

Adapting to the Image and Resisting It: On Filming Literature and a Possible World for Literary Studies

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PREDICTING ANY FUTURE—OR FUTURES—FOR LITERARY CRITICISM is a risky business, perhaps all the more so now that the relation of literature to its others is arguably subject to greater and faster changes than ever before. The changes to come in literary criticism will be determined by transformations in literature proper as well as by any number of forces outside literature. By changes “within” literature we cannot mean simply those to contemporary or recent literature, whose canons—to say nothing of what exceeds these canons—are far from settled. The literary past continues to change even if every given text endlessly repeats itself like a broken record. For an authoritative formulation of this position, one need not turn to some outré poststructuralist or to Walter Benjamin’s contention that even the dead are not “safe” from the reaches of the present (“On the Concept” 391). One can appeal to the sober, usually conservative thinking of T. S. Eliot:

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. (38)

One could quibble with this or that phrase in Eliot’s formulation, and few would cling to the invocation of “an ideal order”; but his well-chosen term “preposterous” illuminates, in this oddly Hegelian

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passage, how the work of art changes over time in relation to its subsequent history, the “pre” transformed by the “post.” It’s not just that one might read the former differently in the light of the latter, as in the popular sense that one always finds “something new” in “the classics.”¹ The work of the past changes, even if not utterly.

In any configuration of a literary work and its posthumous or postdated others, one of the most telling supplements would be its film adaptation (or adaptations), which would preposterously change the literary original, after the fact, even if the filmmakers attempt to render their source faithfully.² The film adaptation would be a pointed version of the supplement that Benjamin argued, in his first dissertation, mainly on Friedrich Schlegel, was called for by art. In his (Schlegelian) view, the work of art demands its own critique, its reading, its reworking in or translation into another form, including that of another work of art (“Concept”). The adaptation can be all these, and the strong adaptation that, like the kind of translation about which Benjamin theorized, marks its distance from the original, marks itself as adaptation or translation even as it engages its original, never trying or pretending to fold itself or dissolve back into the original (“Task”).

In what follows, I use brief examples to sketch some of the stakes and possibilities of the relation between the original and its adaptations, with an eye to how one might teach film and literature with and sometimes against each other. In our historical moment of the (hyper)modern West, with its increasingly visual culture, the formerly pure text, if there ever was such a thing, stands under a certain—or uncertain—pressure of the image. We are and have been witnessing the becoming-image of the word in any number of guises, to say nothing of the displacement and even replacement of word by image (Rancière). Having always had to rely on a circumscribed visibility to be legible, the written

word is increasingly rendered as a spectacle or at least more imagistically and in the company of images. Words so often now come with images that they seem more or less inseparable: in graphic novels; in comics or manga, with and without high artistic claims; and in fictions riddled with photographs, as in the work of W. G. Sebald, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Aleksandar Hemon.³ And one can hardly imagine these days a newspaper without images. The imaging and screening of texts are increasing by quantum leaps and bounds.

Today vast numbers of students of literature and other readers are as conversant with images as with words, or more so.⁴ Would teaching text with images, literature with film, be pandering to students, caving in to a not-so-lofty trend? Or might it afford opportunities to get at what is actually going on with texts, images, and text images? Literary theory beginning with Plato has tended to evince a pronounced animus against the image, from Aristotle’s dim view of *opsis* in his *Poetics* to Hegel’s awarding, in his lectures on aesthetics, the highest place among the arts to poetry, since poetry leaves behind the sensuous element and operates almost purely in the realm of the intellectual, not as a symbol but as a “meaningless sign” (968). In this, philosophical literary theory generally sides with the stance that monotheistic, especially Abrahamic, cultures have adopted more or less rigorously: a resistance to the image. The ancient (Mosaic) prohibition against images casts a long shadow, informing the production and nonproduction of images and their reception to this day, more tenaciously in Islamic and Judaic cultures than in Christian (though the issue plays out differently in Protestantism and Catholicism). It also informs a main line of aesthetic theory, the tradition of Burke and Kant, in which sublimity is aligned with the power of the word and the syntactic, combinatorial possibilities of discourse to render effects impossible or hard to achieve through images alone. There is, however, a countertradition,

