

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
The Well-Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory	Dudley Andrew 9
Borges, Bertolucci, and Metafiction	Ulrich Wicks 19
Strick's Adaptation of Joyce's <i>Portrait of the Artist</i> : Discourse and Containing Discourse	Michael Klein 37
Narrative Discourse in Film and Fiction: The Question of the Present Tense	Joan Dagle 47
Audience Engagement in Wenders' <i>The American Friend</i> and Fassbinder's <i>Ali: Fear Eats the Soul</i>	Peter Ruppert 61
Mediation, the Novelistic, and Film Narrative	Judith Mayne 79
Tradition and the Individual Talent: Poetry in the Genre Film	Barry K. Grant 93
Ritual Patterns in Western Film and Fiction	Robert T. Self 105
Story, Pleasure, and Meaning in <i>The Scarlet Empress</i>	William Cadbury 115
Point of View and Narrative Voice in <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> : Steinbeck and Ford	Doug Emory 129
Notes on Contributors	137
Editors' Note	139

The Well-Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory

DUDLEY ANDREW

Frequently the most narrow and provincial area of film theory, discourse about adaptation is potentially as far reaching as you like. Its distinctive feature, the matching of the cinematic sign system to a prior achievement in some other system, can be shown to be distinctive of all representational cinema.

Let us begin with an example, *A Day in the Country*. Jean Renoir set himself the task of putting his knowledge, his troupe, and his artistry at the service of a tale by Guy de Maupassant. No matter how we judge the process or success of the film, its being owes something to the tale which was its inspiration and potentially its measure. That tale, "A Country Excursion," bears a transcendent relation to any and all films which adapt it, for it is itself an artistic sign with a given shape and value if not a finished meaning. A new artistic sign will then feature this original sign as either its signified or its referent. Adaptations claiming fidelity bear the original as a signified, while those which are inspired by or derived from an earlier text stand in a relation of referring to the original.

The notion of a transcendent order to which the system of the cinema is beholden in its practice goes well beyond this limited case of adaptation.¹ What is a city symphony, for example, if not an adaptation of a concept by the cinema.² A definite notion of Berlin preexisted Walter Ruttmann's 1927 treatment of that city. What is any documentary, for that matter, except the signification by the cinema of some prior whole, some concept of person, place, event, or situation. If we take seriously the arguments of marxist and other social theorists that our consciousness is not open to the world but filters the world according to the shape of its ideology, then every cinematic rendering will exist in relation to some prior whole lodged unquestioned in the personal or public system of experience. In other words, no filmmaker (at least none working in the representational mode) responds immediately to reality itself, or to his own inner vision. Every representational film adapts a prior conception. Indeed the very term "representation" suggests the existence of a model. Adaptation delimits representation by insisting on the cultural status of the model, on its existence in the mode of the text or the already textualized. In the case of those texts which are explicitly termed "adaptations," the cultural model which the cinema represents is already treasured as a representation in another sign system.

This broader notion of the process of adaptation has much in common

with interpretation theory, for in a strong sense adaptation is the appropriation of a meaning from a prior text. The hermeneutic circle, central to interpretation theory, preaches that an explication of a text occurs only after a prior understanding of it, yet that prior understanding is justified by the careful explication it allows.³ In other words, before we can go about discussing and analyzing a text we must have a global conception of its meaning. Adaptation is similarly both a leap and a process. It can put into play the intricate mechanism of its signifiers only in response to a general understanding of the signified it aspires to have constructed at the end of its process. While all representational films function this way (as interpretations of a person, place, situation, event), we reserve a special place for those films which foreground this relation by announcing themselves as versions of some standard whole. A standard whole can only be a text. A version of it is an adaptation in the narrow sense.

While these speculations so far encourage a hopelessly broad view of adaptation, there is no question that the restricted view of adaptation from known texts in other art forms offers a privileged locus for analysis. I do not say that such texts are themselves privileged. Indeed the thrust of my earlier remarks suggests quite the opposite. Nevertheless the explicit, foregrounded relation of a cinematic text to a well-constructed original text which it derives from and in some sense strives to reconstruct provides the analyst with a clear and useful laboratory condition which he neglects only to his own detriment.

