

contents of our readings, but these are always open to further revision by other readers, who will establish their own. Literature is a privileged place for dialogue, and it is one of the key virtues of Andrew Monnickendam's *Waverley* homepage to remind us that this is so,

and to encourage us to keep the dialogue alive.

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Brian MCFARLANE. *Novel to film: an introduction to the theory of adaptation*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996, viii + 279 pages.

Many film directors avoid the problem of having to create *ex nihilo* by finding a scriptwriter to adapt a book rather than dream up an entirely new story. This has certain advantages. There is a ready-made plot and more or less rounded characters, and if the novel is well-known, familiarity with the original may boost interest in the film. Recent examples of famous fictions transformed into films are Austen's *Sense and sensibility* (Lee), James's *Portrait of a lady* (Campion), Ishiguro's Booker-Prize winning *Remains of the day* (Ivory), and another Booker success, Ondaatje's *The English patient* (Minghella).

Inevitably, the film version raises questions about the relationship to its verbal origins. Many critics and scholars are quick to point out what the film leaves out, take the director to task for altering developments in the plot, and generally voice disappointment, basically, that the director did not do what they themselves would have done. A fruitful comparison, however, does not stop at cataloguing differences, but tries to do justice both to a director's intentions (which may differ from the author's) and to the instruments the two different media, language and film, have at their disposal to tell the «same» story. If conducted in this spirit, a systematic investigation of a novel and its corresponding film can shed light on the two art works themselves as well as con-

tribute to more theoretical insights into medium-specific and medium-independent dimensions of story-telling.

Brian McFarlane has undertaken such a project. In his *Novel to film: an introduction to the theory of adaptation* he aims to avoid the impressionistic talk about film adaptations that mars, he claims, so many studies in this realm, as well as to provide specific concepts for discussing the nature of the transformation process. Employing what he himself terms «a modified structuralist approach» (201), he distinguishes between transferable and non-transferable elements. For example, while a plot can usually be kept intact in the adaptation, such devices as «first-person narration» and «omniscient narration» do not have a direct equivalent in cinema. All elements pertaining to the way in which a narrative is presented in a certain medium belong to what McFarlane calls «enunciation», to be distinguished from the elements that are not medium-spe-

cific —these being labelled «narrative».<sup>1</sup> McFarlane sees two worthwhile lines of investigation: «(a) in the transposition process, just what is it *possible* to transfer or adapt from novel to film; and (b) what key factors other than the source novel have exercised an influence on the film version of the novel?» (p. 22). The author presents five novel/film pairs to show how his theoretical framework can be applied. A limitation of his study, as he himself admits, is that he pays little attention to the musical dimension of the films.

The theoretical foundation is brief but to the point. The Barthesian distinction between essential narrative events (major cardinal functions) and those of secondary importance (catalysers) is usefully supplemented by references to Vladimir Propp's notion that certain developments in a story can be realised by different characters or events, as long as they are functionally equivalent. Furthermore there are references to Lévi-Strauss's «myths» (in the broad sense of archetypal blueprints of events) and Freudian motifs that inform fictions. And finally, the idea of binary oppositions —a key concept of semiotic approaches— is invoked as a practical tool to help characterise how stories are structured. Clearly McFarlane did not want to burden his readers with elaborate, highly theoretical schemas and reflections, nor to introduce unnecessary terminology. Instead, he provides enough theoretical background to ensure that his own analyses are systematic and verifiable, while the model remains conveniently flexible; McFarlane has too much respect for the idiosyncrasies of novels

and films to believe they can fully be fitted into ready-made theoretical Procrustus beds. Theory is used in the service of applications, not the other way round. But this focus also means that those seeking extended reflections on theoretical assumptions had better look elsewhere (e.g., in Chatman 1990).

After outlining his theoretical model, McFarlane presents five detailed case-studies: *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne/Sjöström), *Random Harvest* (Hilton/LeRoy), *Great Expectations* (Dickens/Lean), *Daisy Miller* (James/Bogdanovich), *The Executioners/Cape fear* (MacDonald/Scorsese). Each chapter has the same general plan: in a section labelled «Narrative and transfer», McFarlane examines the structural patterns of, respectively, the novel and the film —that is, he investigates those elements that are transferable from text to cinema and discusses the consequences of the transfer-decisions taken by the director. Subsequently, he concentrates on the non-transferable elements in a section entitled «Enunciation and adaptation», in which the narrational modes of novel and film are charted, and which shows what, if anything, has been done with the typically verbal dimensions of the narrating voice(s) in terms of cinematic techniques. The last part of each chapter is a «special focus» section, in which an issue of particular relevance to a specific book/film pair is explored more closely.

