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Distinguished Lecture of the Institute and Society for Advanced Study given on September 24, 1999
Indiana University
Institute for Advanced Study

Indiana University
1999
James Naremore, born in Louisiana, received his graduate education at the University of Wisconsin and joined the faculty at Indiana University in 1970. Currently, he is Chancellor’s Professor of Communication and Culture, English, and Comparative Literature. Professor Naremore began his academic career as a specialist in modern British literature, and is the author of The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf And the Novel (Yale, 1973). Soon after arriving in Bloomington, however, he gravitated to the film courses that were being developed in Comparative Literature. His life-long passion for movies ultimately determined the path his career would take, and most of his subsequent teaching and publication has been in the area of film studies. His major writing include Filmguide to Psycho (Indiana, 1973), The Magic World of Orson Welles (Oxford, 1978), Acting in the Cinema (California, 1988), The Films of Vincente Minnelli (Cambridge, 1993), and More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Context (California, 1998). His short educational film, "A Nickel for the Movies" (1981) was awarded a prize from the Society of Visual Education in Los Angeles. The recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Gallery of Art, Professor Naremore was also awarded Indiana University’s Tracy M. Sonneborn Prize for Distinguished Teaching and Research.
Film and the Reign of Adaptation

James Naremore

My title alludes to a relatively little known essay by Andre Bazin—"Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest," written in 1948 but translated into English only recently for Burt Cardullo's useful anthology, *Bazin at Work* (Routledge, 1998). I especially recommend this essay to American readers, who tend to think of Bazin almost exclusively as an eloquent proponent of a certain kind of humanist realism in the cinema. Without denying the importance of Bazin's writings on the phenomenology of the photographic image and the realistic uses of the camera, we need to remember that an entire volume of the French edition of his posthumously collected criticism, published in four volumes under the single title, *What is Cinema?*, was devoted to the relationship between film and the other media. The essay on adaptation is one of his most intriguing statements on behalf of what he called "mixed cinema," and it enables us to see him in a new light, as someone who has a good deal to contribute to contemporary cultural studies.

I shall return to Bazin, but first I want to comment on some of the reasons why his essay on adaptation may have been neglected, and why the very subject of adaptation has constituted one of the most jejune areas of scholarly writing about the cinema. One of the major reasons, I suspect, is institutional: a great many film programs in the academy are attached to literature departments, where the theme of adaptation is often used as a way of teaching celebrated literature by another means. Thus we immediately think of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1998) or even of the more freely derivative *Orlando* (1993) as adaptations, but not of *The Set Up* (1949, based on a narrative poem), *Batman* (1989, based on a comic book), *His Girl Friday* (1940, based on a play), *Mission Impossible* (1996, based on a TV series), or *Twelve Monkeys* (1995, based on an art film). Even within the realm of the novelistic, the range of things usually discussed under the rubric of adaptation is quite narrow. Twentieth Century Fox's 1940 production of *The Grapes of Wrath* is always seen in relation to John Steinbeck, but the same studio's 1944 production of *Laura* is almost never viewed as an adaptation of Vera Casparay (even though the film's main title reads "Laura, by Vera Casparay")—probably because Casparay's post-proletarian, proto-feminist thriller has long been out of print and has barely been read by English teachers.

Unfortunately, most discussions of novelistic adaptation in film can be summarized by a *New Yorker* cartoon that Alfred Hitchcock once described to Francois Truffaut: two goats are eating a pile of film cans, and one goat says to the other, "Personally, I liked the book better." Even when academic writing on the topic is not directly concerned with a given film's artistic adequacy or fidelity to a beloved source, it tends to be narrow in range, inherently respectful of the "precursor text," and constitutive of a series of binary oppositions that post structuralist theory has taught us to deconstruct: literature vs. cinema, high culture vs. mass culture, original vs. copy. Such oppositions are themselves
the products of the submerged common sense of the average English department, which is composed of a mixture of Kantian aesthetics and Arnoldian ideas about society.