The making of a film out of an earlier text is virtually as old as the machinery of cinema itself. Well over half of all commercial films have come from literary originals, though by no means all of these originals are revered or respected. If we confine ourselves to those cases where the adaptation process is foregrounded, that is, where the original is held up as a worthy source or goal, there are still several modes of relation between the film and the text which may obtain. These modes can, for convenience, be reduced to three: borrowing, intersection, and fidelity of transformation.

In the history of the arts, surely borrowing names the most frequent mode of adaptation. Here the artist employs, more or less extensively, the material, idea, or form of an earlier, generally successful text. Medieval paintings featuring biblical iconography and miracle plays based on Bible stories draw on an exceptional text whose power they borrow. In a later, secular age the artworks of an earlier generation might be used as sacred in their own right. The many adaptations of Shakespeare's plays come readily to mind. Doubtless in these cases the adapting artists hope to win an audience by the prestige of their borrowed titles or subjects. At the same time they seek to gain a certain respectability, if not aesthetic value, as a dividend in the transaction. Adaptations from literature to music, opera, or paintings are of this nature. There is no question of the replication of the original in Richard Strauss's *Don Quixote*. Instead the audience is expected to enjoy basking in a certain preestablished presence and to call up new or especially powerful aspects of a cherished work.

To study this mode of adaptation, the analyst needs to probe the source of power in the original by examining the use made of it in adaptation. Here the main concern is the generality of the original, its potential for wide and

varied appeal; in short, its existence as a continuing form or archetype in culture. This is especially true of that adapted material which, because of its frequent reappearance, claims the status of myth: *Tristan and Isolde* for certain, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* possibly. The success of adaptations of this sort rests on the issue of their fertility not their fidelity. Frank McConnell's book, *Storytelling and Mythmaking*,⁴ catalogues the garden of culture by examining borrowing as the history of grafting and transplantation in the fashion of Northrop Frye or even Carl G. Jung. This direction of study will always elevate film by demonstrating its participation in a cultural enterprise whose value is outside film and, for Jung and others, outside texts altogether. Adaptation is the name of this cultural venture at its most explicit, though McConnell, Frye, and Jung would all immediately want to extend their theories of artistic fertility to original texts which, upon inspection, show their dependence on the great fructifying symbols and mythic patterns of civilization.

This vast mode of adaptation as borrowing finds its opposite in that attitude toward adaptation I choose to call intersection. Here the uniqueness of the original text is preserved to such an extent that it is intentionally left unassimilated in adaptation. The cinema, as a separate mechanism, records its confrontation with an ultimately intransigent text. Undoubtedly the key film sponsoring this relation is Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*. André Bazin, championing this film and this mode,⁵ claimed that in this instance we are presented not with an adaptation so much as a refraction of the original. Because Bresson featured the writing of the diary and because he went out of his way to avoid opening up or in any other way cinematizing the original, Bazin claims that the film is the novel as seen by cinema. To extend one of his most elaborate metaphors,⁶ the original artwork can be likened to a crystal chandelier whose formal beauty is a product of its intricate but fully artificial arrangement of parts while the cinema would be a crude flashlight interesting not for its own shape or the quality of its light but for what it makes appear in this or that dark corner. The intersection of Bresson's flashlight and the chandelier of Georges Bernanos's novel produces an experience of the original modulated by the cinema. Naturally a great deal of the Bernanos work fails to be lit up, but what is lit up is only that work as seen by the cinema.

