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The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative

Second edition

H. PORTER ABBOTT

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Chapter 9

Adaptation across media

Adaptation as creative destruction

If the creative leeway between script and performance is wide in the production of plays, it is enormous when adaptation crosses media boundaries. This is necessarily the case. Reviewers who complain that a film or play is a poor “translation” of the original may miss the fact that adaptation across media is not translation in anything but the loosest sense. In fact, it can sometimes be the attempt to make a strict translation that winds up in failure. George Bluestone formulated the strong “destructivist” position on this issue fifty years ago:

What happens . . . when the filmist undertakes the adaptation of a novel . . . is that he does not convert the novel at all. What he adapts is a kind of paraphrase of the novel – the novel viewed as raw material. . . . It has always been easy to recognize how a poor film “destroys” a superior novel. What has not been sufficiently recognized is that such destruction is inevitable. In the fullest sense of the word, the filmist becomes not a translator for an established author, but a new author in his own right.¹

This holds for plays as well as movies. In the words of a still earlier critic and director, Béla Balázs, “Shakespeare, reading a story by Bandello, saw in it not the artistic form of a masterpiece of story-telling but merely the naked event narrated in it” (Bluestone, 63). Adapters, in other words, if they are at all good, are raiders; they don’t copy, they steal what they want and leave the rest. It is rather like what I did (or at least tried to do) in the last chapter when I freely interpreted (that is, adapted) Hemingway’s “Now I Lay Me.”

Directors and theorists go hot and cold on this issue. Among the directors of “New Wave” cinema (c. 1948–62), there was strong agreement with the line of Bluestone and Balázs. The Swedish director Ingmar Bergman went so far as to declare that “Film has nothing to do with literature; the character and substance of the two arts are usually in conflict.”² More recently, Anthony Minghella put the relationship of literature to film a little more cautiously, but not much. Commenting on his experience in adapting Patricia Highsmith’s

The Talented Mr. Ripley, he said: “You’ve drunk the drink, and the taste that’s left in your mouth is what you go with.”³ But still other directors and theorists, like André Bazin and Dudley Andrew, have argued that instead of positing an unbridgeable gulf between the media we should look at the possibilities of connection between them and even creative symbiosis. In such a spirit Sergei Eisenstein published a landmark essay in 1944 that demonstrated how the early film giant D. W. Griffith learned his film technique from a novelist – one, moreover, who was dead long before film was invented: Charles Dickens.⁴ And in the same spirit, Dudley Andrew has called for an end to “battles over the essence of the media or the inviolability of individual art works” in favor of a focus on what adaptations tell us about the media and about how we see and communicate.

Borrowing, intersecting, transforming

Dudley Andrew has distinguished three different kinds of film adaptation, which may help you think about the subject: 1) *Borrowing* is close to the *intertextuality* of all art, the kind of casual appropriation of stories, ideas, situations that would appear to be inevitable in any creative act. 2) *Intersecting* is what filmmakers do when they try to come as close as they can to the original, using the different medium of cinema to bring out as faithfully as possible the world and texture of the original. Andrew’s demonstration text is Bresson’s film version of Bernanos’s *Diary of a Country Priest*: “an experience of the original modulated by the peculiar beam of the cinema. Naturally a great deal of Bernanos fails to be lit up, but what is lit up is only Bernanos, Bernanos however as seen by the cinema.” 3) *Transforming* is adaptation that seeks to deploy the full power of cinematic techniques and material both to remain faithful to the original and at the same time to make a full transformation of it in the new medium.⁵

For a critic, then, to judge a work on the basis of its faithfulness to the original, it is important to determine whether faithfulness was in fact the goal. Otherwise, one should judge on other grounds. These can still involve a comparison with the original. An adaptation can be less or more profound, less or more sentimental, less or more fun, and so on. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night* are on many grounds superior to the novellas of Matteo Bandello that Shakespeare raided for his story material. Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, however, is not clearly superior to Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. But from what we can determine of Shakespeare’s intentions, to say that he did not translate, or capture, or do justice to the works he stole from, including Chaucer’s, is not to render a valid criticism.

It is nevertheless understandable why this criticism is so common. A major reason is the problem of titling. When Beckett complained that the all-woman

Godot produced in Holland was not his play, he was making a valid point about a play titled *Waiting for Godot*. Even introducing one woman into the cast creates fundamental harmonic changes in the play. And though the court went against Beckett, one wonders if there is not a way of indicating the Dutch difference in the *paratexts* of performance. In the title, for example, and the attribution of authorship (e.g., “after a play by Samuel Beckett”), one could let audiences know that there are two separate plays in this instance and two separate sets of creative agency. This problem is greatly compounded when narratives are adapted across media lines. From the start, the film industry has omnivorously consumed novels to produce movies. And for obvious reasons of marketing, it has often used the titles of successful novels as titles of the films adapted from them – *Wuthering Heights*, *Of Mice and Men*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Great Expectations*, *Tom Jones*, *A Clockwork Orange* – the list goes on and on. Yet the differences between these films and the novels of the same name are far greater than those between the Dutch *Godot* and Beckett’s original.