When I use the term "Arnoldian," I am chiefly referring to Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), which argues that culture is synonymous with great works of art, and that the inherited cultural tradition of the Judeo-Christian world, embodied in "the best that has been thought and said," can have a civilizing influence, transcending class tensions and leading to a more humane society. The study of English literature in American universities owes its very existence to this argument, which was more subtly elaborated by such later figures as T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis; and, until recent years, English professors have been especially suspicious of mass-produced narratives from Hollywood, which seem to threaten or debase the values of both "organic" popular culture and high literary culture. When I use the term "Kantian," I am speaking of a slightly older, more complex mode of idealist philosophy that emerges toward the end of the eighteenth century in Europe, and that we commonly associate not only with Immanuel Kant, but also with Georg Hegel, Johann von Schiller, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing throughout the period of high literary modernism, all art in the European world was theorized under what might be roughly described as a Kantian set of assumptions; that is, both the making and the appreciation of art were conceived as specialized, autonomous, and transcendent activities having chiefly to do with media-specific form. A *locus classicus* of such reasoning (perhaps even a parody of it) is the fifth chapter of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914), in which Stephen Dedalus tells us that art differs from pornography because it does not elicit desire, from propaganda because it does not teach or move to political action, and from market goods because it has no entertainment value or practical utility. The proper effect of art, Dedalus says, is the "luminous silent stasis of aesthetic pleasure," which can be achieved only through the contemplation of formal or part-to-whole relationships.

Never mind that Joyce's own novel problematizes such ideas, and that his next novel, *Ulysses*, pushes aestheticism far beyond its sustainable limits. Some variation of aesthetic formalism has none the less continued to underpin every modern discipline that claims to be dealing with art. Consider, for example, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's excellent college textbook, *Film Art*, which has long been used in introductory film study courses throughout the United States. In most ways, Bordwell and Thompson are quite different from the literary dandies and philosophical idealists of the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries; their approach is practical and undogmatic, grounded in empirical evidence from an exceptionally wide range of films, and their chief theoretical influences are contemporary narratology and the Russian formalists. Even so, they devote themselves to teaching us how to recognize cinema-specific codes, and how to appreciate part-whole relationships within individual movies.

I hasten to confess that I myself am something of an aesthete, and I strongly believe that no proper criticism of art can ignore questions of form. I'm also an English major, and I don't think that we can simply dismiss Matthew Arnold, or that we should stop reading the Great Books and seeing films based on them. It is nevertheless important to understand that both the Arnoldian defense of high culture and the aesthetic movement
are historically situated ideologies, generated largely in response to industrial capitalism and mechanical reproduction. Their culminating or extreme instance, and in one sense their crisis, was the period immediately before and after World War II, when New Criticism was in the ascendency in American universities, and when modernist intellectuals, including such otherwise quite different theorists as Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg, enunciated an idea of "authentic" art in defense against the culture industries. Greenberg's famous essay on "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," for example, describes the essential project of modernism as follows: "Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself."²

Greenberg was writing in 1939, at a moment of trauma for Popular-Front intellectuals, when Fascism had overtaken Europe, when modern art, which had already been assimilated into bourgeois culture, was being assailed from both the left and the right for its decadence and elitism, and when aestheticism seemed caught in a struggle to survive the two reigning forms of materialist utopia—capitalism and Stalinism. For Greenberg, the only refuge for "authentic" art lay in the realm of the "merely artistic," or in the radically formal exploration of artistic media. The artistic imitation of the natural or social world, he argued, needed to be replaced by the study of "the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves" (23). As Juan A. Suarez has recently observed in a fine commentary on Greenberg, the result of this policy was "an exacerbation of formalism and a sort of art in exile from the values of audiences; that is, an art which seeks to remain untainted by reigning mercantilism and instrumental rationality."³