what one might call the line of Lessing, who in his *Laocoön* was at pains to distinguish specificity of the literary and plastic arts. If Lessing ultimately prefers the verbal too, his treatise stops short of establishing a conceptual or doctrinal hierarchy. In Lessing's era, any number of aestheticians, well versed in the visual and literary arts, many of them also practicing artists, saw no need to argue for one domain's priority over the other.⁵ I too see no virtue in categorically favoring words over images or images over words, even if it were possible and even if literary studies necessarily focuses far more on the word.

There is not always a huge difference between text on a printed page and on a computer screen, but something distinctive seems to obtain in reading on a screen, a medium where images are more expected. Before the late twentieth century, it was rare for fictions to rely on significant visual effects. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, with its black and marbled pages, and Stéphane Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés," with its spectacular typographic layout, are striking exceptions that prove the general rule of the medium.

Certainly literature often has its designs on the visual, from locodescriptive poetry to character sketches to the more or less elaborate setting of novelistic scenes. The narrator in *Tristram Shandy* will on occasion say something like "Let me stop and give you a picture . . ." and proceed to describe in some detail the matters in question (374). Film clearly has visual resources along these lines of which literature can only dream. A perhaps apocryphal story tells of Tolstoy's early enthusiasm for and envy of film's ability to set and change scenes instantly (Leyda 410). The whole economy of the system György Lukács called "narration and description," of showing and telling, works very differently in film and in literature, and the tension between the way it works in one medium and in the other can highlight the specificity of the two media. The translation from literature to film entails

an inability to reproduce some things in one-to-one fashion. This impossibility simply to reproduce affords certain freedoms but often coexists with an imperative to analogize.⁶ The most astute commentator on adaptation, André Bazin, can find in Jean Delannoy's pervasive use of snow in his film version of *La symphonie pastorale* (*The Pastoral Symphony*) a rough equivalent of André Gide's *passé simple*; even better, he sees an equivalent of Georges Bernanos's hyperboles in Robert Bresson's use of ellipsis and litotes throughout his adaptation of *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (*Journal of a Country Priest* [124–25]).

The most common judgment of a film adaptation is that it doesn't live up to the original, as if every adaptation could be subtitled "Lost in Translation." There are, no doubt, counterexamples: almost everyone would agree with Salman Rushdie that the film *The Wizard of Oz* surpasses, as a work of art, the book on which it was based (14), and many viewers could likely agree on many other instances, perhaps Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* or Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, with its masterly direction of a screenplay by Raymond Chandler and Wilder based on a not-too-shabby James Cain novel. Common negative judgments often have to do with the putative inadequacy of the film to do justice to the language—and what is there but language?—of the text, what it presents and represents. Yet the relation of text to film is hardly a simple opposition between word and image, not least because texts can be rather imagistic, even ekphrastic, and films can be laden with dialogue, voice-overs, and other sorts of discourse.⁷ One tends to forget how wordy even silent films can be, with their intertitles and often easily readable lips. Yet if a text consists of wall-to-wall language and a film contains wall-to-wall images, the omnipresence of the image in film cannot be accompanied by correspondingly ubiquitous language: the medium simply cannot bear it. This becomes a crucial issue when literary texts are adapted