The modern cinema is increasingly interested in just this sort of intersection. Bresson, naturally, has given us his Joan of Arc from court records and his *Mouchette*, once again from Bernanos. Jean-Marie Straub has filmed Pierre Corneille's *Othon* and *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*. Pier Paolo Pasolini audaciously confronted Matthew's gospel with many later texts (musical, pictorial, and cinematic) which it inspired. His later *Medea*, *Canterbury Tales*, and *Decameron* are also adaptational events in the intersectional mode. In all such works, he fears or refuses to adapt. Instead he presents the otherness and distinctiveness of the original text, initiating a dialectical interplay between the aesthetic forms of one epoch with the cinematic forms of our own epoch. In direct contrast to the search for aesthetic generality by which scholars have treated the mode of borrowing, these intersections compel the analyst to attend to the specificity of the

original within the specificity of the cinema. An original is allowed its life, its own life, in the cinema. The consequences of this method, despite its apparent forthrightness, are neither innocent nor simple. Indeed, the disjunct experience such intersection promotes is consonant with the aesthetics of modernism in all the arts. The existence of this mode calls into question the commonplace that adaptations support only a conservative film aesthetics.

Unquestionably the most frequent and most tiresome discussion of adaptation (and of film and literature relations as well) concerns fidelity and transformation. Here it is assumed that the task of adaptation is the reproduction in cinema of something essential about an original text; we have a clear-cut case of a film trying to measure up to a literary work, or of an audience expecting to make such a comparison. Fidelity of adaptation is conventionally treated in relation to the letter and to the spirit of the text, as though adaptation were the rendering of an interpretation of a legal precedent. The letter would appear to be within the reach of cinema for it can be emulated in mechanical fashion. It includes aspects of fiction generally elaborated in any film script: the characters and their inter-relation, the geographical, sociological, and cultural information providing the fiction's context, and the basic narrational aspects which determine the point of view of the narrator (tense, degree of participation, and knowledge of the storyteller, etc.). Ultimately, and this was Bazin's complaint about faithful transformations, the literary work can readily become a scenario written in typical scenario form. The skeleton of the original can, more or less thoroughly, become the skeleton of a film.

More difficult is fidelity to the spirit, to the original's tone, values, imagery, and rhythm, for finding stylistic equivalents in film for these intangible aspects is the opposite of a mechanical process. The cineaste presumably must intuit and reproduce the feeling of the original. It has been argued variously that this is frankly impossible, or that it involves the systematic replacement of verbal signifiers by cinematic signifiers, or that it is the product of artistic intuition, as when Bazin found the pervasive snowy decor in *Symphonie Pastorale* (1946) to reproduce adequately the simple past tense which André Gide's verbs all bear in that tale.⁷

It is at this point that the specificity of these two signifying systems is at stake. Generally film is found to work from perception toward signification, from external facts to interior motivations and consequences, from the givenness of a world to the meaning of a story cut out of that world. Literary fiction works oppositely. It begins with signs, graphemes and words, building to propositions which attempt to develop perception. As a product of human language it naturally treats human motivation and values, seeking to throw them out onto the external world, elaborating a world out of a story.

George Bluestone, Jean Mitry, and a host of others find this opposition to be most graphic in adaptations.⁸ Therefore they take pleasure in scrutinizing this practice even while ultimately condemning it to the realm of the impossible. Since signs name the inviolate relation of signifier to signified, how is translation of poetic texts conceivable from one language to another (where signifiers belong to different systems); much less, how is it possible to transform the signifiers of one material (verbal) to signifiers of another

material (images and sounds)? It would appear that one must presume the global signified of the original to be separable from its text if one believes it can be approximated by other sign clusters. Can we attempt to reproduce the meaning of the *Mona Lisa* in a poem, or of a poem in a musical phrase, or even of a musical phrase in an aroma? If one accepts this possibility at the very least one is forced to discount the primary articulations of the relevant language systems. One would have to hold that while the material of literature (graphemes, words, and sentences) may be of a different nature from the materials of cinema (projected light and shadows, identifiable sounds and forms, and represented actions), both systems may construct in their own way, and at a higher level, scenes and narratives which are indeed commensurable.