The capitalist movie industry, especially in Hollywood, has always operated by a dialectically opposite logic. It recognized from the beginning that it could gain a sort of legitimacy among middle-class viewers by reproducing facsimiles of more respectable art or by adapting literature to another medium. Film scholars William Uricchio and Roberta E. Peterson have demonstrated that as early as 1908, at the height of the nickelodeon boom and partly in response to the Reform Movement in American politics, the Vitagraph film company in New York engaged in an aggressive, concentrated effort to appeal to the middle class by making one-reel adaptions of Shakespeare and Dante.⁴ At virtually the same moment, Parisian financiers established the Société Film d'Art, which made quite profitable feature-length films based on the dramas of Rostand and Sardou, as well as silent versions of Dickens's Oliver Twist and Gothe's The Sorrows of Young Werther. Historian David Cook remarks that "For a while it seemed as if everything written, sung, or danced (for photographed ballet and opera formed a large part of the film d'art corpus) in Western Europe between 1900 and the Renaissance, and Greek tragedy as well, found its way into one of these stage-bound and pretentious productions."⁵ Uncinematic as the films d'art may seem today, they were among the first feature films, and their drive for respectability pointed toward the development of the star system, the picture palace, and in one sense Hollywood itself. Equally important were the hugely successful Italian historical pictures of the same period—especially Enrico Guazzoni's Quo vadis? (1912), a nine-reel spectacular based on a novel by Nobel laureate Henryk Sienkiewicz, which established the market for "blockbuster" movies such as Birth of a Nation (also an adaptation).
The advent of the talkies and the Fordist organization of the major film studios produced a great appetite for literature among Hollywood moguls, who provided a source of major income, if not artistic satisfaction, for every important playwright and author in the United States, including such names as Eugene O’Neill, Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, and William Faulkner. But here we encounter an important historical irony. At the same time that the movies, the legitimate theater, and the book publishing industry were growing closer together, sophisticated art in general was in active rebellion against bourgeois culture and was intentionally producing work that could not be easily assimilated into the mainstream. Modernism was not only willfully difficult and formally “experimental,” it was also sexually scandalous, critical of progress, and offensive to the Babbitts and the Bovarys who supposedly made up the viewing audience. Thus, at the height of the classic studio system, when Hollywood was absorbing every kind of artistic talent and establishing itself as the very emblem of modernity, the Production Code Administration (PCA) began to engage in what film historian Richard Maltby calls “a conscious ideological project” aimed at preventing what one of its leaders described as “the prevalent type of book and play” from becoming “the prevalent type of movie.” This did not mean that modern literature was no longer adapted. Classic Hollywood still wanted to acquire every sort of cultural capital (in the 1940s, Twentieth-Century Fox even proposed John Ford as the possible director of an adaptation of Ulysses), but it was especially interested in source material that could easily be recuperated into an aesthetically and morally conservative form of entertainment. Even after the qualified relaxation of censorship restrictions in the 1950s, the most adaptable sources for movies were the “readerly” texts of the nineteenth century rather than the “writerly” texts of high modernism, which were explicitly designed to resist being “reduced” to anything not themselves.

Meanwhile, in still another historical irony, film was being regarded in some quarters as the quintessentially modernist medium. Some of the most talented movie directors in the first half of the century approached the problem of literary adaptation in a spirit of intense aestheticism—as in Stroheim’s version of Greed, or in Eisenstein’s abortive attempt to film An American Tragedy. Along similar lines, high modernist fiction and the international art cinema clearly influenced one another—as in John Dos Passo’s USA trilogy, which Dos Passos began shortly after meeting Eisenstein and reading the Soviet theories of montage. Eventually, the cinema was theorized as the dominant “way of seeing” in the modern world and as a condition toward which most of the visual and literary arts aspired. Cultural critic Arnold Hauser once placed the whole of the twentieth-century art, including such things as Cubist paintings and poems like The Waste Land, under the evocative rubric of “the film age.” In an influential book written in the 1950s, French critic Claude-Edmonde Magny proposed that the period between the two world wars should be called “the age of the American novel” and that the leading American writers, especially Hemingway and Faulkner, were guided by a “film aesthetic.” More recently, American critics Alan Spiegel and Keith Cohen have each written books arguing that modernist literature—especially the writings of Flaubert, Proust, James, Conrad, Joyce, and Woolf—is fundamentally “cinematic” in its form.

