

Nineteenth-Century American Fiction on Screen

Edited by

R. Barton Palmer



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Nineteenth-Century American Fiction on Screen

The process of translating works of literature to the silver screen is a rich field of study for both students and scholars of literature and cinema. The fourteen essays collected here provide an up-to-date survey of the important films based on, or inspired by, nineteenth-century American fiction, from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* to Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. Several of the major works of the American canon are examined, notably *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Sister Carrie*. The starting point of each essay is the literary text itself, the focus then moving on to describe specific aspects of the adaptation process, including details of production and reception. Written in a lively and accessible style, the book includes production stills and full filmographies. With its companion volume on twentieth-century fiction, this study offers a comprehensive account of the rich tradition of American literature on screen.

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Introduction

R. Barton Palmer

Since the early days of the commercial cinema, many, perhaps most, important works of literary fiction have found a subsequent life on the screen, extending their reach and influence. Filmmakers, in turn, have enjoyed the economic and critical benefits of recycling what the industry knows as “presold properties.” No doubt, this complex intersection has deeply marked both arts. Keith Cohen, for example, has persuasively argued that cinematic narrative exerted a decisive influence on the shift in novelistic aesthetics from “telling” to “showing,” providing new depth of meaning to the old maxim *ut pictura poesis*.¹ Film theorists, in turn, most notably Sergei Eisenstein, have emphasized the formative influence on cinematic storytelling of the classic realist novel, whose techniques and themes, adapted by D. W. Griffith and others, made possible a filmic art of extended narrative. Modern fictional form has been shaped by filmic elements such as montage, shifting point of view, and close attention to visual texture. An enabling condition of this constant and mutually fruitful exchange has been the unconventional conventionality of both art forms, their generic receptivity to outside influence. As Robert Stam puts it, “both the novel and the fiction film are *summas* by their very nature. Their essence is to have no essence, to be open to all cultural forms.”²

Screen adaptations provide ideal critical sites not only for examining in detail how literary fiction is accommodated to cinematic form, but also for tracing the history of the symbiotic relationship of the two arts and the multifarious and ever-shifting connections between the commercial institutions responsible for their production. Until recently, however, neoromantic assumptions about the preeminent value of the source text have discouraged a thorough analysis of the complex negotiations (financial, authorial, commercial, legal, formal, generic, performative, etc.) that bring adaptations into being and deeply affect their reception. Traditionalist aesthetic considerations have also foreclosed discussion of the place of adaptations within the history of the cinema. For this latter is a critical task that requires the identification

and analysis of contextual issues that have little, if anything, to do with the source. In sum, the notion of “faithfulness” as the sole criterion of worth positions the adaptation disadvantageously, as only a secondary version of an honored work from another art form. An exclusive view of the adaptation as a replication closes off its discussion not only *per se*, but also *in se*. From the exclusive point of view of the source, an adaptation can only reflect value, for it does not result from the originary, creative process that produced its model. Traditional adaptation studies thus strive to estimate the value of what, by its nature, can possess no value of its own.

For this reason, it is not surprising that literary scholars have too often understood adaptations as only more or less irrelevant, if occasionally interesting, copies, as mere supplements to the literary source. From this perspective, the importance of adaptations is quite limited to the fact that they make their sources more available, extending the influence of literary masterpieces. Film scholars, in turn, have often viewed with suspicion and distaste the dependence of the screen adaptation on a novelistic pretext, seeing “literary” cinema as a less than genuine form of film art. The “grand theory” developed during the past three decades has emphasized the description and analysis of various aspects of cinematic specificity; grand theory, however, has not for the most part concerned itself with the intersemiotic relationships that generate and define the formal features of film adaptations. A nascent discipline, eager to establish its independence, perhaps could not afford such tolerance and breadth of critical vision. An approach that postulated films as in some sense secondary, especially as derivative versions of valued literary texts, would enact in microcosmic form the institutional bondage of film to literature. It would also reinforce the notion that the cinema was a parasitic art form, dependent on prior literary creation. Providing popular abridgements of literary masterpieces (to make the obvious point) hardly argued for the cultural importance of what Gilbert Seldes terms the seventh of “the lively arts.” Studying filmic adaptation ran counter to the new theorizing about the cinema in the 1970s – not to mention the academic respectability and independence for which such work implicitly campaigned. For literary and film scholars alike, adaptation studies encountered disfavor on both intellectual and institutional grounds.

