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Edited and with an introduction by
James Naremore

Film Adaptation



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Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest

The problem of digests and adaptations is usually posed within the framework of literature. Yet literature only partakes of a phenomenon whose amplitude is much larger. Take painting, for instance. One might even consider an art museum as a digest, for we find collected there a selection of paintings that were intended to exist in a completely different architectural and decorative context. Nonetheless, these works of art are still original. But now take the imaginary museum proposed by Malraux. It refracts the original painting into millions of facets thanks to photographic reproduction, and it substitutes for that original images of different dimensions and colors that are readily accessible to all. And, by the way, photography for its part is only a modern substitute for engraving, which previously had been the only approximate "adaptation" available to art connoisseurs.¹ One must not forget that the adaptation and summary of original works of art have become so customary and so frequent that it would be next to impossible to question their existence today. For the sake of argument, I shall take my examples from the cinema.

More than one writer, more than one critic, more than one filmmaker, even, has challenged the aesthetic justification for the adaptation of novels to the screen; however, there are few examples of those who take actual exception to this practice, of artists who refuse to sell their books, or to adapt other people's books, or to direct such adaptations when producers come along with the right blandishments. So their theoretical argument does not seem altogether justified. In general, they make claims about the specificity or distinctness of every authentic literary work. A novel is a unique synthesis whose molecular equilibrium is automatically affected when you tamper with its form. Essentially, no detail of the narrative can be considered secondary; all syntactic characteristics, then, are in fact expressions of the psychological, moral, or

metaphysical content of the work. André Gide's simple pasts² are, in a way, inseparable from the events of *The Pastoral Symphony* (1919), just as Camus's present perfects are inherent in the metaphysical drama of *The Stranger* (1942).

Even when it is posed in such complex terms, however, the problem of cinematic adaptation is not absolutely insolvable, and the history of the cinema already proves that this problem has often been solved in various ways. I shall cite only incontestable examples here: Malraux's *Man's Hope* (*Espoir*, a.k.a. *Sierra de Teruel*, 1939), Jean Renoir's *A Day in the Country* (1936), after Maupassant, and the recent *Grapes of Wrath* (1940; directed by John Ford), from Steinbeck. I find it easy to defend even a qualified success such as *The Pastoral Symphony* (1949; directed by Jean Delannoy). It is true that not everything in the film is a success, but this is certainly not due to what some consider the ineffable aspect of the original. I do not care much for Pierre Blanchar's acting, but I do think that Michèle Morgan's beautiful eyes—which are able to communicate the blind Gertrude's innermost thoughts—and the omnipresent motif of the ironically serene snow are acceptable substitutes for Gide's simple pasts. All it takes is for the filmmakers to have enough visual imagination to create the cinematic equivalent of the style of the original, and for the critic to have the eyes to see it.

To be sure, this theory of adaptation comes with the following warning: that one not confuse prose style with grammatical idiosyncrasies or, more generally still, with formal constants. Such confusion is widespread—and, unfortunately, not merely among French teachers. "Form" is at most a sign, a visible manifestation, of style, which is absolutely inseparable from the narrative content, of which it is, in a manner of speaking and according to Sartre's use of the word, the metaphysics. Under these circumstances, faithfulness to a form, literary or otherwise, is illusory: what matters is the *equivalence in meaning of the forms*.³ The style of Malraux's film is completely identical to that of his book, even though we are dealing here with two different artistic forms, cinema on the one hand and literature on the other. The case of *A Day in the Country* is subtler: it is faithful to the spirit of Maupassant's short story at the same time that it benefits from the full extent of Renoir's genius. This is the refraction of one work in another creator's consciousness. And there is not a person who will deny the beauty of the result. It took somebody like Maupassant, but also someone like Renoir (both of them, Jean and Auguste), to achieve it.

