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# Literature on Screen, A History: In the Gap

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## Literature on Screen, A History: In the Gap

### **Abstract**

Perhaps more than any other film practices, cinematic adaptations have drawn the attention, scorn, and admiration of movie viewers, historians, and scholars since 1895. Indeed, even before this origin of the movies - with the first public projections of films by Auguste and Louis Lumière in France and Max and Emil Skladanowsky in Germany - critical voices worried about how photography had already encroached on traditional aesthetic terrains and disciplines, recuperating and presumably demeaning pictorial or dramatic subjects by adapting them as mechanical reproductions. After 1895, however, film culture moved quickly to turn this cultural anxiety to its advantage, as filmmakers worked to attract audiences with well-known images from books now brought to life as *Cinderella* (1900), *Gulliver's Travels* (1902), and *The Damnation of Faust* (1904). The plethora of cinematic adaptations in recent decades and the flood of scholarship responding to these films - films like *Bride and Prejudice*, (2004), Bollywood's version of Jane Austen's novel, and scholarly projects like Robert Stam's back-to-back anthologies *A Companion to Literature and Film* (2005), *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (2005) and critical study *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic and the Art of Adaptation* (2005) - indicate that the practice of adaptation and the disciplinary debates about it remain as lively and pressing as ever.

### **Disciplines**

English Language and Literature | Film and Media Studies | Film Production | Mass Communication

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TIMOTHY CORRIGAN

# Literature on screen, a history: in the gap

Perhaps more than any other film practices, cinematic adaptations have drawn the attention, scorn, and admiration of movie viewers, historians, and scholars since 1895. Indeed, even before this origin of the movies – with the first public projections of films by Auguste and Louis Lumière in France and Max and Emil Skladanowsky in Germany – critical voices worried about how photography had already encroached on traditional aesthetic terrains and disciplines, recuperating and presumably demeaning pictorial or dramatic subjects by adapting them as mechanical reproductions.<sup>1</sup> After 1895, however, film culture moved quickly to turn this cultural anxiety to its advantage, as filmmakers worked to attract audiences with well-known images from books now brought to life as *Cinderella* (1900), *Gulliver's Travels* (1902), and *The Damnation of Faust* (1904). The plethora of cinematic adaptations in recent decades and the flood of scholarship responding to these films – films like *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), Bollywood's version of Jane Austen's novel, and scholarly projects like Robert Stam's back-to-back anthologies *A Companion to Literature and Film* (2005), *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (2005) and critical study *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic and the Art of Adaptation* (2005) – indicate that the practice of adaptation and the disciplinary debates about it remain as lively and pressing as ever.

Adaptation describes, of course, multiple textual exchanges besides those involving film. Literary and theatrical works have regularly adapted historical chronicles; paintings have adapted theatrical or literary scenes, and music has converted literary figures into audio motifs and scores. The movies have themselves often turned to other sources than literary texts to adapt to the screen. Early Japanese films inherited the figure of the benshi, an actor commenting on the action on the screen or stage, from Kabuki theatre, and these films often found models for spatial compositions in ukiyo-e prints whose dramatic flat surfaces and planes would often draw attention away from the human figures in them. Even music has a significant tradition within

the history of cinematic adaptation, most famously found in movies such as the 1940 *Fantasia* and Ingmar Bergman's 1975 filmic opera, *The Magic Flute*. Finally, the direction of the exchange between the cinema and adaptation does not proceed only from a literary original to a cinematic adaptation but also runs in the other directions whereby novels, poetry, and theater absorb and adapt filmic materials and tropes as prominent thematic and structuring principles. Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase No. 2* (1912) is a famous example of a painting whose fragmented frames of a moving figure approximate the look of a series of film frames, and Vladimir Nabokov notes about his novel *Invitation of a Bezar* (1960) that he wrote "the entire book as if it were a film."<sup>2</sup>

With the cinema, however, the adaptation of literature to film describes the central current in film history with movies commonly turning to novels, short stories, or plays as source material to be transformed into screenplays and then into films. Given the cultural and historical ubiquity of cinematic adaptation, Dudley Andrew has gone so far as to observe that the "study of adaptation is tantamount to the study of cinema as a whole,"<sup>3</sup> a claim that can be expanded and refined to suggest how the changing definitions of the cinema have themselves reflected the changing dynamics of cinematic adaptation over the last 110 years. These definitions of the cinema involve a range of attributes such as the cultural status of the movies (as art or entertainment, for instance) or their formal shapes and organizations (such as the historical preeminence of narrative films), and more often than not, they reflect to some degree how the complexities of film technology, economics, aesthetics, and reception position themselves in relation to the literature of the past, present, and future.