It was not until 1957, however, that the movies seemed to have “matured” enough to produce the first full-scale academic analysis of film adaptation in America: George
Bluestone’s *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema* (University of California Press). In this book, Bluestone argues that certain movies (his examples are all from Hollywood, including *The Informer, Wuthering Heights,* and *The Grapes of Wrath*) do not debase their literary sources; instead, they “metamorphose” novels into another medium which has its own formal or narratological possibilities. Such an argument seems hardly likely to provoke controversy; its difficulty, at least insofar as Bluestone’s general aim of giving movies artistic respectability is concerned, is not so much that it leads to the wrong conclusions, but that it takes place entirely on the grounds of formalism or high-modernist aestheticism. Given the modernist ideology of art, film cannot acquire true cultural capital unless it first theorizes a media-specific form. Bluestone recognizes this fact, and as a result he bases his entire book on the notion that “the end products of novel and film represent different aesthetic genera, as different from each other as ballet is from architecture” (5). At the same time, however, his book tends to confirm the intellectual priority and formal superiority of canonical novels, which provide the films he discusses with their sources and with a standard of cultural value against which their success or failure is measured.

Bluestone does not seem to realize that when we start from the modernist position, the only way to avoid making film seem belated, middlebrow, or culturally inferior is to devalue straightforward, high-cultural adaptation altogether. Indeed, that’s exactly what happened in Europe at the very moment when Bluestone’s book was published. The central importance of the French New Wave in the history of worldwide taste and opinion was that it was able to break with traditional movie criticism and establish a truly modernist (as well as somewhat Arnoldian) film criticism by launching an attack on what Truffaut called a “Tradition of Quality,” made up of respectable literary adaptations. One of the best-kept secrets of the New Wave was that many of their own films were based on books; the sources they chose, however, were often lowbrow, and when they adapted “serious” works or wrote essays about film adaptations (such as Bazin’s famous essay on *Diary of a Country Priest*), they made sure that the auteur would seem more important than the author.

The French auteurists never treated movies as a “seventh art” or as a separate but equal member of the cultural pantheon. Instead, adopting Alexandre Astruc’s idea of the “camera stylo,” they spoke of film as a language and the director as a kind of writer, wielding a lens instead of a pen. They elevated the cinematic mise-en-scene (the director’s treatment of camera movement, space, decor, and acting) to a greater importance than the scenario; and as a result of the critical revolution they helped to inspire, it is now commonplace for film historians to speak of directorial masterpieces or canonical works of cinema that revise and far surpass their relatively minor written sources. (My personal list of such pictures would include Eisenstein’s *October,* Murnau’s *Sunrise,* Welles’s *Magnificent Ambersons,* Ophuls’s *Letter From an Unknown Woman,* Hitchcock’s *Psycho,* and Godard’s *Contempt.* It is also commonplace to observe that some of the best movie directors deliberately avoid great literature in order to foreground their own artistry. The practice is enshrined during Hitchcock’s interview with Truffaut, in which Hitchcock claims that the approach he usually takes to sources is to “read a story only once, and if I like the basic idea, I just forget about the book and start to create cinema.” He says that he would never adapt *Crime and Punishment,* in part because he thinks that feature films
are more like short stories than like novels, and in part because “in Dostoyevsky’s novel there are many, many words and all of them have a function” (72). Truffaut quickly agrees, voicing one of the axioms of modernist aesthetics: “That’s right. Theoretically, a masterpiece is something that has already found its perfection of form, its definitive form” (72). And indeed, Hitchcock’s credits lend support to these conclusions, although it should be noted that there are exceptions to the rules: Thirty-nine Steps (based on a novel by John Buchan), Sabotage (based on a novel by Josef Conrad), and The Birds (based on a short story by Daphne DuMaurier) are quite free adaptations, but the half-hour TV film, “Lamb to the Slaughter,” which is one of Hitchcock’s most perfect achievements, is a quite literal adaptation of a Rooul Dahl short story, scripted by Dahl himself.