for the screen, some more than others. When Vladimir Nabokov was hired, for a princely sum, to write the screenplay for *Lolita*, the fact that, with breathtaking naïveté, he turned in a manuscript of some four hundred pages indicates how little he thought could be sacrificed to maintain the integrity of a text dependent on verbal density and dexterity; only a fraction of the manuscript (roughly twenty percent) was retained for Kubrick's film (x).⁸ The ubiquity of the image virtually necessitates a spare use of the word. There are, of course, good films with loads of dialogue, like Howard Hawks's *His Girl Friday*, with its fast-talking dames and nondames, but such films tend to be almost pure dramas, often with a low degree of visual interest. When a film such as Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting*, based on the Irvine Welsh novel, features barrages of words, that language is hard to take and to process: the rules of the medium virtually prohibit it. Yet even *Trainspotting* confines such density of language to short spurts. When the Japanese novelist Kōbō Abe was commissioned to transform his novel *Woman in the Dunes* for Hiroshi Teshigahara's film of the same name, it was remarkable how much of his language he would sacrifice for the film to work as a film. In adaptation, the trick is often to do by any visual means necessary—or by primarily visual means—something of what was done verbally, in the more or less nebulous spirit of the text.⁹

My principal example of how a cinematic adaptation can function as a compelling supplement to its literary source is Kubrick's rendition of Stephen King's *The Shining*, an adaptation that famously disappointed the author, so much so that he helped finance a longer, more faithful miniseries for television as if to correct the Kubrick version. King's novel runs over five hundred pages and Kubrick's film just under three hours: something had to give. Fredric Jameson has written helpfully about the telescoping of generations in the transition from novel to film, one way that

Kubrick reduces the novel so as to make a historical point different from King's. Both novel and film are about a small family—nuclear in more ways than one—charged with taking care of the vast, remote, aptly named Overlook Hotel one Colorado winter. Jack Torrance, the father, is an aspiring writer with a drinking problem, and his son, Danny, has the strange power of “shining,” able to see the future, the past, and the absent present, not unlike an omniscient narrator,¹⁰ and to communicate telepathically. (It's no accident that King's most succinct definition of writing is simply “[t]elepathy, of course” [*On Writing* 103].)

There are visual mechanisms and dynamics in Kubrick's rendition of *The Shining* that constitute and even perform striking analogues to the rhetoric, themes, and narration of King's text. In an essay, accompanied only by stills, one cannot reproduce the sequential movements of scenes; I will focus instead on the midpoints between outgoing and incoming scenes in Kubrick's film. In the scene that precedes the frame reproduced in figure 1, Jack's wife, Wendy, is delivering breakfast in bed to her husband, who is first framed (unbeknownst to us) in a mirror. The camera pulls back and reveals the mirror reflecting his image. The *œil* has been *tromped*, as it were, by the mirror—a vehicle and an emblem of full, if reversed, mimesis—which frames a scene of conversation about the ease or unease with writing. Wendy ventures that “it's just a matter of getting into the habit of writing every day,” to which Jack—not meaning it—retorts, “Yup, that's all it is.” The scene ends with a discussion of horror and a comic dismissal of it (one of many in the film); Jack remarks on a powerful incident of *déjà vu* he experienced and proceeds to parody the typical soundtrack of a low-budget horror movie. *Déjà vu* here is not just any return of the past but a return that allows one to “see,” as Jack says, “around the next corner,” a motif that will gather force later in the film, whose visual grammar depends a lot on the articulations of corridors and corners.

Exactly in the middle of the transition from this scene to the next, we see the image of a typewriter overlapping the figure of Jack (fig. 1). The film shifts from the writer to the *typewriter*, a typewriter sans typist, though a smoking cigarette suggests someone should be there. The typewriter is superimposed over the face of the writer who is supposed to be writing or at least typing. (Jameson recalls Truman Capote's judgment of Jack Kerouac: "That's not writing, it's typing" [93].) The writer and the medium of writing are divorced from each other in time and space—the typewriter displacing, "overwriting," the writer proper. As the incoming scene unfolds, we hear a rhythmic beating as if some supernatural (nonhuman) force were striking one key at a time, but we find seconds later that the sound comes from Jack throwing a tennis ball against a wall again and again. The striking transition is effected by the use of a dissolve, the fading out of one scene merging