The relationship between two terms, "adaptation" and "discipline," strikes me as an especially useful framework within which to measure these dynamics. On the one hand, adaptation, in its specific and more general sense, suggests alterations, adjustments, and intertextual exchanges, while on the other, discipline denotes and connotes rules, boundaries, and textual restrictions. The changing relationships between literature and film and how viewers and scholars have understood that relationship can, I want to argue, be mapped across this gap between film as an adaptive practice and film as a discipline. The many textual, cultural, and industrial territories inhabiting this gap become the prominent fields where the cinema's textual integrity, its cultural status, and its scholarly and academic boundaries are often hotly contested.

No single film addresses more directly and provocatively these complex currents of film adaptation than Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 *Contempt*. A self-reflexive film about the struggles to adapt Homer's *Odyssey* to the screen,

the film describes the efforts of an arrogant American producer, Jeremy Prokosch (Jack Palance), to enlist a French screenwriter, Paul Javal (Michel Piccoli), to doctor the script that German director Fritz Lang (playing himself) has developed and is in the process of filming. While Lang struggles to maintain the aesthetic integrity of the epic poem in adapting it as a film, Prokosch urges Paul to transform it into a more sensational and hence more profitable piece of entertainment. ("When I hear the world culture I reach for my chequebook," Prokosch remarks.) Entwined with this plot is the collapse of Paul's marriage to Camille (Brigitte Bardot) and, while the characters struggle to communicate through four different languages, the metaphoric prostitution of *The Odyssey* and Paul's talents as a writer come to parallel Paul's seeming surrender of his wife to Prokosch's lecherous interests. Here, the story of a cinematic adaptation describes an odyssey and battle of different infidelities, financial greed, personal exploitation, translations and misinterpretations, and the crisis of a professional identity. Tossing and turning through the constant movements of "adapting" (stories, lives, identities, and languages) and the longing for authenticity and professional discipline, *Contempt* adumbrates three dominant motifs in the dialogue between film adaptation and the film discipline: textual fidelity and specificity, the cultural position of film, and the academic and scholarly status of film studies. The film is also, fittingly, an extreme remake of a novel by Alberto Moravia, *A Ghost at Noon* (1954).

### Specificity and fidelity

The most common discussions and debates about film adaptation seem generally to focus on the notions of specificity and fidelity. Specificity assumes that different representational practices, such as literature and film, have individual material and formal structures that distinguish and differentiate them from other practices. Conversely, fidelity is a differential notion that purportedly measures the extent to which a work of literature has been accurately recreated (or not) as a movie. Emphasizing the textual specificity of literature and film clearly complicates, if not entirely obstructs, aims to "faithfully" adapt a book as a movie, since it implies a translation between "languages" that will always be only approximate or, at best, capture "the spirit" of the original text. Mediating the grounds between specificity and fidelity, moreover, are the different industrial and commercial structures that reinforce the textual differences dividing a literary work and its filmic adaptation, such as the technologies of production (print versus moving images, for instance) and the mechanisms of reception (reading versus viewing). To the degree that a film is faithful or not to the textual

specificity of a literary work (the narrative voice and textual style, as well as characters, settings, and plots) or to the “spirit” of that original, cinematic adaptations will always measure both the power of film – to assimilate, to transform, to distort, or to overcome – the specifics of that source material.