The strident and often futile arguments over these issues can be made sharper and more consequential in the language of E. H. Gombrich or the even more systematic language of semiotics. Gombrich finds that all discussion of adaptation introduces the category of "matching."⁹ First of all, like Bazin he feels one cannot dismiss adaptation since it is a fact of human practice. We can and do correctly match items from different systems all the time: a tuba sound is more like a rock than like a piece of string; it is more like a bear than like a bird; more like a romanesque church than a baroque one. We are able to make these distinctions and insist on their public character because we are matching equivalents. In the system of musical instruments the tuba occupies an equivalent position to that enjoyed by the romanesque in its system of architectural styles. Nelson Goodman has treated this issue at length in *The Language of Art*¹⁰ pointing to the equivalence not of elements but of the position elements occupy vis-à-vis their different domains. Names of properties of colors may thus metaphorically, but correctly, describe aspects of the world of sound (a blue note, a somber or bright tone). Adaptation would then become a matter of searching two systems of communication for elements of equivalent position in the systems capable of eliciting a signified at a given level of pertinence, for example, the description of a narrative action. For Gombrich adaptation is possible, though never perfect, because every artwork is a construct of elements built out of a traditional use of a system. Since humans have the general capacity to adapt to new systems with different traditions in achieving a like goal or construct, artistic adaptation poses no insurmountable obstacles. Nevertheless, attention to such "proportional consistencies" demands that the study of adaptation include the study of both art forms in their proper historic context.

Gombrich and Goodman anticipated the more fashionable vocabulary of semiotics in their clarification of these issues. In a recent book *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange*, Keith Cohen tries to justify this new, nearly scientific approach to questions of relations between these arts. He writes, citing Christian Metz:

A basic assumption I make is that both words and images are sets of signs that belong to systems and that, at a certain level of abstraction, these systems bear resemblances to one another. More specifically, within each such system there are many different codes (perceptual, referential, symbolic). What makes possible, then, a study of the relation between two separate sign systems, like novel and film, is the fact that the same codes may reappear in more than one

system The very mechanisms of language systems can thus be seen to carry on diverse and complex interrelations: "one function, among others, of language is to name the units segmented by vision (but also to help segment them), and . . . one function, among others, of vision is to inspire semantic configurations (but also to be inspired by them)."11

Cohen, like Metz before him, suggests that despite their very different material character, despite even the different ways we process them at the primary level, verbal and cinematic signs share a common fate: that of being condemned to connotation. This is especially true in their fictional use where every signifier identifies a signified but also elicits a chain reaction of other relations which permits the elaboration of the fictional world. Thus, for example, imagery functions equivalently in films and novels. This mechanism of implication among signs leads Cohen to conclude that "narrativity is the most solid median link between novel and cinema, the most pervasive tendency of both verbal and visual languages. In both novel and cinema, groups of signs, be they literary or visual signs, are apprehended consecutively through time; and this consecutiveness gives rise to an unfolding structure, the diegetic whole that is never fully *present* in any one group yet always *implied* in each such group."12

Narrative codes, then, always function at the level of implication or connotation. Hence they are potentially comparable in a novel and a film. The story can be the same if the narrative units (characters, events, motivations, consequences, context, viewpoint, imagery) are produced equally in two works. Now this production is, by definition, a process of connotation and implication. The analysis of adaptation then must point to the achievement of equivalent narrative units in the absolutely different semiotic systems of film and language. Narrative itself is a semiotic system available to both and derivable from both. If a novel's story is judged in some way comparable to its film adaptation, then the strictly separate but equivalent processes of implication which produced the narrative units of that story respectively through words and audiovisual signs must be studied. Here semiotics coincides with Gombrich's intuition: such a study is not comparative between the arts but is instead intensive within each art. And since the implicative power of literary language and of cinematic signs is a function of use as well as of system, adaptation analysis ultimately leads to an investigation of film styles and periods in relation to literary styles of different periods.