with the fading in of another. The discussion takes up writing and the subject's easy or difficult relation to it, only to have the whole scene displaced by the image of a writing machine without a writer that nonetheless seems to perform a sort of writing. This transition links up with numerous passages in the film in which a subject is not in control of himself or herself, and it relates to a similar phenomenon in King's text, whose narrative texture features all kinds of sentences whose agency or status differs from that of regular sentences and is often unclear. The novel marks out many italicized sentences, starting with the first one: "Jack Torrance thought: *Officious little prick*" (3). This teaches us the basic code that an italicized sentence is spoken as if to oneself, not voiced. Yet other italicized sentences are fully disembodied, as in the party scene, where some phrasing is borrowed from one of King's source texts, Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death": "(*The Red Death held sway*



FIG. 1

Frame from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*.

over all!)” (157). Such interventions have to be presented in the linear sequence of the words on the page, even if they are or could be simultaneous with action or some other language in the scene. The film has different resources at its disposal.

Before offering a general characterization of how the dissolve works in terms of a reading of the novel, let us take up another spectacular instance of this formal mechanism or structure. It comes in a sequence where Jack and Wendy are shown around the hotel as it's being closed up, with talk of how the hotel is about to become “a ghost ship.” We glimpse in a first dissolve a ghostly image of the group talking and walking, even though the shift seconds later is only to the same group, seen now from the front instead of the back. This shift is followed almost immediately by a discussion between the regular caretaker, Dick Halloran, about to leave, and young Danny. For the first seconds of this conversation, we

see Halloran's face superimposed over the figures in the group (fig. 2). Freezing the frame allows us to see how the entire group is somehow *inside* Halloran's head, as if contained in his consciousness, which makes peculiar sense here, since he is about to talk to Danny about the gift of shining they both possess to so great an extent, a gift that includes the knowledge of what is absent. The scene also features a doubling of Halloran's voice: we hear the “voiced” voice saying one thing in conversation while we hear an internal voice-over, or “voice-under,” saying something different. In this scene, as in numerous others, the dissolve is well suited to this medium for mediums, since the mechanism allows for the copresence, by superimposition, of two times and places at one and the same time and place. The dissolve as a form of transition, used more than a dozen times in *The Shining*, also makes particularly good sense because the novel is substantially about repetition, the



FIG. 2

Frame from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*.

spectral repetition of certain histories posited usually as beyond the control of the human agents in the story, consistent with the tradition of the haunted house, of which the Overlook Hotel is an extreme version. One scene lingers into another, surviving itself, living its own aftermath. The past is not simply left in the past. The film often does simultaneously (or almost so) what the text can only do sequentially, or it does allegorically what the text does in more narrative, history-like terms. The film performs economically many things that the text unfolds in its extended course. It shows visually—and in concert with words—what is going on textually in the literary original, at the same time as it offers a “reading” of its source. The dissolve in *The Shining* is a compelling formal mode of compensation that performs things consistent with any number of preoccupations and occurrences in the novel, approximating formal and thematic strains of the text.

It is not as if I am calling for, in the light of such an analysis, every literature course to incorporate film or for every philologist of the future to be a film critic or historian. *Beowulf* the film need not accompany every teaching of *Beowulf* the text, though there can be some virtue in showing students even (parts of) a substandard film adaptation (think Demi Moore as Hester Prynne!) or even just pointing to the afterlife of a text from a radically different era. Whole domains of literature have been nearly unaffected by film adaptation. Films of lyric poetry are very few and far between, for obvious reasons. Even films of drama are less auspicious than they might seem. One might suppose that in this case the screenplays have been written in advance: all one has to do is film them. And yet, perhaps because of the two forms’ proximity in some respects and the lack of tension between them, many dramas fall decidedly flat as films. Notable exceptions include numerous versions of Shakespeare (British, Russian, Japanese), Derek Jarman’s provocative rendition of Mar-

lowe’s *Edward II*, and Elia Kazan’s adaptation of Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but films often translate plays poorly, since the originals are based on the quite different visual and spatial relations appropriate to the theater.