Examples of the sometimes extreme pull and push of the practices and debates surrounding specificity and fidelity pervade the entire history of the cinema from 1898 to today. Eric von Stroheim’s 1924 *Greed*, for example, attempts to recreate the complete text of Frank Norris’s novel *McTeague* (1899), and the result is a renowned example of the collision between artistic commitments to fidelity and the industrial forces that must adapt film’s specificity to economic and commercial restraints. After von Stroheim submitted a final version over nine hours long to Goldwyn Pictures, he grudgingly allowed it to be re-edited to approximately four hours. Eventually taken out of his hands by Irving Thalberg, the only surviving version of the film is about two hours and twenty minutes in length. This remarkable effort to overcome – faithfully – different orders of textual specificity becomes then a reminder of how thoroughly those specificities are subject to industrial forces. With many different aims and outcomes, this showdown would be restaged through the rest of the century and beyond. Kenneth Branagh’s 1996 *Hamlet* is a stunning 242-minute film aiming to be the first textually complete and hence faithful cinematic version of the play. Made economically feasible in large part by Branagh’s multi-film deal with Miramax Films to adapt a number of Shakespeare’s plays, this faithful *Hamlet* is, in context, as much a skillful economic negotiation through the power of independent cinema in the 1990s as it is an artistic achievement.<sup>4</sup>

While the majority of casual responses to film adaptations usually call upon some notion of specificity and fidelity (the movie rarely able to do justice to the book for most viewers), the most important film scholars and critics of the twentieth century have also taken strong positions around these terms, frequently as a way of defending the power and art of cinema. Indeed, three of the most notable classical film theorists have represented both the range and complexity inherent in different position towards these central issues of specificity and fidelity. In his 1933 *Film as Art*, Rudolph Arnheim argues vigorously for the differentiation of film forms and styles from those of other literary and pictorial practices, as a way of valorizing the unique art of film: “In order that the film artist may create a work of art,” he observes, “it is important that he consciously stress the peculiarities of his medium.”<sup>5</sup> In his famous 1942 essay “Dickens, Griffith, and Film Today,” Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein acknowledges the massive contribution of literature to film in the evolution of the language of “viewing” but, for Eisenstein, this “rich cultural heritage” has paved the way for the “unprecedented art” of film

as the art (and politics) of modern society.<sup>6</sup> Using a subtle model of a “work” which can materialize in different textual practices, André Bazin claims in his 1948 essay “Cinema as Digest” that cinematic “faithfulness to a form, literary or otherwise, is illusory: what matters is equivalence in the meaning of the forms.”<sup>7</sup>

As these and other writers recognize, implicit in the two terms, specificity and fidelity, are notions of authority and morality, suggesting how film adaptations and our perspectives on them can be as much about cultural attitudes and intellectual assumption as about the inherent complexity or achievements of a film adaptation. Arguments about how faithful movies are to books or to what extent one medium can be translated into another can differ significantly, for instance, if the source is considered classical literature or popular literature. Because of the canonical status and the historical longevity of a Shakespeare play or a Dickens novel, cinematic adaptations usually have little chance of usurping their authority and so the cinematic adaptation will normally appear “unfaithful” to some extent. Here, specificity suggests a sense of textual purity revealed especially through and in its proper discipline, and fidelity to a source suggests the rights of the original that must be acknowledged and ideally adhered to.<sup>8</sup> With the adaptation of literary works less celebrated or less culturally privileged, such as minor novels or “pulp fiction,” it is far less common to hear arguments about specificity and fidelity, and so the remarkable cinematic achievements of Hitchcock’s 1958 *Vertigo* are lauded in terms of filmic specificity, while its fidelity to Thomas Narcejac and Pierre Boileau’s *From Among the Dead* (1954) is rarely raised as a concern. In this and so many other cases, specificity and fidelity become more clearly about the authority of both literature and film than about faith in textual specificity.

### The cultural status, economics, and laws of adaptation

Commercial and historical circumstances or contexts have always mediated the practices of and debates about cinematic specificity, fidelity, and adaptation. Of the myriad examples throughout film history, I will highlight, at several exemplary historical moments, three of the most prominent and important forces used to control and direct literary adaptations in terms of cultural status, economic power, and legal rights. These three social forces identify, in turn, perspectives on cinematic adaptations in terms of three critical categories: cinematic texts, genres, and authors. Not coincidentally, these critical categories have become the prominent figures in adaptation studies both in the past and in the present.