We have come round the other side of the argument now to find once more that the study of adaptation is logically tantamount to the study of the cinema as a whole. The system by which film involves us in fictions and the history of that system are ultimately the questions we face even when starting with the simple observation of an equivalent tale told by novel and film. This is not to my mind a discouraging arrival for it drops adaptation and all studies of film and literature out of the realm of eternal principle and airy generalization, and onto the uneven but solid ground of artistic history, practice, and discourse.

It is time for adaptation studies to take a sociological turn. How does adaptation serve the cinema? What conditions exist in film style and film

culture to warrant or demand the use of literary prototypes? While adaptation may be calculated as a relatively constant volume in the history of cinema, its particular function in any moment is far from constant. The choices of the mode of adaptation and of prototypes suggest a great deal about filmmakers' aspirations and sense of the role of cinema from decade to decade. Moreover, the stylistic strategies developed to achieve the proportional equivalences necessary to construct matching stories not only are symptomatic of a period's style but may crucially alter that style.

Bazin pointed to an important instance of this in the immediate postwar era¹³ when adaptations from the stage by Jean Cocteau, Orson Welles, Laurence Olivier, William Wyler, and others not only developed new ways for the cinema to be adequate to serious theater, but also developed a kind of discipline in *mise-en-scène* whose consequences go far beyond the production of *Les Parents Terribles*, *Macbeth*, *Henry V*, and *The Little Foxes*. *Les Parents Terribles*, to take one example, derives its style from Welles's use of interior shooting in *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*, thus responding to a new conception of dramatic space; but at the same time Cocteau's film helped solidify a shooting style that would leave its mark on, among others, Alexandre Astruc and André Michel. Furthermore, his particular cinematic *écriture* would allow François Truffaut to set him against the cinema of quality in the famous 1954 diatribe.¹⁴ It is instructive to note that while Truffaut railed against the status quo for its literariness and especially for its method of adaptation, the directors he praised were also working with literary originals: Bresson adapting Bermanos, Max Ophuls adapting Maupassant and Arthur Schnitzler, Cocteau adapting his own theater pieces. Like Bazin, Truffaut looked upon adaptation not as a monolithic practice to be avoided but as an instructive barometer for the age. The cinema *d'auteur* which he advocated was not to be pitted against a cinema of adaptation; rather one method of adaptation would be pitted against another. In this instance adaptation was the battleground even while it prepared the way for a stylistic revolution, the New Wave, which would for the most part avoid famous literary sources.

To take another sort of example, particular literary fashions have at times exercised enormous power over the cinema and, consequently, over the general direction of its stylistic evolution. The Romantic fiction of Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, Alexandre Dumas, and countless lesser figures originally set the stylistic requirements of American and mainstream French cinema at the end of the silent era. Similarly Emile Zola and Maupassant, always of interest to French cineastes, helped Renoir muscularly reorient the style of world cinema in the 1930s. Not only that, Luchino Visconti developed this naturalist impulse directly into one strain of neorealism in his adaptations of Giovanni Verga (*La Terra Trema*) and James M. Cain (*Ossessione*).

This latter case forces us to recall that the "dynamics of exchange," as Cohen calls it, go both ways between film and fiction. Naturalist fiction helped cinema develop its interest in squalid subjects and a hard-hitting style. This in turn affected American hard-boiled novelists like Cain and Dashiell Hammett, eventually returning to France in the film style of Visconti, Marcel

Carné, Henri-Georges Clouzot, and others. This general trading between film and literature in the currency of naturalism had some remarkable individual incidents associated with it. Renoir's adaptation of *The Lower Depths* can serve as an example. In 1884 Zola had cried out for a naturalist theater¹⁵ and had described twenty years before the time precisely the sort of drama Maxim Gorki would write in *The Lower Depths*: a collection of real types thrown together without a domineering plot, the drama driven by the natural rhythms of little incidents and facts exposing the general quality of life in an era. Naturalism here coincided with a political need, Gorki's play preceding the great uprisings in Russia by only a few years.