The hard-liners will respond that the above-mentioned examples prove only that it is perhaps not metaphysically impossible to make a cinematic work inspired by a literary one, with sufficient faithfulness to the spirit of the original and with an aesthetic intelligence that permits us to consider the film the equal of the book; but they will also say that this is no longer the kind of "adaptation" I was talking about at the

beginning of this chapter. They will say that *A Day in the Country* on screen is a different work from the novel and is equal or superior to its model because Jean Renoir is, in his own right, an artist of the same rank as Maupassant, and because he has of course benefited from the work of the writer, which is anterior to his own. They will claim that, if we examine the countless American and European novels that are adapted to the screen every month, we will see that the films are something completely different from the novels, that they are the condensed versions, summaries, film "digests" of which I spoke earlier. For instance, take aesthetically indefensible films such as *The Idiot* (1946; directed by Georges Lampin) and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943; directed by Sam Wood), or those never-ending "adaptations" of Balzac, which seem to have more than amply demonstrated that the author of *The Human Comedy*⁴ is the least "cinematic" of all novelists. To be sure, one must first know to what end the adaptation is designed: for the cinema or for its audience. One must also realize that most adapters care far more about the latter than about the former.

The problem of adaptation for the audience is much more evident in the case of radio. Indeed, radio is not quite an art like the cinema: it is first and foremost a means of reproduction and transmission. The digest phenomenon resides not so much in the actual condensing or simplification of works as in the way they are consumed by the listening public. The cultural interest of radio—precisely the aspect of it that scares Georges Duhamel⁵—is that it allows modern man to live in an environment of sound comparable to the warm atmosphere created by central heating. As for me, although I have had a radio set for barely a year now, I feel the need to turn it on as soon as I get home, often I even write and work with the radio on as my companion. Right now, as I write this article, I am listening to Jean Vittold's⁶ excellent daily morning broadcast on the great musicians. Earlier today, while I was shaving, Jean Rostand,⁷ juggling with chromosomes, told me why only female cats (or was it male cats?) can be of three colors simultaneously, and I do not remember who explained to me while I was having breakfast how, through simple scraping with sand, the Aztecs carved extraordinary masks of polished quartz that one can see at the Musée de l'Homme.⁸ Jules Romains's⁹ appalling hoax on extraocular vision was itself seriously adapted for radio.

Radio has created an atmospheric culture that is as omnipresent as humidity in the air. For those who think that culture can be achieved only through hard work, the ease of physical access that radio allows to works of art is at least as antagonistic to the nature of these works as any tampering with their form. Even if it is well rendered or integrally performed on radio, the Fifth Symphony is no longer Beethoven's work when you listen to it while in your bathtub; music must be accompanied by the ritual of attending a concert, by the sacrament of contemplation.

However, one can also see in radio the spreading of culture to everyone—the physical spread of culture, which is the first step toward its spiritual ascendance. Radio comfortably provides, like one more modern convenience, “culture for everyone.” It represents a gain of time and a reduction of effort, which is the very mark of our era. After all, even M. Duhamel will take a cab or the metro to get to the concert hall.

The clichéd bias according to which culture is inseparable from intellectual effort springs from a bourgeois, intellectualist reflex. It is the equivalent in a rationalistic society of the initiatory rites in primitive civilizations. Esoterism is obviously one of the grand cultural traditions, and I am not pretending that we should completely banish it from our civilization. But we could simply put it back in its place, which should in no way be absolute. There is a definite pleasure in cracking or conquering the hermeticism of a work of art, which then refines our relationship to that work of art. So much the better. But mountain climbing has not yet replaced walking on level ground. In place of the classical modes of cultural communication, which are at once a defense of culture and a secret-
ing of it behind high walls, modern technology and modern life now more and more offer up an extended culture reduced to the lowest common denominator of the masses. To the defensive, intellectual motto of “No culture without mental effort,” which is in fact unconsciously elitist, the up-and-coming civilization now responds with, “Let’s grab whatever we can.” This is progress—that is, if there really is such a thing as progress.

As far as the cinema is concerned, my intention is not to defend the indefensible. Indeed, most of the films that are based on novels merely usurp their titles, even though a good lawyer could probably prove that these movies have an indirect value, since it has been shown that the sale of a book always increases after it has been adapted to the screen. And the original work can only profit from such an exposure. Although *The Idiot*, for example, is very frustrating on the screen, it is undeniable that many potential readers of Dostoyevsky have found in the film’s oversimplified psychology and action a kind of preliminary trimming that has given them easier access to an otherwise difficult novel. The process is somewhat similar to that of M. de Vogüé, the author of “abridged” classics for schools in the nineteenth century. These are despicable in the eyes of devotees of the Russian novel (but they have hardly anything to lose by this process, and neither does Dostoyevsky), yet extremely useful to those who are not yet familiar with the Russian novel and who thus can benefit from an introduction to it. In any event, I shall not comment further on this, for it has more to do with pedagogy than with art. I would much prefer to deal with a rather modern notion for which the critics are in large part responsible: that of the untouchability of a work of art.