Since the 1960s, academic writing on adaptation has gained considerable sophistication by making use of important theoretical writings on both literature and film, including the structuralist and post-structuralist poetics of Roland Barthes, the narratology of Gerard Genette, and the neo-formalism of Bordwell and Thompson. In general, however, it continues to waver back and forth between the two approaches exemplified by Bluestone and the auteurists. The Bluestone approach relies on an implicit metaphor of translation, which governs all investigations of how codes move across sign systems. Writing in this category usually deals with the concept of literary versus cinematic form, and it pays close attention to the problem of textual fidelity in order to identify the specific formal capabilities of the media. By contrast, the auteurist approach relies upon a metaphor of performance. It, too, involves questions of fidelity, but it emphasizes textual difference rather than similarity, individual styles rather than formal systems. The two approaches are mirrored in the practice of certain film makers, and both give valid answers to the kinds of questions they ask, although I myself have always preferred the auteurists because they are less reverent about literature and more apt to consider such things as audiences, historical situations, and cultural politics.

The problem with most writing about adaptation as translation is that it tends to valorize the literary canon and essentialize the nature of cinema. Consider Seymour Chatman’s “What Novels Can Do That Film Can’t (and Vice Versa),” first published in Critical Inquiry in 1981, a theoretically informed essay that offers an intelligent discussion of Jean Renoir’s 1936 adaptation of Guy de Maupassant’s “Une Partie de campagne,” showing how the same narrative is represented in different media. Chatman is ostensibly unconcerned with questions of value, but his argument is nevertheless based on respected literary and cinematic examples. He makes some interesting observations about the ways description and point of view are treated respectively in realist fiction and narrative cinema, but he also makes dubious generalizations about the nature of film. (In the last analysis, film is best defined in material terms, as nothing more nor less than an audiovisual recording instrument. It is therefore capable of representing the whole range of signifying practices and of juxtaposing literary language with images.) Ultimately, Chatman’s analysis tells us less about what conventional novels can do that narrative films can’t than we could learn by reading certain books and by broadening the textual milieu we examine. For example, Charles Willeford’s relatively little known Pick-Up, a pulp-fiction masterpiece of the 1950s, would present more difficulty for a film maker than Joyce’s Finnegans Wake (which has in fact been turned into a movie), for the simple reason that a crucially important word describing the central character does not appear until the
final sentence. I refrain from quoting the word here and simply recommend this intriguing book to my readers.

Another problem with most writing on adaptation as translation is that it betrays certain unexamined ideological concerns because it deals of necessity with sexually-charged materials and cannot avoid a gendered language associated with the notion of "fidelity." George Bluestone tries to defend certain movies against the accusation that they "violate" their sources. Seymour Chatman spends almost half of his essay on the two versions of "Une Partie de campagne" analyzing the way Renoir adapts a description of a flirtatious young woman on a swing. ("She was a pretty girl of about eighteen," Maupausant writes, and Chatman comments at length on the problem of how to convey the tone of "about eighteen" in cinematic imagery.) In a New York Times essay that is far less systematic and more judgmental than Chatman's, "What Only Words, Not Film, Can Portray," literary critic Cynthia Ozick derides Jane Campion's 1997 adaptation of A Portrait of a Lady because it "perverts" Henry James, replacing his "gossamer vibrations of the interior life" and "philosophy of the soul" with "crudity," "self-oriented eroticism," and "voluptuous gazing." Ozick's commentary is especially intriguing because it reverses the standard imagery of modernist aestheticism, so that mass culture seems less like an ignorant shop girl and more like a crude or lascivious male, bent on despoiling a loved object. I'm reminded of the first sentence of Fredric Jameson's Signatures of the Visible, a book about movies by the most distinguished contemporary proponent of the modernist tradition: "The visual is essentially pornographic," Jameson declares, as if the very act of translating words into photographic images involved a move toward something bodily and nasty.