In this chapter I discuss a few of the reasons why there should be such great differences when you adapt across media.

Duration and pace

A work of prose fiction, like a novel, can take any amount of time to read. It is portable. You can put it down and pick it up again, read slowly or quickly, go back and reread, even skip ahead to the end. In the theater, plays and movies are neither portable nor interruptible. Given the expense and logistics of production, plus the limits of audience endurance, the outside limit for narrative length in these media is usually two hours. There have been exceptions, like the Royal Shakespeare Company’s eight-and-a-half-hour version of Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby* or Eric von Stroheim’s *Greed* (1924), which in its first ten-and-a-half-hour version surpassed the reading time of the novel it adapted, Frank Norris’s *McTeague* (1899). *Greed*, however, was the kind of exception that proves the rule, since the studio quickly cut it down to two and a half hours. Early in the development of cinema, the length of feature films became standard across the industry. And despite the portability and viewing flexibility of DVDs, TiVo, and other digital resources, the primary model for the cinematic narrative experience is still the continuous, unbreakable experience that theater demands, and this continues to exert control over both the length and pacing of the narrative.

The difference in duration alone has major implications for adaptation. Longer prose narratives, like novels, can be “loose, baggy monsters,” as Henry

James mockingly described the works of his competition. They create a world that you can freely enter and leave, and that can include a multitude of characters involved in a number of concurrent threads of action. In the nineteenth century, American, European, and Russian novels quite commonly weighed in at more than 800 pages. Many were first published serially over a period of twenty months. The great classic Chinese novels often included hundreds of characters. Adaptation to the shorter, continuous forms of stage and screen is, then, a surgical art. Even to adapt narratives of considerably less length and complexity, authors of scripts must ruthlessly cut the originals. *Wuthering Heights* at 400 pages is a short nineteenth-century novel, yet William Wyler’s award-winning 1939 film version amputated the original half way through the narrative at the point where Catherine dies. Except for the death of Heathcliff, the whole second half of the novel with its diversity of character and incident is missing. This necessary economy alone would have made Wyler’s film a fundamentally different narrative from the book. The same is true for nineteenth-century stage adaptations of *Wuthering Heights*, which stopped at the same point.

But Wyler had to reduce even further, not only to squeeze four hundred pages into 104 minutes, but also to ensure that the audience would not get lost. Ironically, it is theater’s absolute control over the pacing of the narrative experience, keeping the audience prisoners in their seats, that gives audiences enormous power of their own over the content of that experience. The result is a kind of tyranny of the story line, which must be kept clear enough to be grasped in one continuous experience. Conversely, novel readers tolerate a great deal of material unrelated or only peripherally related to the story line. Anecdotes, meditations, conversations, descriptions can all be piled on to the narrative platform of a novel without necessarily cutting into its appeal (and market value). There have been in fact highly successful novels with wide audiences, like *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), in which the central story is so encumbered by extraneous material that it barely comes alive. This rarely works in plays or films, at least commercially, and the exceptions tend to appeal to restricted audiences. So, even with their shortened story line, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, the screenwriters for the 1939 *Wuthering Heights*, found that they had to cut still further, throwing out much material that comes before Catherine’s death. This included the birth of Hareton Earnshaw, Heathcliff’s accidental rescue of him when he falls from the landing, Nelly’s vision of Hindley at the crossroads, Heathcliff’s hanging of Isabella’s dog, his confrontation with Edgar Linton at the Grange, and much else. However, what the film in its finished form does bring out clearly is what readers of the novel often find themselves struggling to understand: the story’s *constituent events*. We see much more clearly than in the novel how one event leads to the next,

and this is a direct result of the time constraint that filmmakers have to deal with.