In the early years of film history, literary adaptations become a quickly recognized panacea for many of the pressures and challenges inherent in this new and seemingly revolutionary entertainment. From 1895 to the turn of the twentieth century, early films and debates about those films question, implicitly and explicitly, whether film should in fact be considered a science or an entertainment: “actualities” present daily and historical events such as *The Corbett and Fitzsimmons Fight* (1897) as if they were newspaper reports and sociological recordings, while trick films and other visual amusements, such as Cecil Hepworth’s *The Explosion of a Motor Car* (1901), use films to surprise and delight audiences with their visual magic. At the same time and with increasing regularity, the first cinematic adaptations begin to appear, presenting short scenes from famous plays and novels, such as the 1899 version of Shakespeare’s *King John* or the 1903 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

By 1903 movies are establishing themselves as an entertainment industry moving definitively out of their vaudevillian heritage towards the promise of the higher cultural position associated with theater and literature. Identified in the early years of the twentieth century primarily with working-class and immigrant audiences of music halls and vaudevillian stages, the movies begin to adapt literary subjects to suggest and promote a kind of cultural uplift that would presumably curb many of the social and moral suspicions about their power over children, women, and the putatively uneducated.<sup>9</sup> One specific and celebrated example of this cultural disciplining is the “film d’art” movement, begun by the Société Film Art in 1908 with the production of *Assassination of the Duc de Guise* and flourishing through the 1912 *Loves of Queen Elizabeth*. Adaptations of Shakespeare, Goethe, Hugo, Dickens, and Wagner would also appear.

More broadly, the widespread shift to classical narrative structures after 1910 describes a crucial turn in the cultural alignment of the movies, whereby the movie’s choice of and increasing reliance on narrative literature results in the standardization of so-called classical film narrative. D. W. Griffith is doubtless the best-known filmmaker identified with the importation of a narrative structure inherited from nineteenth-century novels. His 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, adapted from *The Clansman* (1905), Thomas E. Dixon, Jr.’s novel and play, not only establishes the central structures of classical film narrative according to those structures – a linear narrative with a cause-and-effect logic driven by the agency of one or two main characters – but also introduces a new cultural standard for films equipped with grander and more complex stylistics, clearly imitating nineteenth-century novels and theatrical melodramas.

This early cultural reframing and assimilation of nineteenth-century narrative structures has both economic and legal implications that are still



operative today. Economically, longer, more artistically ambitious movies will expand audience demographics and the larger box office receipts by offering more lavish movies to an audience base that now extends into the middle and upper classes. While early films before 1903 lasted ten to fifteen minutes and charged their audience a nickel to gather in a store-front nickelodeon, Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, as a cinematic epic, would run for over three hours, charge two dollars for admission, and with its elaborate orchestral presentations led the way to movie-palace exhibition. These commercial and cultural gains in the adapting of literature, however, also introduce drawbacks. The 1907 *Ben-Hur* initiates the first copyright lawsuit in film history by Harper & Row, the publisher of Lew Wallace's 1880 novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*.<sup>10</sup> The subsequent emergence of the scriptwriter, and the necessity of scripts and screenplays as key components in the production of films, becomes a central transitional figure and production stage in the entire relationship of film to literature, adding to economic costs and allowing more predictability and control over the film process.

Although the first two decades of film history are an especially active period in the cultural disciplining of film through the adaptation of material and practices from older literary or artistic heritages, similar turns in the cultural currency of adaptation describe different key moments throughout the twentieth century. In the late 1920s and 1930s, adaptations of contemporary literature become more popular than ever before, partly because the introduction of sound in 1927 allows movies to more fully recreate literary and theatrical dialogue, character psychology, and plot complexity found in novels. At the same time, MPPDA (The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) and its censorious arm, Will Hays's Production Code, watched carefully to be sure that sensational literature did not cross over into the more popular realm of film. An illustrious moment in the more repressive dynamics of literary adaptation at this time – and one that offers a suggestive sense of how the connotations of discipline and adaptation interact – is the 1931 adaptation of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* by, first, the Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, and, then, the German/American filmmaker Josef von Sternberg. With the Hays Office looking conspicuously over the shoulder of Paramount Studios, Eisenstein's adaptation (favored by Dreiser) was rejected and von Sternberg's accepted. As all parties recognized, Eisenstein's version faithfully but dangerously maintained the political and social complexity behind the attempted murder at the heart of the plot, while von Sternberg remade it as a morality tale about the dangers of sexual obsession. Writing in *Close Up*, Harry Potamkin lambasted the cultural and legal politics of literary adaptation in Hollywood: "The fight for the integrity of this experience [depicted in Dreiser's novel] is not a personal one,