The nineteenth century, more than any other, firmly established an idolatry of form, mainly literary, that is still with us and that has

made us relegate what has in fact always been essential for narrative composition to the back of our critical consciousness: the invention of character and situation. I grant that the protagonists and events of a novel achieve their aesthetic existence only through the form that expresses them and that somehow brings them to life in our minds. But this precedence is as vain as that which is regularly conveyed to college students when they are asked to write an essay on the precedence of language over thought. It is interesting to note that the novelists who so fiercely defend the stylistic or formal integrity of their texts are also the ones who sooner or later overwhelm us with confessions about the tyrannical demands of their characters. According to these writers, their protagonists are *enfants terribles* who completely escape from their control once they have been conceived. The novelist is totally subjected to their whims; he is the instrument of their wills. I am not doubting this for a minute, but then writers must recognize that the true aesthetic reality of a psychological or social novel lies in the characters or their environment rather than in what they call its style. The style is in the service of the narrative: it is a reflection of it, so to speak, the body but not the soul. And it is not impossible for the artistic soul to manifest itself through another incarnation. This assumption, that the style is in the service of the narrative, appears vain and sacrilegious only if one refuses to see the many examples of it that the history of the arts gives to us, and if one therefore indulges in the biased condemnation of cinematic adaptation. With time, we do see the ghosts of famous characters rise far above the great novels from which they emanate. Don Quixote and Gargantua dwell in the consciousness of millions of people who have never had any direct or complete contact with the works of Cervantès and Rabelais. I would like to be sure that all those who conjure up the spirit of Fabrice and Madame Bovary have read (or reread, for good measure) Stendhal and Flaubert, but I am not so sure. Insofar as the style of the original has managed to create a character and impose him on the public consciousness, that character acquires a greater autonomy, which might in certain cases lead as far as quasi-transcendence of the work. Novels, as we all know, are mythmakers.

The ferocious defense of literary works 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 of 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. In the Middle Ages there were only a few themes, and they were common to all the arts. That of Adam and Eve, for instance, is to be found in the mystery plays, painting, sculpture, and stained-glass windows, none of which were ever challenged for transferring this theme from one art form to another. And when the subject of the Rome Prize for Painting is “the love of Daphnis and Chloë,”¹⁰ what else is it but an

adaptation? Yet nobody is claiming that copyright has been violated. In justification of the artistic multiplication of works with biblical and Christian themes during the Middle Ages, it would be wrong to say that they were part of a common fund, a kind of public domain of Christian civilization: the copiers or imitators had no more respect for the *chansons de gestes*, the Old French epic poems, than they did for religious literature. The reason is that the work of art was not an end in itself; the only important criteria were its content and the effectiveness of its message. But the balance between the public's needs and the requirements for creation was such in those days that all the conditions existed to guarantee the excellence of the arts. You may perhaps observe that those days are over and that it would be aesthetic nonsense to want to anachronistically reverse the evolution of the relationship among the creator, the public, and the work of art. To this I would respond that, on the contrary, it is possible that artists and critics remain blind to the birth of the new, aesthetic Middle Ages, whose origin is to be found in the accession of the masses to power (or at least their participation in it) and in the emergence of an artistic form to complement that accession: the cinema.

But even if this thesis is a rather risky one that would require additional arguments in its support, it remains true that the relatively new art of cinema is obliged to retrace the entire evolution of art on its own, at an extraordinarily quickened pace, just as a fetus somehow retraces the evolution of mankind in a few months. The only difference is that the paradoxical evolution of cinema is contemporaneous with the deep-seated decadence of literature, which today seems designed for an audience of individualist elites. The aesthetic Middle Ages of the cinema finds its fictions wherever it can: close at hand, in the literatures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It can also create its own fictions, and has not failed to do so, particularly in comic films, from the first French ones to the American comedies of, say, Mack Sennett and above all Charlie Chaplin. The defenders of seriousness in the cinema will name instead examples such as the Western epics and those of the Russian revolution, or such unforgettable pictures as *Broken Blossoms* (1919; directed by D. W. Griffith) and *Scarface* (1932; directed by Howard Hawks). But there is nothing that can be done to bring back the halcyon past. Youth is transient, and grandeur with it; another grandeur will take its place, if perhaps a bit more slowly. In the meantime, the cinema borrows from fiction a certain number of well-wrought, well-rounded, or well-developed characters, all of whom have been polished by twenty centuries of literary culture. It adopts them and brings them into play; according to the talents of the screenwriter and the director, the characters are integrated as much as possible into their new aesthetic context. If they are not so integrated, we naturally get these mediocre films that one is right to condemn, provided one does not