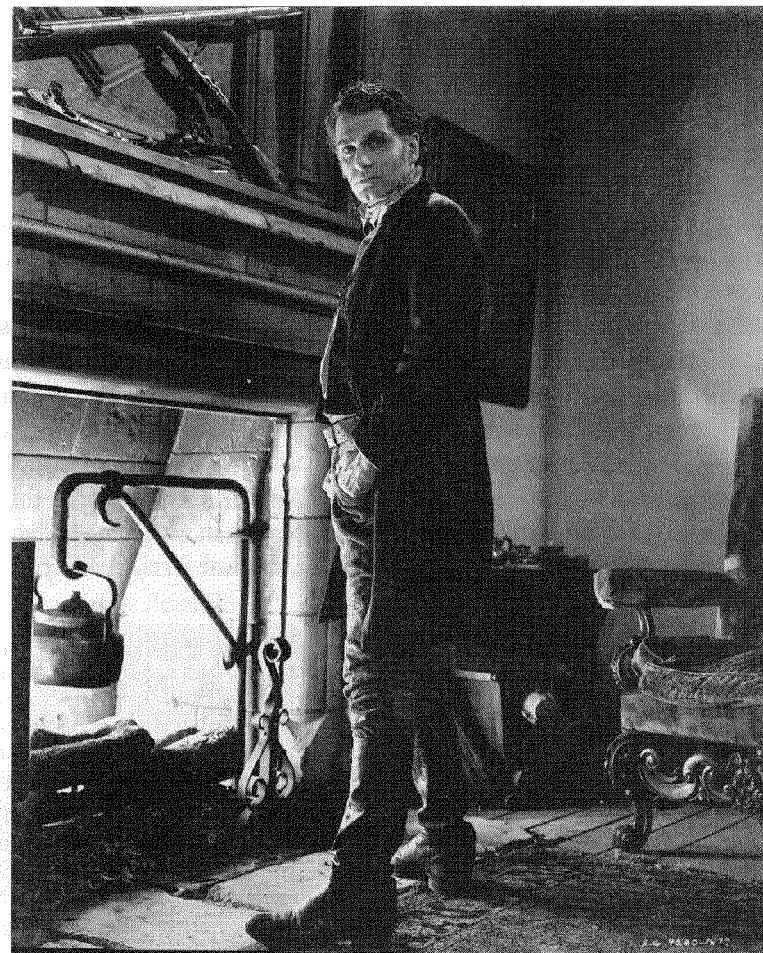
The relations between novelists and the film industry have had their low moments. There are a number of reasons why they should have, but a critical one has been this need to make the story line move with greater clarity and simplicity in a film. One way to explain the difference is the quality and degree of *retardation*, or the slowing down of the narrative discourse, that the media can tolerate. Retardation is one of the great pleasures of narrative. It allows us to settle in and think about what we are taking in; it also can play a key role in the development of *suspense*. But the limits beyond which retardation becomes a liability vary from medium to medium. Like most narrative, film tolerates (indeed thrives on) retardation, but its tolerance is much more restricted than that of novels. Adjusting to the very different quality of retardation in film is something with which few novelists, regardless of their brilliance, have been fully comfortable.

Character

What do you see when you see a character in a novel or a short story? Given our current knowledge of the way we imagine things, there is much about this question that is impossible to answer. But it is clear that in some way we draw upon pre-existing *types* that we have absorbed from our culture and out of which, guided by the narrative, we mentally synthesize, if not the character, something that stands for the character. What we synthesize is to a greater or lesser extent unique, yet as a rule sufficiently flexible to accommodate new information.

Mr Heathcliff forms a singular contrast to his abode and style of living. He is a dark skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman; that is, as much a gentleman as many a country squire: rather slovenly, perhaps, yet not looking amiss with his negligence, because he has an erect and handsome figure, and rather morose.⁶

This is one of the earliest descriptions we have of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. What do we see and understand from this passage? It provides what seem to be contradictions of nineteenth-century type: a “dark skinned gypsy,” yet a gentleman; slovenly in dress, yet “erect and handsome.” If we are not seriously underreading, we must deploy some kind of mental flexibility that allows us to hold these traits loosely together in our minds. Moreover, this description is transmitted through Mr Lockwood, who proves himself elsewhere



Lawrence Olivier, *Wuthering Heights* (United Artists, 1939).

to be an *unreliable narrator*. A silly and shallow man, Lockwood goes on astonishingly to see his own traits of modesty and reserve in Heathcliff. Realizing this, we must be additionally wary, keeping our sense of Heathcliff open, rejecting selectively some of what Lockwood says (for example: “his reserve springs from an aversion to showy displays of feeling”). As the story progresses, we cobble together from these and other descriptions, combined with Heathcliff’s words and actions, a fascinatingly complex entity – highly intelligent, passionate, articulate, avaricious, haunted, murderous and cruel – who somehow seems to hold together as a character. But when we see the character on

stage, or see Olivier play him on the screen, much of this flexible indeterminacy is foreclosed. The character is to a considerable degree fixed for us, both visually and aurally. This kind of fixing of a character through image, of course, happens when written narratives are illustrated, either in hard copy or hypertext.

It is also much harder to get inside a character on stage or on screen. Actors' soliloquies can approximate the associative flow of private thoughts, and dream sequences can represent an internal struggle, but they rarely match the kind of extensive explorations in depth that can be rendered through *indirect discourse* (thought report) or *interior monologue*. Tied to the dominance of visual and aural sensation, audiences of stage and film must apprehend human interiors by inference, much as we do in the course of our lives. For the dramatist and filmmaker, this constraint, like all constraints in art, can be the source of discipline and inspiration. François Truffaut's decision to end *The Four Hundred Blows* with the face of the child was a brilliant stroke in this regard. The view is external, but the face becomes a screen in which the audience reads the child's abandonment and what must be, at some level, his despair.