During the past five years, however, the increasing popularity in cinema studies of what is usually termed “middle level theory” has turned the attention of scholars back toward the analysis of, and limited *in parvo* theorizing about, the material history of films and filmmaking, including the cinema’s relationship with literature. A key role in this development has been the increasing institutional presence of cultural

studies (or, in its more politically self-conscious British form, cultural materialism). Now recognized as a legitimate academic specialty, cultural studies ignores the formal and institutional boundaries between film and literature, even as it provides fertile ground for working on their interconnections. As Stam has recently remarked, "From a cultural studies perspective, adaptation forms part of a flattened out and newly egalitarian spectrum of cultural production. Within a comprehensively textualized world of images and simulations, adaptation becomes just another text, forming part of a broad discursive continuum."³ From this point of view, treating a film as an "adaptation" is a matter of critical politics as well as of facts, the result of a decision to privilege one form of connection or influence over any number of others.

Other recent developments in postmodern theory have made it possible for literary and film scholars alike to take a more nuanced and positive look at film adaptations. There is no doubt, in fact, that the field has been thriving, with a number of important theoretical works published during the past decade. In particular, intertextuality theory and Bakhtinian dialogics now hold prominent positions in literary and film studies. Intertextuality contests the received notion of closed and self-sufficient "works," their borders impermeable to influence, their structures unwelcoming of alien forms. As an archly postmodernist critical protocol, intertextuality provides an ideal theoretical basis from which can proceed an account of the shared identity of the literary source and its cinematic reflex. Any consideration of filmic adaptation means speaking of one text while speaking of another. Adaptation is by definition intertextual, or transtextual, to use Gérard Genette's more precise and inclusive taxonomic concept of textual relations. A peculiar doubleness characterizes the adaptation. For it is a presence that stands for and signifies the absence of the source-text. An adaptation refers to two texts with the same identity that are not the same. Such forms of permeable and shared textuality can be accounted for only by critical approaches that focus on interrelations of different sorts, including the (dis)connections between literary and cinematic contexts.

In film studies the decline of grand theory has enabled the field to take the direction that theorist Dudley Andrew has long advocated: a "sociological turn" toward the consideration of the institutional and contextual pressures that condition the process of adaptation and define what role the adaptation comes to play in the history of the cinema. Critical studies of literary/film relations are beginning to focus on "how adaptation serves the cinema," as Andrew puts it; and this new direction of inquiry has the added advantage of shedding light on how the literary source is affected by becoming part of an intertextual, intersemiotic,

interinstitutional series.⁴ Robert Stam provides an anatomy of source/adaptation relationships; these are surprisingly varied: “One way to look at adaptation is to see it as a matter of a source novel’s hypotext being transformed by a complex series of operations: selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation, analogization, popularization, and reculturalization.”⁵

Comparing the source and adaptation draws attention to the specific negotiations of various kinds involved in the process of transformation. Consideration can then be given to the role the resulting film comes to play within the cinema. The foundational premise of the approaches taken by the contributors to this volume has been that adaptations possess a value in themselves, apart from the ways in which they might be judged as (in)accurate replications of literary originals. Because it is sometimes a goal that guides those responsible for the adaptation process, faithfulness has found a place in the analyses collected here more as an aspect of context rather than a criterion of value. The fact (more often, the promise) of fidelity in some sense can also figure rhetorically in the contextualization of the film, most notably as a feature promoted by the marketing campaign. But very often it plays no crucial role in the transformation process and merits less critical attention than more relevant issues.

Undeniably, adaptations constitute an important area of modern cultural production, making them worthy and appropriate objects of study. But how to organize that study? Seeing a text as an adaptation means invoking its relations to two distinct but interconnected cultural series and its insertion within two divergent institutional series; adaptations become the analytical objects of two separate but not dissimilar disciplines in which topical, author-oriented, genre, and period forms of organization predominate. Film/literature adaptation courses are becoming increasingly prominent in university curricula, and they are usually housed within English or literature departments, where they are often organized, following the most common disciplinary paradigm, in terms of literary period. That practice has been followed in this volume and its companion, *Twentieth-Century American Fiction on Screen*. Although by no means the only interesting or pedagogically useful way in which adaptations might be studied, organization of the source-texts by period has the not inconsiderable virtue of offering literature teachers a familiar body of fiction with which to work. Additionally, this approach focuses narrowly on a selected stretch of literary history, permitting the analysis of how movements, themes, and dominant formal features have undergone “cinematicization.” In treating American fiction of the nineteenth century, this collection marshals a broad sweep