffuse than the functions proper, and are therefore more broadly open to adaptation rather than to the

comparative directness of transfer, informants 'are pure data with immediate signification'.²⁴They include 'ready-made knowledge' such as the names, ages, and professions of characters, certain details of the physical setting, and, in these senses and in their own ways, share the authenticating and individuating functions performed in other respects by catalysers, and they are often amenable to transfer from one medium to another. What Barthes designates as cardinal functions and catalysers constitutes the formal content of narrative which may be considered independently of what Chatman calls 'its manifesting substance' (e.g. novel or film), and informants, in their objective name-ability, help to embed this formal content in a realized world, giving specificity to its abstraction. Perhaps informants may be seen as a first, small step towards mimesis in novel and film.

As we go through all the discussion we come to the conclusion that both the medium has its advantages and disadvantages it depends on how it is adapted if the adaptation suits the flavour of the fiction then it becomes an amazing creation. We find that fiction has limited reader but a film can get a large audience but still word images still outdo the film, but sometimes the complex ideas conveyed in the fiction can beautifully and easily depicted in the film. Sometimes the visuals creates such an aura that simple fiction is transformed in wonderful scene which provides it a new edge .So we can conclude that each genre has its limitation and advantage.

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