Must film actors have stronger personalities than stage actors?

Is there a difference between character as we see it acted on stage and character as we see it acted on screen? Leo Braudy makes the interesting argument that, if film actors don't necessarily have stronger personalities than stage actors, they must at least draw more on their personalities. This is because of a fundamental difference in production: "The stage actor memorizes an entire role in proper order, putting it on like a costume, while the film actor learns his part in pieces, often out of chronological order, using his personality as a kind of armature, or as painters will let canvas show through to become a part of the total effect."⁷ If Braudy is right about this, then the need for a kind of armature of personality would be even greater for actors in film series, like the James Bond films, and perhaps even greater still for actors in TV series.

Figurative language

Quite similar to this difference between media in the representation of characters is the difference that verbal narration has when it draws on figurative language, particularly on metaphors. Often on the page what is internal to a character comes out in metaphorical language. In *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, the governess-narrator describes in the following passage both her charges as she first found them and then how the situation changed:

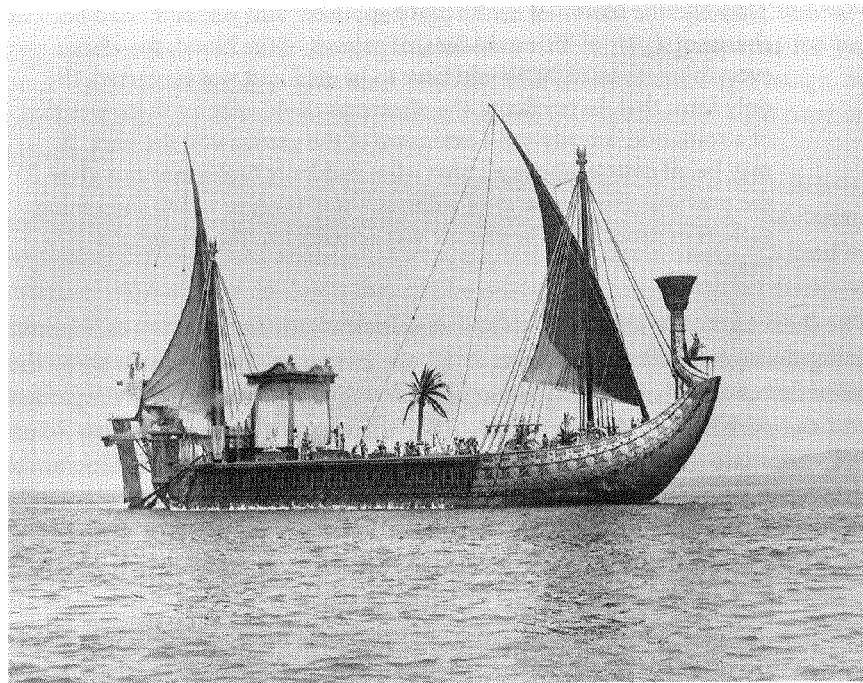
They had the bloom of health and happiness; and yet, as if I had been in charge of a pair of little grandees, of princes of the blood, for whom everything, to be right, would have to be enclosed and protected, the only form that, in my fancy, the afteryears could take for them was that of a romantic, a really royal extension of the garden and the park. It may be, of course, above all, that what suddenly broke into this gives the previous time a charm of stillness – that hush in which something gathers or crouches. The change was actually like the spring of a beast.⁸

The challenges of "translating" this passage in dramatic or filmic terms, without using dialogue, soliloquy or voice-over, are immense. How do you show the mind fantasizing the future as "a romantic, a really royal extension of the garden and the park"? How do you translate for the stage or screen the sense of an indeterminate (and therefore much more frightening) beast, crouching amid that peaceful beauty and then springing? And how do you do all this while maintaining the strict economy that plays and films require? In this regard, what prose narrative loses in the immediate physical vitality of sight and sound it gains in figurative flexibility.

It is a mistake, however, to think that stage and screen are entirely without this resource. As long as there are characters in a narrative, they can in their turn become describers and even narrators who use words. They have in fact given us some of the most powerful figurative language ever employed in narrative. In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, here is how Enobarbus begins to describe Antony's first view of Cleopatra:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,
Burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold,
Purple the sails, and so perfuméd that
The winds were lovesick with them. The oars were silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke and made
The water which they beat to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes.⁹

This is not what anyone would call detached, objective reporting. Enobarbus draws on a diverse arsenal of figurative tropes – personification, hyperbole, metaphor, catachresis – to saturate the wind and water with the feelings of the "amorous" and "lovesick" Antony. But to appreciate it in the theater, we must to some degree detach ourselves from what we see before us on stage (Enobarbus and Agrippa in a house in Rome) and engage in the same sort of mental theater that we do all the time with verbal narrative. And as with the case of characters like Heathcliff, brought to earth photographically in film,



Cleopatra (Twentieth Century Fox, 1963).

the filming of *Cleopatra*'s "barge" cannot hope to compete with Enobarbus's words.