confuse this mediocrity with the very principle of cinematic adaptation, whose aim is to simplify and condense a work from which it basically wishes to retain only the main characters and situations. If the novelist is not happy with the adaptation of his work, I, of course, grant him the right to defend the original (although he sold it, and thus is guilty of an act of prostitution that deprives him of many of his privileges as the creator of the work). I grant him this right only because no one has yet found anyone better than parents to defend the rights of children until they come of age. One should not identify this natural right with an a priori infallibility, however.

Instead of Kafka's *Trial*, which was adapted to the stage by André Gide (1947) from a translation by André Vialatte, I shall take the more appropriate example of *The Brothers Karamazov*, adapted by Jacques Copeau (*Les Frères Karamazov*, 1911), in my defense of the condensed adaptation. The only thing Copeau has done—but he did it more skillfully than did M. Spaak¹¹ in *The Idiot*—is to extract the characters from Dostoyevsky's novel and condense the main events of their story into a few dramatic scenes. There is something slightly different about these theatrical examples, however: the fact that today's theater-going public is educated enough to have read the novel. But Copeau's work would remain artistically viable even if this were not the case.

To take another example, I suffered when I saw *Devil in the Flesh* (1947; directed by Claude Autant-Lara), because I know Raymond Radiguet's book; the spirit and "style" of that book had somehow been betrayed. But it remains true that this adaptation is the best one that could be made from the novel and that, artistically, it is absolutely justified. Jean Vigo would probably have been more faithful to the original, but it is reasonable to conclude that the resulting film would have been impossible to show to the public because the reality of the book would have ignited the screen. The work of the screenwriters Aurenche and Bost consisted, so to speak, in "transforming" (in the sense that an electric transformer does) the voltage of the novel. The aesthetic energy is almost all there, but it is distributed—or, perhaps better, dissipated—differently according to the demands of the camera lens. And yet, although Aurenche and Bost have succeeded in transforming the absolute amorality of the original into an almost too decipherable moral code, the public has been reluctant to accept the film.

In summary, adaptation is aesthetically justified, independent of its pedagogical and social value, because the adapted work to a certain extent exists apart from what is wrongly called its "style," in a confusion of this term with the word *form*. Furthermore, the standard differentiation among the arts in the nineteenth century and the relatively recent subjectivist notion that an author is identified with a work no longer fit in with an aesthetic sociology of the masses in which the cinema runs a relay race with drama and the novel and does not eliminate them, but

rather reinforces them. The true aesthetic differentiations, in fact, are to be made not among the arts, but within genres themselves: between the psychological novel and the novel of manners, for example, rather than between the psychological novel and the film that one would make from it. Of course, adaptation for the public is inseparable from adaptation for the cinema, insofar as the cinema is more "public" than the novel.

The very word *digest*, which sounds at first contemptible, can have a positive meaning. "As the word indicates," Jean-Paul Sartre writes, "it is a literature that has been previously digested, a literary chyle." But one could also understand it as a literature that has been made more accessible through cinematic adaptation, not so much because of the oversimplification that such adaptation entails (in *The Pastoral Symphony*, the narrative on screen is even more complex than the one in the novel), but rather because of the mode of expression itself, as if the aesthetic fat, differently emulsified, were better tolerated by the consumer's mind. As far as I am concerned, the difficulty of audience assimilation is not an a priori criterion for cultural value.

All things considered, it is possible to imagine that we are moving toward a reign of the 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. If the film that was made of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1940; directed by Lewis Milestone) had been successful (it could have been so, and far more easily than the adaptation of the same author's *Grapes of Wrath*), the (literary?) critic of the year 2050 would find not a novel out of which a play and a film had been "made," but rather a single work reflected through three art forms, an artistic pyramid with three sides, all equal in the eyes of the critic. The "work" would then be only an ideal point at the top of this figure, which itself is an ideal construct. The chronological precedence of one part over another would not be an aesthetic criterion any more than the chronological precedence of one twin over the other is a genealogical one. Malraux made his film of *Man's Hope* before he wrote the novel of the same title, but he was carrying the work inside himself all along.