nor even for the rights of authorship. It is a struggle against the debasing of the intellectual and social level of an experience.”<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, during this same period, Hollywood studios expand and increasingly develop “prestige films,” usually adaptations of classical literature, like the 1935 version of Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and, the same year, *Becky Sharp*, adapted from Thackeray’s nineteenth-century novel *Vanity Fair*, the first Technicolor feature in movie history. Although prestige films exist before the 1930s, the growing power of the Hays Office makes classic literary adaptations more attractive than ever, partly because they offer psychologically and socially complex stories whose canonical status could protect them from too close scrutiny by the censors.<sup>12</sup> In this period when most film genres are developing the classical formulae that would be the economic backbone of the film industry, an exceptionally important genre to the economics and legalities of the film industry becomes “the prestige film.”

Related to the prestige films but describing a different sort of cultural positioning are the heritage films of late twentieth-century cinema. This more modern version of the literary genre film appears particularly in France and England since the 1980s and includes films such as Merchant Ivory’s *A Room with a View* (1985) and Claude Berri’s *Germinal* (1993).<sup>13</sup> The cultural motivations may be less clear for this generic variation on 1930s prestige films in contemporary times, yet for many they are certainly there. Within a contemporary climate of political violence and social multiculturalism (seen, for instance, in the Thatcherite 1980s in England) these comfortable images of a literary past often represent a therapeutic nostalgia for “traditional” national values, while at the same time marketing those values to foreign audiences as a self-contained, stable, and unified vision of another culture.<sup>14</sup>

Against the background of this historical sketch, a sharp pattern appears, a pattern that has dominated most film production and film criticism as the direct result of the economic, stylistic, and industrial prevalence of literary narratives (short stories, drama, and novels) as the heart of cinema and cinema studies. Because literary narratives have dominated film culture, it has meant the marginalization of other dynamic forms of adaptation that have lacked the cultural, economic, and even legal presence offered by film narratives, such as film adaptations of poetry, essays, and other non-narrative forms. Since D. W. Griffith’s adaptation of a Tennyson poem as *Enoch Arden* in 1911 to Chris Marker’s claim that he makes essay films like his 1983 *Sans soleil/Sunless*, these alternative relations with literature have been a regular but largely invisible part of film culture.

Announcing itself as a rebellion against “A Tradition of Quality” built around adaptations of classic literature, the French New Wave of the 1950s

and 1960s, identified with directors such as François Truffaut, Agnès Varda and Jean-Luc Godard, represents, after narrative texts and literary genres, a third prominent cultural and critical relationship between film and literature.<sup>15</sup> Suggested as early as 1948 in Alexander Astruc's essay "The Birth of the New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo," this configuration valorizes classical films and many of the new wave films that followed the French (from Italy to, more recently, Iran and Taiwan), as the product of "authors" or auteurs. As Astruc phrased it, the film camera (especially with the introduction of light-weight technologies such as the Eclair camera in the 1940s) would now be comparable to the writer's pen: "the cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression, just as all other arts have been before it, and particularly painting and the novel."<sup>16</sup> Rather than a precedent literary text, the agency of the filmmaker as author now becomes the measure of cinematic distinction, specificity, and quality, and fidelity now becomes a matter of authorial expression and authenticity.

These claims for cinematic authorship have in fact described a variety of cultural strategies and positions adopted before the 1950s which are still prevalent today. It recalls, for instance, the literary and commercial confrontation suggested earlier by Harry Potamkin in relation to *An American Tragedy* and also the celebrated confrontation in the early 1930s between Bertolt Brecht and German filmmaker G. W. Pabst over the adaptation of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* where, despite Brecht's angry protest, both the legal and artistic rights of the filmic author superseded those of the literary author once a work had been sold to a filmmaker.<sup>17</sup> In more recent years, auteurism has both maintained and shifted its cultural significance according to exigencies of time and place. Contemporary Iranian cinema, for example, consciously exploits the cultural capital of auteurs like Abbas Kiarostami, allowing him to make films like *10* (2002), meant to undermine the very presence and importance of the director as auteur.