Drama and screen can also deploy their visual resources in an effective counterpoint to language like this. A sturdy, domestic this-worldly Roman set, for example, can put Enobarbus's language into sharp relief, making the imagined African river scene it describes seem to belong to a different world, exotic and mythological. Such contrasts can give wonderful energy to a scene. When Romeo spies Juliet on the balcony, he cries,

But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief
That thou her maid art far more fair than she.¹⁰

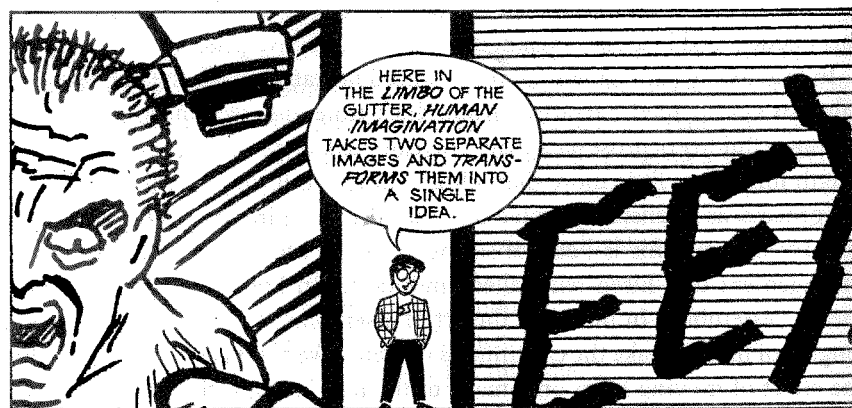
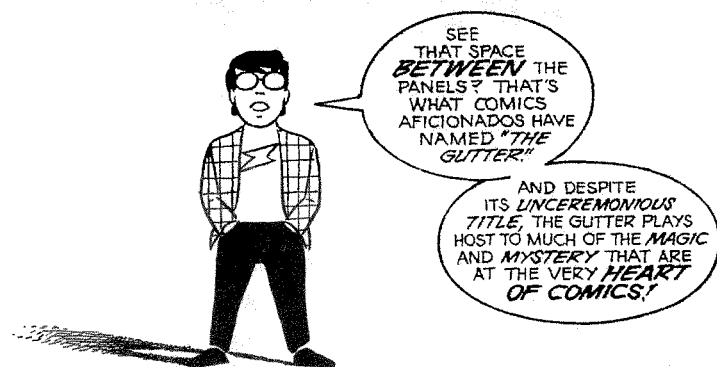
Personification again, hyperbole, metaphor, but all of them deployed while the object of description is right there before our eyes. It might even help if Juliet is not exceptionally beautiful, since the difference between her quite mortal

beauty and the romantic excess of her lover's words can say a great deal about the power of love.

Gaps

As noted in Chapter Six, gaps are everywhere in prose narrative. There is no way that a narrator can avoid calling on listeners or readers to help bridge one gap after another. But what if we had the *characters* in the story actually before us, alive, and the *action* unfolding with no difference between the time it takes and clock time? What happens is that many of these narrational gaps disappear. This is what happens on stage. The difference in effect is great, and it makes you see why some narratologists would rather not include staged action as a type of narrative, but instead fall back on categories like "*mimesis*" or "the presentation of events" to categorize what they are. It is important to bear in mind, though, that most prose narratives also include stretches of dialogue, some of them quite long. At these moments, prose narrative approaches the kind of gaplessness in staged narrative. There usually are, of course, a few major gaps in plays. Scene breaks and act breaks sometimes separate installments of the action by great swathes of time. There have also been quite fluid stagings of time shifts in any number of twentieth-century productions. With a modest set, John Guare's play *Six Degrees of Separation* can easily slide from one time and place to another with no breaks over 120 pages of script. But despite devices like this that have given some playwrights considerable flexibility, the unit of drama is still the scene. And scenes take place in real time. So, by and large, adaptation of a novel to the stage requires finding and shaping the scenes that carry action and intensity. Again, it is a highly selective process.