NOTES

This essay was first published in French in *Esprit* 16:146 (July 1948), pp. 32-40.

1. Bazin's note: In a recent radio broadcast of *French Cancan*, during which Messieurs Pierre Benoit (1886-1962, French novelist, member of the Académie Française, author of *Koenigsmark* and *L'Atlantide*), Labarthe (obscure French literary figure of Bazin's time, coauthor with Marcel Brion, Jean Cocteau, Fred Bérence, Emmanuel Berl, Danielle Hunebelle, Robert Lebel, Jean-Lucas Dubreton, and Jean-Jaques Salomon of a volume entitled *Léonard de Vinci* [1959]), and several others exchanged a great number of utter platitudes, we heard Curzio Malaparte (1898-1957, Italian novelist, celebrated author of *Kaputt* and many other works, who contributed one film to Italian cinema, *Il Cristo Proibito* [Forbidden Christ, 1950], which he wrote, directed, and scored and was released

in the United States in 1953) ask the speaker what he would think of a "condensed version" of the Parthenon, for example. In his mind, this was supposed to be the ultimate argument against the "digest." Nobody was there to respond that such a condensed version had been realized a long time ago in the casts that were made of the Parthenon's friezes, and above all in the photo albums of the Acropolis that anybody can buy at a reasonable price in a gift shop.

2. Translator's note: Bazin is here using the term *passé simple* in French. This tense does not exist in English. It is a form of the simple past, which itself is called *imparfait* in French. *Imparfait* tends to be used more often in everyday language, whereas *passé simple* is a more literary term for the same tense.

3. Bazin's note: There are types of stylistic transfer that are indeed reliable, however, such as those "simple pasts" of André Gide that unfortunately were not built into the actual cutting of *The Pastoral Symphony* (i.e., its filmic syntax), but did show up in the eyes of an actress and in the symbolism of the snow.

4. Translator's note: This was the title given by Honoré de Balzac to his collected stories and novels, thus casting his copious fictions as a single, secular reply to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. *La Comédie Humaine* was published in sixteen volumes by Furne, Paulin, Dubochet, and Hetzel between 1842 and 1846; a seventeenth supplementary volume appeared in 1847.

5. Translator's note: Georges Duhamel (1884-1966), now a largely forgotten figure, achieved fame before World War II, being elected to the Académie Française in 1935. He is remembered for two cycles of novels: *Vie et Aventures de Salavin* (1920-32) and the popular *Chronique des Pasquier* (1933-45). Writing with warmth and humor, Duhamel used the saga of the Pasquier family to attack materialism and defend the rights of the individual against the collective forces of society.

6. Translator's note: Vittold was a famous French musicologist.

7. Translator's note: Rostand was a well-known French biologist who did much to popularize the study of science.

8. Translator's note: Famous anthropological museum in Paris.

9. Translator's note: Jules Romains (pseudonym of Louis Farigoule, 1885-1972) was a French novelist, dramatist, poet, and essayist, elected to the Académie Française in 1946. *La Vie Unanime*, a collection of poems published in 1908, and much of his later verse and prose were influenced by Unanimist theories of social groups and collective psychology. Before the outbreak of war in 1914 he published more collections of poetry, a verse play, *L'Armée dans la Ville* (1911), and two novels, *Mort de Quelqu'un* (1911) and the farcical *Les Copains* (1913).

The farcical comedies *Knock, ou le Triomphe de la Médecine* (1923), *M. Le Troubadec Saisi par la Débauche* (1923), and *Le Mariage de M. Le Troubadec* (1925) earned him much popularity after the war. Interesting collections of essays include *Hommes, Médecins, Machines* (1959) and *Lettre Ouverte contre une Vaste Conspiration* (1966), with its strictures on modern cultural attitudes and standards.

10. Translator's note: Daphnis and Chloë were two lovers in an old Greek pastoral romance of the same name, attributed to Longus (of the third century A.D. [?]). Daphnis himself was a Sicilian shepherd renowned in Greek myth as the inventor of pastoral poetry.

11. Charles Spaak was a Belgian screenwriter whose credits include *Carnival in Flanders* (1935) and *La Grande Illusion* (1937).