McFarlane's pairs reflect different themes and techniques. For instance, Sjöström's *The Scarlet Letter* (1926) — based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's chilling depiction of hypocrisy and repression in Puritan America— was chosen

1. The distinction between narrative and enunciation in McFarlane's book is crucial. In practice, the plot of the story belongs generally to the narrative, and can easily be transposed from language to film (as can at least some of the novel's dialogues), while its formal/stylistic aspects require (creative) transformation from the verbal into the visual and the aural.

because it is a silent film. McFarlane argues that changing the order of events in the novel (*in medias res*, with flashbacks to reveal what happened before) into straight chronology in the film may well have been a decision guided by silent film's limited means to render the complex intertwining of the past and present of the novel. Furthermore, minor shifts in emphasis can perhaps be explained with reference to the socio-historical context of the film's production. Contemporary Hollywood notoriously imposed severe restrictions on the display of such infamous events as kissing and other passionate behaviour that might stir audiences' baser urges — restrictions that were often felt to be patronising and dishonest. McFarlane suggests that the film subtly criticises this type of censorship and hypocrisy. Another factor which probably influenced the cinematic adaptation was that the film was to serve as a star vehicle for the young actress Lillian Gish. The filmic «enunciation» necessarily loses virtually all of the narrative voice characterising Hawthorne's novel, the silent film's intertitles (text inserted between shots carrying dialogues or descriptions) being too much needed to convey essential information to be able to catch anything of the novel's reflective prose. But various cinematographic techniques were employed to reflect the atmosphere created by the novel's narration: *mise-en-scène* hints at hierarchies and symbolical relationships between characters; sharp lighting emphasises the profound contrasts informing the story; a preference for close-ups and medium close-ups over long shots stimulates viewers' involvement with, rather than detached observation of, the unfolding drama. The chapter on *The Scarlet Letter* concludes

with a special focus on the film's visual correlatives for the story's structuring oppositions: man versus woman; private versus public guilt, agitation versus composure, sincerity versus hypocrisy.

The case-studies emphatically raise issues that go beyond the specific novel-film pair considered. One recurring theme is that even elements lending themselves to «transfer» from one medium to the other undergo a degree of change in the process. After all, successful transfer means that «visual and aural signifiers have been found to produce data corresponding to those produced by the verbal signifiers of the novel» (82) — and inevitably this touches upon matters of enunciation as well. Cinematically rendering such a simple sentence as «Winterbourne looked along the path and saw a beautiful young lady advancing» involves selecting an actor and an actress, a *mise-en-scène*, a camera position, a camera angle, a camera movement, a location, a type of montage of shots, music (or the absence of music) — all of which may have effects that are not necessarily identical to those of the sentence, and vice versa. Even dialogues from the novel that are literally employed in the film are affected by an actor's performance: intonation, timbre, speed of delivery, pauses and various other elements are part and parcel of a film's spoken texts. Not surprisingly, McFarlane concludes that the crucial discrepancies between a novel and a film are found on the level of enunciation rather than narrative — a point also made by Hurst (1996).<sup>2</sup>

One of the book's assets is the attention paid to the effects of the socio-historical context of novel and film, and the way the two may differ. *Random Harvest* (1942) appeared only a year after

2. For a review in Dutch of Hurst's book see Forceville, *Tijdschrift voor Literatuurwetenschap* 2:2 (June 1997), 178-181.

Hilton's novel. McFarlane grants that it portrays the English countryside with a clichéd prettiness and stability that can easily irritate modern viewers, but points out that it probably was a relief amidst the chaos of a war-ridden world. Similarly, the filmmakers' choice to give *Great Expectations* (1949) a more positive ending than Dickens did may have been caused by the feeling that post-war audiences had had their fill of misery and pessimism. With regard to Scorsese's *Cape Fear*, McFarlane points out that this is as much a remake of an earlier film (in 1961, by Lee-Thompson) as an adaptation of the unremarkable novel by John MacDonald. Whereas both the book and the older film depict the invasion of the Bowden family by the maniacal Cade in stark contrasts between good and evil, Scorsese's nineties' version disturbingly suggests that evil comes as much from inside as from outside the family. In addition, the intertextual echoes of the later film version are richer than those of its predecessor—not only do they include that very predecessor, but they also build on such milestone exercises in physical and psychological violence as *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).

*Novel to film* is a firm and convincing plea for a fair comparison between a novel and the film(s) based on it. Such a

comparison foregoes vague references to the «faithfulness» of a film (or lack of it) to its literary source, applying instead a number of well-defined concepts with suitable flexibility to novel/film pairs. Specifically, the enunciatory possibilities and restrictions of both media need to be studied carefully before anything beyond the subjectively impressionistic can be claimed about the success of an adaptation. This unbiased approach is closely linked to another recommendable aspect of the book. McFarlane does not content himself with cataloguing themes and techniques, but always tries to account for the effects which writers and directors' choices (may) have on their respective audiences. For this is of course what really counts; a difference without a real or possible effect, after all, simply doesn't matter. Inevitably McFarlane often cannot but speculate about these effects, since he did no experimental research to support his interpretations, but his speculations are cautious, sensible, and informed. Finally, the shot analyses (*The scarlet letter*, *Daisy Miller*) and segmentations into scenes (*Random Harvest*, *Great Expectations*, *Cape Fear*) should be of considerable help for those who want to pursue their studies of any of the films in more detail (the most useful approach still is Bordwell 1985).

## References

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**Notes**

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