In this area of gaps, cinema revolutionized narrative in the theater, releasing *mimesis* (performed narrative) from clock time and reconnecting with the narrative fluidity of prose narrative. This came as a surprise. The earliest feature-length films were little more than filmed theater. But they quickly evolved. In the process, as Eisenstein pointed out, they drew inspiration from nineteenth-century fiction. This is because so much of the art of film is an art of gap management that Eisenstein called "montage." In French, montage literally means "assembly." In film, it is the art of assembling a multitude of different lengths of film to make the continuous narrative we see. Eisenstein argued that the effect of moving from one image to the next was not the sum of the two images but something quite new. In this way, an entire car chase through a city can be conveyed by a few selected moments. Conveying continuous events like a car chase, a climb upstairs, a fall from a window, a sudden embrace, or



From *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud.

a conversation through the use of montage makes for great efficiency in the deployment of a film's 90 to 120 minutes. But suggesting the continuity of events is only one aspect of the art of montage. Putting disparate shots next to each other can also convey meaning, and often with considerable power. In *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the onrush of helicopter gunships flying to the strains of Wagner's *Die Walküre* suddenly gives way to the sight and sound of Vietnamese schoolchildren in a village compound. The contrast not only conveys the continuous action of an assault on the village but also suggests a moral discrepancy between the invaders and the invaded. In sum, the ease of narrative movement that montage permits approximates the freedom of movement novelists enjoy as they jump ahead, fall back, speed up, slow down, or drift from character to character. And though the voice of the narrator can still take us many places the camera cannot go, it cannot match film's immediacy of sound and sight.

A narrative art form that draws, like some hypertext fiction, on both film's visuals and prose's narrative flexibility is the comic strip. Long neglected as a "legitimate" art, comics are only now beginning to be theorized as they gain a certain level of respect through the innovative work of artists like Scott McCloud, Frank Miller, and Neil Gaimon. At the center of this theory is, once again, the principle of the gap. McCloud, in his *Understanding Comics*, vividly demonstrated this centrality of the gap in his explication of the "gutter" – the necessary gap that regularly falls between succeeding images.

Persistence of vision

Moving pictures don't really move. All the motion that we think we see on the screen is in fact a succession of still pictures. Its appearance as motion relies on the principle of "persistence of vision." Images persist on the retina for roughly one-tenth of a second after their initial impact. This is enough to carry over from one frame of a film to the next, tricking us into seeing motion where, were it not for this persistence of vision, we would see only a jerky succession of still pictures. In other words, even here, at this molecular level of cinematic narrative, we are engaged in bridging gaps.

Focalization

In Chapter Five, I described focalization in verbal and written narrative as the point from which (or the eyes through which) you are given the illusion of seeing the action. It commonly, but not invariably, includes traces of the sensibility – the thought and emotion – of the chosen viewer. In drama, there is of course no

illusion of seeing since what you see is empirically real, a narrative embodied by actors who perform largely in real time. But also, in drama, focalization is largely constant. You see the entire narrative from the fixed perspective of your seat in the auditorium. There are ways that stage technology can be used to shift our focus from one point to another. Changes in lighting can draw your attention from one point on the stage to another, from one group of actors to another, and darkness can limit what you see. These devices can be very important, manipulating our attention, and to that degree, visually controlling our reception of the narrative. But by and large focalization in drama is centered, and fixed, in our own unmanipulated vision. As in all trade-offs between media, here too constraint creates discipline, and playwrights and directors sharpen the practice of their craft by having to work within a fixed visual space. But also a great deal of the thrill of drama comes from the fact that we are present at a spectacle involving real people in a three-dimensional space, witnessing it unfold as if we were right there.

The situation is quite different in film. Montage, which liberated film time, liberated film space as well. In other words, just as it gave film its great freedom to construct narrative through an artistry of gaps, montage also gave film a freedom of focalization. Though we may sit in a theater, confined to one perspective from which to see the screen, the camera eye acts as our on-screen focalizer. Through the almost unlimited freedom of editing, our eyes can be shifted from one point of observation to another with a speed and fluidity that rivals that of prose fiction. And as in prose fiction, film focalization can take us anywhere (note, for example, the opening of *Contact* [1997], during which we rapidly move away from the earth out into the universe). The camera eye is often a cold eye, with no trace of a human sensibility, though some have argued that there is always something of the voyeur in this “external” focalizer. But film can readily adopt the point of view of any of its characters with shots aligned with his or her eyes. Camera eyes can get drunk, weave about, lose consciousness. Particularly vivid examples of what Mieke Bal calls “character-bound focalization” (105–14) in film can be found in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). For great stretches of this film, the hand-held cameras of the young filmmakers, who are also characters in the film, give us both what they see and, through movement, something of the intensity of their panic. And in the night shots, including those in the house at the end, our vision is almost identical to theirs, confined as it is to the lights on their cameras. Death comes with the final out-of-focus shot of the fallen camera.