In another era and in response to a different political need, Renoir leapt at the chance to adapt the Gorki. This was 1935, the year of the ascendancy of the Popular Front and Renoir's treatment of the original is clearly marked by the pressures and aspirations of that moment. The film negotiates the mixture of classes which the play only hints at. Louis Jouvet as the Baron dominates the film, descending into the social depths and helping organize a collective undoing of Kostilev, the capitalist landlord. Despite the gloomy theme, the murder, jailing, deaths by sickness and suicide, Renoir's version overflows with a general warmth evident in the open setting by the Marne and the relaxed direction of actors who breathe languidly between their lines.

Did Gorki mind such an interpretation? We can never know, since he died a few months before its premiere. But he did give Renoir his imprimatur and looked forward to seeing the completed version, this despite the fact that in 1932 he declared that the play was useless, out of date, and unperformable in socialist Russia. Perhaps these statements were the insincere self-criticism which that important year elicited from many Russian artists. I prefer, however, to take Gorki at his word. More farsighted than most theorists, let alone authors, he realized that *The Lower Depths* in 1932 Russia was by no means the same artwork as *The Lower Depths* in the France of the Popular Front. This is why he put no strictures on Renoir assuming that the cineaste would deal with his play as he felt necessary. Necessity is, among other things, a product of the specific place and epoch of the adaptation, both historically and stylistically. The naturalist movement of 1904, fleshing out the original plans of Zola, gives way to a new historic and stylistic moment, and feeds that style which Renoir had begun elaborating ever since *La Chienne* in 1931, and which, despite its alleged looseness in comparison to the Gorki, would help lead European cinema into a period of naturalism.

This sketch of a few examples from the sociology of adaptation has rapidly taken us into the complex interchange among eras, styles, nations, and subjects. This is as it should be, for adaptation, while a tantalizing keyhole for theorists, nevertheless partakes of the universal situation of film practice, dependent as it is on the aesthetic system of the cinema in a particular era and on that era's cultural needs and pressures. Filmmaking, in other words, is always an event in which a system is used and altered in discourse. Adaptation is a peculiar form of discourse but not an unthinkable one. Let us use it not to fight battles over the essence of the media or the inviolability of individual art works. Let us use it as we use all cultural practices: to understand the world from which it comes and the one toward

which it points. The elaboration of these worlds will demand, therefore, historical labor and critical acumen. The job of theory in all this is to keep the questions clear and in order. It will no longer do to let theorists settle things with a priori arguments. We need to study the films themselves as acts of discourse. We need to be sensitive to that discourse and to the forces that motivate it.

University of Iowa

NOTES

¹ For this idea I am indebted to a paper written by Dana Benelli in a class at the University of Iowa, Autumn 1979.

² The "city symphony" is a genre of the 1920s which includes up to 15 films all built on formal or abstract principles, yet dedicated to the presentation of a single city, be it Berlin, Paris, Nice, or Moscow.

³ In the theory of interpretation this is generally attributed to Dilthey, although Martin Heidegger has made much of it in our century.

⁴ Frank McConnell, *Storytelling and Mythmaking: Images from Film and Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979).

⁵ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* ed. and trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967), p. 142.

⁶ Bazin, p. 107.

⁷ Bazin, p. 68.

⁸ George Bluestone, *Novels into Film* (1957, rpt. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1968), and Jean Mitry, "Remarks on the Problem of Cinematic Adaptation," *Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 10 (Spring 1971), 1-9.

⁹ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1960), p. 370.

¹⁰ Nelson Goodman, *The Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1976), especially pp. 143-48.

¹¹ Keith Cohen, *Film and Literature: The Dynamics of Exchange* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 3-4. Cohen's citation from Metz comes from Christian Metz, *Langage et Cinéma* (Paris: Larousse, 1971), p. 24.

¹² Cohen, p. 92.

¹³ Bazin, p. 76.

¹⁴ François Truffaut, "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema" (1954), rpt. in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), pp. 224-36.

¹⁵ Émile Zola, "Naturalism and the Theater," in *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, trans. Belle M. Sherman (New York: Haskell House, 1964).