Both film practices and studies of those practices have been dominated, since the 1950s, by models of film genre and film auteurs, both of which spring from and relate to the exchanges between film and literature. While these two critical models are commonly opposed – one representing industrial patterns and the other individual expression – their foundations in the cultural positioning of the film/literature exchange reminds us of the fluid dynamic that binds the categories. One telling example that engages the cultural, economic, and legal dimensions of film and literature is the New German Cinema of the 1970s and early 1980s. This group of filmmakers took conscious advantage of the critical and financial power of a successful auteurist cinema and reshaped it as a more political and cultural tool: auteurs like Wim Wenders, Helke Sanders, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder leveraged

their positions as international figures to make films that often explored critically the history and politics of a contemporary Germany that attempted to resist and deny those films. At one point, these auteurs developed their own version of prestige cinema with a spate of classic literary adaptations that included Volker Schlöndorff's 1979 *The Tin Drum* and Fassbinder's 1980 *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. In this case, however, adapting literary classics becomes not about prestige or heritage but a way to mount a slightly veiled but critically stinging engagement with a contemporary German political paranoia (and censorship).

### Disciplines and academia

Paralleling the changing cultural positions of film adaptation and its primary configurations as specific texts, genres, and auteurs, a century of scholarly debates has both reflected and challenged the many different aesthetic and social relationships between film and literature. Since 1895, responses to adaptation by philosophers, journalists, scholars, and filmmakers describe active and robust testimonies to intellectual openings that occur when questions of the specificity of the medium and the kinds of fidelity possible with film adaptation become recharged within those different historical and cultural contexts.

Even before 1895, debates about adaptation shadowed discussions of art and literature. Most famously, towards the end of the eighteenth century, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766) presented a detailed philosophical analysis of how the arts differ in terms of their forms and respective powers to represent the world, and while many of the major educational and intellectual figures of the nineteenth century (notably Matthew Arnold) developed rigorous positions about the shared and distinguishing features of the arts within modern cultures, the major challenge to many of these aesthetic and academic positions emerged quickly in the form of mass entertainments – from theatrical spectacles and dioramas of the early nineteenth century to the photography, musical halls, and cinema projections that followed. Between the high cultural ground being articulated in universities and museums and the low cultural fairgrounds from which the movies would spring, the nineteenth century predicted a long line of anxieties and claims about the relationship of the movies to the other arts.

One early and perceptive writer about the movies, Vachel Lindsay, was an especially articulate voice in these debates. Writing his landmark *The Art of the Moving Picture* in 1915, Lindsay was an active poet with a profound social sense who regarded the new art of film as the medium to bring the spirit of poetry to the democratic masses of America. In their ability to adapt

and to serve other arts and professions, movies are able to draw on a wide variety of interdisciplinary fields, in addition to the literary, and so activate those fields as “sculpture-in-motion,” “painting-in-motion,” and “architecture-in-motion.” Indeed, in one of the most prophetic arguments of his early book, Lindsay foresees film as a key tool for linking and communicating the many scholarly disciplines in universities and museums, allowing academic research to be disseminated outside their walls as a “University Extension.”<sup>18</sup>