But *The Blair Witch Project* is what could be called a *tour de force*, stretching the limits of the medium to create remarkable effects. Though film shares much of the flexibility of prose and verbal narrative in moving easily from external

to character-bound focalization, it is very difficult for film to achieve the depth of internal focus that can come so handily in a novel:

[H]er communication had the oddest effect on him. Vaguely and confusedly he was troubled by it; feeling as if he had even himself been concerned in something deep and dim. He had allowed for depths; but these were greater; and it was as if, oppressively – indeed absurdly – he was responsible for what they had now thrown up on the surface. It was – through something ancient and cold in it – what he would have called the real thing.¹¹

This passage from *The Ambassadors* (1903) is pretty typical Henry James. The way his language here tries to seek out and express the inexpressible underscores another trade-off between the media. The absence of vivid empirical immediacy of sight and sound in the novel is made up for by the flexibility it gains in relying on the fluid representational capacities of our imagination.

How cold an eye?

The coldness of the camera eye has often been taken to mean that there is nothing in the mechanics of film focalization that would suggest a consciousness like that of a narrator. Yet Edward Branigan has maintained that in every film there is always “an underlying level of omniscient narration – that which frames but is not itself framed – and voyeuristic reception – that which looks but is not itself seen – which together create the fictional appearance of other levels of narration.”¹² What do you think?

Constraints of the marketplace

Culture constrains all narrative. Audiences set limits on what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, and by their response they select which narratives get repeated and which fall away. Nevertheless, departures from cultural norms catch on and enter a culture’s narrative pool. How this happens is as mysterious as it is exciting. But as culturally transgressive fads catch on they become in their turn cultural (or subcultural) norms, and as such serve to underscore the general rule – that audience expectations exert great control over the form and content of narratives as they are disseminated through a society. No doubt it has ever been thus, going back to the earliest oral transmissions.

The marketability of narrative, combined with new technologies of narrative delivery, put a complex spin on the whole issue of narrative’s cultural constraints. In the European renaissance, two contrasting sets of marketable

narrative technologies enjoyed extraordinary growth: the book and the staged play. Both had to meet bottom-line fiscal targets, for which a paying audience was indispensable. But these audiences, though they overlapped, were different, as were the costs of production for these two technologies. The private experience of written narrative (especially with silent reading – a comparatively recent development) allowed for a range of niche markets for books, small subcultures that often adhered to values quite divergent from the norms of the larger culture. Books also had a “shelf life.” In a seventeenth-century bookseller’s shop, they could wait patiently for readers to come and purchase them. But staged plays were big events that happened at set times. They required an immense investment of both funds and labor: a paid company of actors and a theater, which must be built, purchased, or rented. They also needed to bring in the broadest cross-section of society if they were going to meet expenses. This difference in the technology and marketing of these two narrative media has only grown with time. At present, printed narratives far exceed staged theatrical productions in both number and variety. A paperback book costs roughly \$10 to \$20; cheap seats in urban theaters run between \$30 and \$90.

But if the impact of this commodity difference is noticeable in top-end theatrical venues, one must still be very careful in generalizing from this commercial difference that books will always be more formally adventuresome than plays. Brilliantly innovative books have often had notoriously difficult times attracting a publisher. Conversely, small theaters have taken wonderful risks. A classic example of the latter opened at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris on January 5, 1953. Offered two plays by a little-known writer and unstaged playwright, actor-director Roger Blin chose the one with the least scenery (one scrawny tree) and cheapest costuming (old clothes for two pairs of tramps). A play in which nothing of any significance happens in two long acts, it opened to mixed reviews. But its reputation gradually caught fire and it has since become the signature play of the twentieth century, *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett (Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969). Events like this are not uncommon in the theater. If the market exerts a powerful force that tends to soften the edges of produceable plays, it is not the only force operating in the circulation of narrative. Producers, especially in small, marginal theaters, regularly take risks with radically new material. There are limits, then, to the predictability of markets for the same reason that narrative seems inevitably to change. To borrow a phrase from Ezra Pound, we seem to want our artists to “make it new.”

If the cost of producing plays is high, the cost of producing films can be astronomical. In fact, films represent such an enormous outlay in capital that the reliance on type characterization and only mildly adapted masterplots is

commonplace in the industry. Written by teams and tested on audiences, films from the large companies fall into “high concept” molds, deploying characters, actors, and situations with proven market potential. Even with an exceptionally good adaptation, like Wyler’s *Wuthering Heights*, the original narrative often has to be tamed and domesticated to make it commercially viable. Brontë’s Heathcliff is a deeply disturbing mixture of attractive and horrifying traits. He delivers “a shower of terrific slaps on both sides” of a young girl’s head. He probably kills Hindley Earnshaw. And about the youthful Cathy and Linton, he can say things like this: “It’s odd what a savage feeling I have to anything that seems afraid of me! Had I been born where laws are less strict, and tastes less dainty, I should treat myself to a slow vivisection of those two, as an evening’s entertainment.”¹³ In Olivier’s film version of *Heathcliff*, none of this savagery survives. Almost exclusively the jealous lover, the Olivier Heathcliff arouses more pity than fear. The only violence we see him commit are two soft slaps of Catherine’s face (unthinkable in Brontë’s *Heathcliff*), which he then proceeds to atone for by deliberately scraping his wrists against broken window panes (again, unthinkable in the novel). Without the disturbing dimensions of Brontë’s *Heathcliff*, Olivier’s *Heathcliff* aroused feelings that were in much closer conformity with the 1930s Hollywood *masterplot* of thwarted love.