The most recent academic book on adaptation as translation, Brian McFarlane's Novel to Film (1996), is aware of at least some of the problems I've been describing. It begins with an attack on "fidelity criticism" and devotes a chapter each to MGM's Random Harvest, which is based on a best seller, and Martin Scorsese's remake of Cape Fear, which is based at least second-hand on a pulp novel. And yet McFarlane himself is obsessively concerned with problems of fidelity—and necessarily so, because the major purpose of his book turns out to be a scrupulous but rather dry demonstration of how the "cardinal features" of narrative, most of them exemplified by canonical, nineteenth-century novels from British and American authors, can be transposed intact to movies. As he puts it, he wants to set up "procedures for distinguishing between that which can be transferred from one medium to another (essentially, narrative) and that which, being dependent on different signifying systems, cannot be transferred (essentially, enunciation)." Here as elsewhere, the study of adaptation stops at the water's edge, as if it were hesitant to move beyond formalism and ask more interesting questions.

Writing about adaptation ought to provide a more flexible, animating discourse, if only because it can address such a wide variety of things. As Dudley Andrew pointed out in 1984 in a seminal essay, every representational film (and, I would add, every representational artefact) could be regarded as an adaptation—hence the very word "representation." Andrew estimates that more than half of all commercial movies derive from novels. This figure may be high, but it is not wildly exaggerated; in fact, in 1985, The New York Times said that one in fifty novels published in this country were optioned by Hollywood. If we extend the idea of adaptation beyond novels, the number of
"derivative" films is quite large. *Variety* has recently published a set of statistics indicating that twenty percent of the movies produced in 1997 had their sources in books. (The list of authors is intriguing: it includes John Gresham, Stephen King, Michael Crichton, Howard Stern, James Ellroy, and Leo Tolstoy.) Another twenty per cent was made up from plays, sequels, remakes, TV shows, and magazine or newspaper articles—meaning that only about half of the pictures seen by the public in that year originated in scripts.  

Academics have limited the issues at stake, not only by focusing largely on novels but also by insisting on what Andrew calls the “cultural status” of a prior model. “In the case of those texts explicitly termed ‘adaptations,’” Andrew writes, “the cultural model which the cinema represents is already treasured as a representation in another sign system” (97). Precisely; one could hardly expect to find a better definition of what adaptation means to most critics and historians. But as long as we continue to accept this definition, as Andrew himself does, we need ask: treasured by whom? The question would reveal that adaptation study in the limited academic sense is only partly about enunciative techniques or the “cardinal features” of narrative; it is also about the interpretation of canonical literature in more or less traditional fashion. In other words, it is a system of film making and critical writing that tends to reproduce a bourgeois mode of reception.

To his credit, Andrew argues that “It is time for adaptation study to take a sociological turn” (104). And yet, because he remains committed to the notion of the “already treasured,” the kind of things he recommends for us to study remain conventionally literary—for example, the changing history of naturalism in Zola, Gorky, and Renoir. I would suggest that what we need instead is a broader definition of adaptation and a sociology that takes into account the commercial apparatus, the audience, and the academic culture industry. Academics need to move the discussion of adaptation slightly away from the Great-Novels-Into-Great-Films theme, and at the same time give less attention to purely formal than to economic, cultural, and political issues. More attention needs to be paid to the ways that books, plays, movies, and TV shows have been subject to cross-cultural adaptation. We also need more analysis of the relation between TV and theatrical film. Over the past decade, Hollywood has created a virtual genre out of old TV shows (“The Fugitive,” “Mod Squad,” “Charlie’s Angels”) that have been adapted to big-screen spectaculars. Ironically it is TV, not film, that seems most interested in the literary canon. For the past twenty-five years, Mobil’s *Masterpiece Theater* has been the major producer of filmed adaptations of “respectable” literature in America, reaching audiences as large as Hollywood in its heyday and probably helping to identify a niche market for the successful Merchant-Ivory adaptations of E.M. Forester that have played in theaters. Public Television is not alone in producing such material. The A&E network recently aired a mini-series based on C. S. Forester’s *Horatio Hornblower*, the USA network has produced *Moby Dick*, and Bravo will soon air *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The TNT organization has announced that during the 1999-2000 season, it will produce adaptations of *Animal Farm*, *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield*, and *Don Quixote*. “We’re taking a big risk,” network president Brad Siegel told a reporter; but he seemed optimistic because “the audience we’re trying to attract is looking for that kind of quality programming.” (As the list of programs suggests, Edwardian and nineteenth-century
classics have always been the best sources for “prestige” movies on TV, just as they have always been for the movies.)