Since that early vision of an interdisciplinary academy promoting film as the new literature, questions of adaptations have continued to function as lightning rods for evolving critical questions about the cinema and the shaping of film studies as an intellectual discipline. Paralleling Eisenstein’s arguments about the specificity of film form as it develops out of its theatrical and literary past, various avant-garde movements since the 1920s struggled to release film from the shadow of literature and literary studies and establish its formal and intellectual independence. A decade after Lindsay’s utopian visions of movies found a place in the colleges and universities of the world, cine-clubs around the world and the journals that sprang up around them – the new academies for this new art – argued heatedly about the merits of a film art whose technologies of movement have replaced literature and the traditional arts. In England, for instance, the journal *Close Up* (1927–1933), “The Only Magazine Devoted to Film as an Art,” featured writings by the poet H. D. and novelist Dorothy Richardson and, despite its literary roots, often fought for a unique art of film, not found in the commercial cinema.<sup>19</sup> In France in the 1940s, Gilbert Cohen-Séat shaped the “filmology movement” specifically as an intellectual field devoted to the study of film in society. Indeed, in all these cases, the insistence on the singularity of film practice as a discipline would remain a consistent motif through the 1950s and, in 1960, experimental filmmaker Maya Deren would announce that the intellectual and creative integrity of film required a complete divorce from its former literary partners. Film “must relinquish the narrative disciplines it has borrowed from literature and in timid imitation of the casual logic of narrative plots” and instead it must “determine the disciplines inherent in the medium, discover its own structural modes, explore the new realms and dimensions accessible to it and so enrich our culture artistically as science has done in its own province.”<sup>20</sup>

This insistence on the intellectual and artistic separation of film and literature evolves along a somewhat different path in the 1960s when film studies begins to enter college and university curriculums in full force and, in tandem, begins articulating itself more consciously as a scholarly discipline developing out of the humanities. In the span of years between two seminal works, George Bluestone’s 1957 *Novels into Film* and Robert Richardson’s

1969 *Literature and Film*, the interdisciplinary exchange of the two practices would be articulated confidently on a broadly humanistic base, addressing topics like “modes of consciousness” (Bluestone) in novels and movies, or “the question of order and coherence in poetry and film” (Richardson). Quite importantly, at this turning point in the 1960s, film courses and scholarship tended to justify their place through work on European auteurs and the related assumption that film form is a “language.” This in turn leads to the institutionalization of a kind of film studies immediately associated with authorial and literary models found in English Departments needing, during this turbulent decade, to loosen and expand their academic and scholarly reach. Through this period, film scholarship adapts decidedly literary (usually narrative) and linguistic models which allowed for comfortable transitions between literature and film, while at the same time film studies moves to secure itself a disciplinary place within academia through the presence of an emerging canon of cinematic “authors.”

In the 1970s and 1980s, the academic and critical centers of film studies would shift in two principal directions, neither of which is particularly hospitable to adaptation studies: towards medium-specific, neo-formalist studies and towards ideological studies. Whereas the first champions the distinctive difference of film from literature (and other representational practices), the second embraces the broader conceptual grounds for film based in post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and contemporary ideological models. In an important sense, both directions are attempts to define film as a discipline, the first in terms of its textual specificity and the second within the large field of film theory.

While these contemporary film studies would insist on the discipline of their own forms or on the theoretical specificity of film practices, adaptation studies of a more conventional kind would flourish, almost as a third and separate field on the fringes of the emerging discipline of film studies. As a product of films’ early association with language and literature departments (still under the influence of New Criticism and its valorization of single texts), according to Robert Ray, “film and literature scholars could only persist in asking about individual movies the same unproductive layman’s question (How does the film compare with the book), getting the same unproductive answer (The book is better). Each article seemed isolated from all the others; its insights apparently stopped at the borders of the specific film or novel selected for analysis.”<sup>21</sup>

Ray’s argument is especially worth considering since he moves beyond debates about aesthetics of specificity and fidelity to the professional and institutional pressures shaping film studies. He goes on to raise important questions about interdisciplinary recuperation of film studies by various

language and literature programs where, following the exigencies of the academic marketplace and a “publish or perish” economy, critical and scholarly engagements with film adaptations have tended to produce an excess of predictably dull close readings of literature adapted as film. Today “the task facing all of us, especially film and literature scholars,” Ray concludes, “involves rethinking the media’s *fait accompli*, imagining new ways in which words and images can be adapted and combined, as well as new purposes for those combinations.”<sup>22</sup>

Since at least the 1990s, I believe, this rethinking has in fact been taking place and producing new energies and significant scholarship in adaptation studies, opening the questions informing the relations of literature and film in larger, less predictable, and more concrete ways. Some of this work springs from more exact cultural and historical investigation, some from the expansion of theoretical boundaries to take into account the hybrid and multi-textual nature of questions about gender, textual authority and priority, or national and transnational formulations of adaptation. This body of recent adaptation studies does not amount to the “poetics of adaptation” that Ray calls for. On the contrary, one positive result of this multiplication and expansion of the field of adaptation study may be precisely the salutary erosion of a traditional longing for cohesion and disciplinarity within film studies.