But here again we must beware of hasty generalizations. Despite the immense market pressures that amplify cultural constraints on film content, remarkable departures slip through. Numerous films from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) to *Brazil* (1985) provide ample evidence that studios and producers don’t always avoid risk. Adaptations like *Clueless* (1995; of Jane Austen’s *Emma*) and *The Loved One* (1965; of Evelyn Waugh’s novel of the same name) show that adaptation to film is not necessarily an art of contraction. If it is still the case that a far greater range of disturbing material is dealt with in the private forms of written narrative, it is far from true that the more expensive public forms of narrative invariably eliminate the subversive and counter-cultural.

Selected secondary resources

An excellent secondary source on film adaptation is the chapter “Adaptation” in Andrew Dudley’s *Concepts in Film Theory*. Two good collections of articles on this and related subjects are Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan’s *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text* (London: Routledge, 1999) and Timothy Corrigan’s *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1999). George Bluestone’s classic study, *Novels into Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), is now over fifty years old, yet still highly serviceable. Much more recently, Marie-Laure Ryan has compiled an impressive anthology of essays, *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, that deal with

narrative as mediated in five different ways: "face-to-face," still pictures, moving pictures, music, and digital media. More recently still, Ryan has written *Avatars of Story (Electronic Mediation)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), a book devoted entirely to the transformations of story-telling in electronic media. A good introduction to the narrative art of the comic strip is Scott McCloud's three-volume series (in comic form) *Understanding Comics* (1993), *Reinventing Comics* (2000), and *Making Comics* (2006), all currently available from DC Comics. For a historically wide-ranging study of the "transposition" of texts, see Genette's hugely ambitious anatomy of all forms of "transtextuality" in his *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*.

Additional primary texts

Over the history of the stage and of film it may be the case that adaptation is more the rule than the exception. In stage-to-screen adaptations, there are numerous examples (Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*). Shakespeare's major plays alone have multiple screen versions. Of these, I would make three sets of selections: Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh both directed and performed in their own adaptations of *Henry V* (1944 and 1989, respectively). Olivier's version is especially notable in the way it opens with a performance in the Globe Theatre that at a certain point gives way to filmic "reality." There are also interesting historical differences in the representation of war. The 1944 version was filmed during World War II and reflects Britain's embattlement as well as its nationalistic war spirit. The 1989 version, filmed in peacetime, implicitly plays off against Olivier's version with a much more sober awareness of the moral and emotional costs of war.

Akira Kurosawa's very free adaptations of *Macbeth* as *Throne of Blood* (1957) and of *King Lear* as *Ran* (1985) are bookends of his career. They make for a fascinating study of cross-cultural adaptation, complicated by Kurosawa's situating of both stories in medieval Japan. For comparison adaptations, I would recommend Orson Welles's 1948 low-budget version of *Macbeth* (starring himself) and Peter Brook's 1971 *King Lear*, a strong production with great depth of acting talent. Perhaps one of the strangest adaptations of any theatrical text is Jean-Luc Godard's 1987 *King Lear*, with a script by Norman Mailer and performances by Peter Sellers and Woody Allen.

There are even more novels and short stories converted to film than plays. One fascinating sequence of adaptation began in 1968 when Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke adapted Clarke's story "The Sentinel" as *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Clarke then wrote a novel version of the film adaptation of his own story, *2001*, and followed it with a sequel, *2010: Odyssey Two*, which in turn was filmed in 1984 as *2010: The Year We Make Contact*, directed by Peter Hyams. Clarke continued the series with *2061: Odyssey Three*. An excellent example of a film adaptation that clarifies an extremely complex and to a degree mystified order of constituent events in the original novel is Anthony Minghella's version of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (novel, 1992; film, 1996, Minghella both

wrote the screenplay and directed the film). There are a number of fine examples of adaptations of highly successful novels that succeed in their own right through the freedom of their adaptations. Among these are Tony Richardson's adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* mentioned above (novel 1948; film 1965, screenplay by Terry Southern and Christopher Isherwood), Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (novel 1962; film 1971), and, also mentioned above, Amy Hackerling's transposition of Jane Austen's English novel of manners *Emma* (1816) to a Beverly Hills high school milieu in her 1995 film *Clueless*. For a contrasting effort to "translate" *Emma* faithfully to the screen see Diarmid Lawrence's 1997 TV adaptation. Finally, for a truly tormented effort to adapt Joseph Conrad's novel of turn-of-the-century colonial exploitation, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), to the American war in Vietnam, see Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979).