The current economic environment, which is characterized by enormous mergers in the communications industry, makes it especially important for us to understand the purely commercial relations between publishing, cinematic, and broadcast media. For example, we need to ask why certain canonical books become of interest to Hollywood in specific periods, and we need more elaborate investigations into the historical relation between movies and book publishing. We also need to ask what conditions of the marketplace govern the desire for fidelity. (An audience survey conducted by David Selznick in the 1940s determined that very few people had read Jane Eyre, and that the movie based on the novel did not need to be especially faithful; on the other hand, Selznick was a fanatic about maintaining fidelity in Gone With the Wind and Rebecca, because he knew that a substantial part of the audience had read Margaret Mitchell’s and Daphne DuMaurier’s best-selling books.) Equally important, we need writings that address the uses of canonical literature by specific film makers. Some directors have been intent on faithfully illustrating their sources, whereas others have been motivated by a desire to interrogate or “read” the prior text. A good example of the latter tendency was Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who once argued that “Cinematic transformation of a literary work should never assume that its purpose is simply the maximal realization of the images that literature evokes in the minds of its readers.” Such an assumption is “preposterous,” Fassbinder wrote, because there are so many different readers with different fantasies. His own aim, as he described it in relation to adaptations such as Berlin Alexanderplatz and Querelle, was to avoid a “composite fantasy” and to engage in what he called “an unequivocal and single-minded questioning of the piece of literature and its language.”

In addition to expanding the questions we ask and the kinds of texts we take into account, we need to augment the metaphors of translation and performance with the metaphor of intertextuality, or with what M. M. Bakhtin called “dialogics.” This approach has recently been elaborated by film theorist Robert Stam, who emphasizes “the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture,” and the “entire matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated.” Stam takes us beyond formalism and beyond simple attempts to compare “originals” with “transformations.” If we followed his advice, adaptation study would be brought more into line with both contemporary theory and contemporary filmmaking. We now live in a media-saturated environment dense with cross-references and filled with borrowings from movies, books, and every other form of representation. If modernism can be described as an effort to prevent adaptation through an emphasis on media-specific form, then postmodernism might be described as an attempt to adapt all the media to one another. Books can become movies, but movies themselves also become novels, published screenplays, Broadway musicals, television shows, remakes, etc. As one minor example of a recent film that reflects this protean and highly allusive environment, consider Richard Kwietniowski’s Love and Death on Long Island (1998), which tells the story of a sheltered British novelist who goes to see an E. M. Forster adaptation at the local cineplex and wanders by mistake into Hot Pants College II. The novelist develops a crush on a young actor he sees on the screen, who reminds him of a
Pre-Raphaelite painting of the death of Chatterton in the Tate Gallery. I shall not describe the plot any further, except to note that Kwietniowski's film is based on a novel by Gilbert Adair and that the novel is itself a rewriting of Mann's *Death in Venice* and Nabokov's *Lolita*. The film complicates things still more by introducing full-scale parodies of Hollywood B movies and TV sitcoms. It brings high culture and low culture, the "literary" and the "cinematic," into ludic juxtaposition, reminding its audience that every text is already intersected with multiple other texts.

Significantly, *Hot Pants College II*, the film that stimulates the lonely novelist's desire, is a sequel; and on a theoretical level, the problem of both sequels and remakes, like the problem of both parody and pastiche, is quite similar to the problem of adaptation. All these forms can be subsumed under the more general theory of artistic imitation, in the restricted sense of works of art that imitate other works of art. Notice, too, that all the "imitative" types of film are in danger of being assigned a low status, or even of eliciting critical opprobrium, because they are copies of "culturally treasured" originals. By way of demonstration, we need only compare the critical discourse surrounding Hitchcock's *Psycho* (an adaptation that some American critics once regarded as a tasteless horror movie but that nearly everyone now acknowledges as a masterpiece) with the discourse surrounding both its sequels/prequel and its 1998 remake, which encountered nearly universal derision.