Film can easily be enlisted in the analysis of what is proper to literature. To understand free indirect discourse in Jane Austen, one hardly need turn outside the texts, yet it is instructive to see how the plethora of Austen adaptations try—and more or less fail—to mimic or compensate for the peculiar mix of third-person and first-person perspectives folded into Austen’s signature narrative style. Curiously, the apparently furthest departure from straight Austen adaptation, Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless*, features perhaps the best approximation of this style, since the film sometimes divides the voice of Cher (the analogue for Emma) in two: we see her at a distance talking and hear her words faintly while we hear her voice-over saying something else. Yet this is an exception that proves the rule of many of Austen’s novels, which, despite their heavily plotted fictions and lucid characterization, resist translation to the screen. Consider the singular instance of repetition in *Emma*, where one chapter ends “Emma could not forgive her” and the very next chapter begins “Emma could not forgive her” (109).¹¹ The subsequent lines make it possible to read these identical sentences differently, the former as if from within Emma’s consciousness and the latter from the outside, even though they both point to an interior sentiment. One could imagine a film repeating a short sequence right after the initial one, framing the second version to render a fissure of difference visible or legible. Yet one senses still the specificity and untranslatability of Austen’s almost unheard-of (before the age of Samuel Beckett) repetition.

Juxtapositions of literary texts with their film renditions show the limits of the possibilities for adaptation, especially the resistance of the original. The tag line for Ku-

brick's *Lolita* was "How did they ever make a movie of *Lolita*?" implying, most likely, that the scandalous story of quasi-incest with a young girl could hardly be displayed in public cinemas. But the more profound reasons for its untranslatability lie with Nabokov's verbal pyrotechnics, his playing with linguistic, not sexual, fire: the incessant punning, the mock-epic lists, the search for the mot juste, to say nothing of the extended reflections of the narrator, whose copiousness could scarcely be mimicked on-screen without sinking the film under its own verbal weight. As the adaptations of *Lolita* and so many other texts show, translation is fated to highlight the specificity of the literary original. The good or strong adaptation marks itself as an adaptation, does not dissolve into the pure idiom of the source. Rather, it is a pointed, critical, finite response of one "text" to another, a kind of reading and a kind of literary study in advance of the literary studies to come.

NOTES

1. For a fanciful fictional take on the permanent newness of the classics, with a less fanciful point to make, see Allen.

2. Fidelity is the problematic but largely inescapable category that dominates the study of adaptation. In the past few decades, it became virtually de rigueur to claim that one was going "beyond" the preoccupation with fidelity, as if to dwell on fidelity were almost hopelessly naive. For good, more or less opposing discussions of fidelity and beyond, see Andrew; Stam. Elliott examines the issues primarily in terms of words and images.

3. Mikulinsky highlights the importance and intricacies of the phenomenon of recent photo-fiction.

4. Bauerlein's jeremiad against this trend, despite an understandable lament over declines in education, surely miscasts "the dumbest generation" as such because they think and read and see differently. How could one generation possibly be dumber than another? It could easily be less or differently educated, and those two phenomena could well coexist now, though their relation varies a lot even in North America, let alone around the rest of the world.

5. These include Joshua Reynolds, Jonathan Richardson, John Flaxman, Henry Fuseli, and Denis Diderot.

6. Battestin argues for the importance of analogy (88).

7. For a provocative set of reflections on text-image relations, including ekphrasis, see Nancy, esp. "Distinct Oscillation" (63–79).

8. Kubrick, moreover, allowed Peter Sellers to improvise a good deal. For Kubrick's rather idiosyncratic and revealing take on adaptation, see his essay "Words and Movies."

9. Battestin discusses the centrality of analogy in the translation from text to film.

10. I accept here for purposes of argument the concept of an omniscient perspective in narrative. Culler provides an illuminating critique of the notion.

11. Miller's incisive reading focuses on a different aspect of this passage (64–68).

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