Indeed it is precisely this potential for adaptation to challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries that has always identified its greatest potential to filmmakers, everyday moviegoers, and academic scholars. Walter Benjamin’s 1936 “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is the most renowned argument to identify this ability of film to challenge and overturn the categories and positions that distinguish traditional arts and literatures, claiming that the “auratic” reading and viewing formations of those classical arts must give way before the cinema’s radical remakings, transformations, and adaptations. More recently, Rey Chow describes cinema studies as a “phantom discipline” practiced mainly by interdisciplinary “amateurs” (like herself) who approach film studies from outside its disciplinary margins without necessarily any (or much) formal training:

If, instead of attaining centrality, film has remained phantomlike as an academic discipline, it is because it is inextricably linked to every other type of knowledge production . . . [To] the extent that cinema tends to reside in the gap between, on the one hand, tangible and archival products (which necessitate specialized documentation and institutional accommodation) and, on the other, the enthralled but transient experiences of generations of moviegoers (for whom film is integral to the texture and fabric of petty bourgeois life), it will perhaps always remain an ambiguous object of study with unstable, open boundaries – but therein may lie its most interesting intellectual future.<sup>23</sup>

Between disciplinarity and adaptation, between literature and film, adaptation studies provide, I am convinced, especially ambiguous, risky, unstable, and enormously interesting opportunities today. When opened out beyond questions of specificity and fidelity, adaptation studies necessarily and productively trouble and open disciplinary boundaries (both those of literary studies and film studies). It is in that gap that many of the most compelling ideas appear.

## NOTES

- 1 See Charles Baudelaire, "The Salon of 1846: On the Heroism of Modern Life" in Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison, *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
- 2 Alfred Appel, Jr., *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 258.
- 3 *Concepts in Film Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 103.
- 4 See Timothy Corrigan, "Which Shakespeare to Love? Film, Fidelity, and the Performance of Literature," in Jim Collins (ed.), *High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 155–81.
- 5 Rudolph Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 35.
- 6 Sergei Eisenstein, "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Today," in Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1949), p. 233.
- 7 André Bazin, "Cinema as Digest," in James Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 20.
- 8 See Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), pp. 54–78.
- 9 See Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio, *Reframing Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- 10 For further discussion of this film, see Chapter 3 in this volume, pp. 54–7.
- 11 Harry Alan Potamkin, "Novel into Film: A Case Study of Current Practice," in *The Compound Cinema: The Film Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York and London: The Teachers College Press, 1977), p. 186.
- 12 See Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, *De la littérature au cinéma: genèse d'une écriture* (Paris: Armand Colin), 1970.
- 13 See Ginette Vincendeau, *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: BFI, 2001). Although most critics have been, at the very least, suspicious of the ideological motivations of heritage films, a recent, quite brilliant re-reading of the ideological potential for heritage cinema can be found in Rosalind Galt, *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- 14 See Chapter 8 in this volume for a discussion of heritage film and television.
- 15 It has been shown that despite their anti-literary pronouncements, Truffaut, Godard, and other New Wave filmmakers were regularly dependent on literary texts and references.



- 16 “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: Le Camera-Stylo,” in Timothy Corrigan (ed.), *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader* (Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999), p. 159.
- 17 In *The Threepenny Lawsuit*, Brecht begins his polemic: “We have often been told (and the court expressed the same opinion) that when we sold our work to the film industry we gave up all our right; the buyers even purchased the right to destroy what they bought.” “The Film, the Novel, and Epic Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964), p. 47.
- 18 Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York: Liveright, 1970), p. 261.
- 19 See Donald, James, Anne Freidberg, and Laura Marcus (eds.), *Close Up, 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- 20 “Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality,” *Film Theory and Criticism*, 6th edn., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 197–8.
- 21 Robert Ray, “The Field of ‘Literature and Film,’” in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 44.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 23 Rey Chow, “A Phantom Discipline,” *PMLA* 116.5 (2001), 1391–2.