Viewed from the larger perspective of cultural anthropology and Bakhtinian dialogics, every movie can be seen to problematize originality, autonomy, and the bourgeois mode of reception. Walter Benjamin was aware of this phenomenon in his famous essay on mechanical reproduction, where he quotes Abel Gance's enthusiastic 1927 pronouncement, "'Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films.'" "Presumably without intending it," Benjamin remarks, Gance was issuing "a far-reaching liquidation." What we may not realize is that Andre Bazin was aware of much the same issues in his 1948 essay on adaptation, to which I alluded at the beginning. In this remarkable essay, Bazin asks us to think of film adaptation in relation to commercialism, industrial modernity, and democracy, and to compare it with an engraving or digest that makes the so-called original "readily accessible to all." Most discussion of such films, he notes, has been conducted on the level of formalist aesthetics, which is preoccupied with the nature of the "cinematic." But "One must first know," he writes, "to what end the adaptation is designed: for the cinema or its audience. One must also realize that most adaptors care far more about the latter than about the former" (44).

Bazin attacks the "cliched bias according to which culture is inseparable from intellectual effort," and the "classical modes of cultural communication, which are at once a defense of culture and a secreting of it behind high walls" (45) He also observes that adaptation has a number of important social functions, one of which is directly pedagogical, taking the form of everything from 19th-century "abridged" classics to more recent things Bazin does not mention, such as *Classics Illustrated* comics, *Reader's Digest* condensed books, and plot summaries in *Cliff Notes*. (Where the notion of the "digest" is concerned, an interesting study could be written about the long and complex relationship between educational institutions and Hollywood. For instance, David Selznick's 1935 adaptation of *David Copperfield* was marketed to high school English teachers by means of
a free illustrated monograph on the art of cinematic adaptation, complete with study questions for students.) Still another function of adaptation, Bazin suggests, is in the creation of national or cultural mythology. How many of us have actually read *Moby Dick*, and how many of us have seen one of the comic-book, theatrical, TV or film adaptations that give it folkloric significance? The most highly "adaptable" authors—Twain and Shakespeare are preeminent examples in the Anglo-American world—have been especially important to the formation of national myths, or to what the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci described as the ideology of the "national-popular." But this mythic or ideological dimension of adaptation is often overlooked because of what Bazin refers to as "a rather modern notion for which the critics are in large part responsible: that of the untouchability of the work of art." The 19th century, he says, "firmly established an idolatry of form, mainly literary, that is still with us" (45). And the idolatry of form blinds us to the fact that all great novels—even the ones by Flaubert or Joyce—create characters that can be appropriated for many uses.

At this juncture and many others in his essay, Bazin sounds like what today we call a post-structuralist or postmodernist. "The ferocious defense of literary works," he says, "is to a certain extent aesthetically justified; but we must also be aware that it rests on a rather recent, individualistic conception of the 'author' and the 'work,' a conception that was far from being ethically rigorous in the seventeenth century and that started to become legally defined only at the end of the eighteenth. ... All things considered, it is possible to imagine that we are moving toward a reign of adaptation in which the notion of the unity of the work of art, if not the very notion of the author himself, will be destroyed" (49). Some people today believe we have already arrived at that point. Whatever the case may be, it is high time that writers on adaptation recognize what Bazin saw in 1948. The study of adaptation needs to be joined with the study of recycling, remaking, and every other form of retelling in the age of mechanical reproduction and electronic communication. By this means, adaptation will become part of a general theory of repetition and will move from the margins to the center of contemporary media studies.

Notes


The logo on the front cover was designed by Douglas R. Hofstadter, Professor of Cognitive Science, Indiana University, and former member of the Governing Board of the Institute for Advanced Study.

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