

## 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*.<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup>

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

of expert opinion, literary and cinematic, on an equally broad field of texts.

*Nineteenth-Century American Fiction on Screen* has been conceived to fill the need for an up-to-date survey of the important films made from these texts, with the book's unity deriving in the first instance from the literary and cultural connections among the various sources. The fourteen essays collected here, all written expressly for this volume, each address the adaptation (occasionally adaptations) of single literary texts, though discussion, where relevant, also ranges over screen versions of other works by the same author, other releases by the same director, or films that are otherwise relevant. This book has a focus that provides a ready organization for courses in adaptation, with readings and viewings easily coordinated with the essays. Despite their singular emphasis, the essays also open up discussion into broader areas of importance. Although the scheme adopted here is in the first instance literary, the different essays are also deeply cinematic, addressing specific aspects of the adaptation process, including details of production where relevant and usually seeking to define the role that the film came to play within the history of the American cinema. Some contributors discuss the intersemiotic aspects of transferring a narrative from one medium to another, while others consider in depth the problems of authorship, an important question whenever the work of a valued author becomes part of the oeuvre of an important director or when the contributions of a screenwriter prove significant and defining.

In various ways and from different critical perspectives, the essays address questions of genre, sexuality/gender, ideology, censorship, politics, the representation of minority groups, and so forth. A major focus is the role of relevant contexts (institutional, aesthetic, commercial, legal, etc.) in determining the shape of the final product. No overly programmatic scheme, however, has been imposed on the contributors, who owe disciplinary loyalty to either cinema studies or literature. The aim instead has been to assemble a volume characterized by both a useful unity and a thought-provoking variety. *Nineteenth-Century American Fiction on Screen* addresses the needs of both literature/film students and those readers more generally, perhaps informally, interested in the fascinating phenomenon of adaptation. The volume exemplifies the varied fictional traditions of the period, from the Christian sentimental novel (*Ben-Hur*, *Little Women*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), to tales of mystery and romance (*The Last of the Mohicans*, *Moby-Dick*, *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Scarlet Letter*), and, finally, realist and naturalist modes of writing (*Daisy Miller*, *The Europeans*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Sea Wolf*, *Sister Carrie*, *The Virginian*).

Much thought has gone into the selection of novels (or short fiction in the case of Poe) and films. In planning *Twentieth-Century American Fiction on Screen*, the extensive corpus of cinematic material provided a good deal of choice, but that proved not to be the case with films adapted from the fiction of the previous century. My starting point was a review of all commercial American adaptations of nineteenth-century American fiction from the sound era, roughly 1930 to the present. Silent films were rejected as being, in general, too difficult to obtain for classroom use, though some are included when there are multiple adaptations of the same source (e.g., the two versions, one silent and one sound, of Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur*) or when the silent film is arguably the most interesting version and is available for classroom use (e.g., *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). After surveying the authors actually filmed by Hollywood, I discovered that a number of major figures, most prominently Washington Irving and almost all women novelists of the period (Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe are the prominent exceptions) had never or rarely (and then generally unsatisfactorily) been adapted for the screen. Because it has been so dedicated to marketing modernity, broadly conceived, Hollywood production offers only a narrow view of nineteenth-century literature. Hollywood's most extensive engagement with nineteenth-century politics and culture is in fact through an essentially twentieth-century form: the western, for many decades the film genre most popular with American audiences, precisely because of the attractive version of nineteenth-century life and values that it celebrated. In the chapter devoted to Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, the emergence and flourishing of the western are taken up in detail.

As it happens, the nineteenth-century novelists whose fiction has been screened are almost all *major* in the sense that they have been and remain the subject of substantial critical work. Hollywood's taste, reflecting in some sense popular opinion, surprisingly coincides closely with the canon of valued texts that emerged during the institutionalization of American literature as a scholarly discipline in the first decades of the twentieth century. The table of contents obviously reflects academic opinion of the fiction in this period. So there are three chapters devoted to the works of Henry James, a central literary figure who also happens to be one of the most adapted of American nineteenth-century writers in the sound era. For the purposes of this volume, James has been counted as "American," though, naturally, his national affiliation, if it can be said to be in fact singular, is disputable.

The writers whose work is discussed here continue to find a readership. Their works, in other words, remain in print. They are also nearly all what we would now term "high cultural": Louisa May Alcott, James

Fenimore Cooper, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Henry James, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. I have also included two writers, Lew Wallace and Owen Wister, who might be described as popular novelists with substantial historical, but arguably literary, importance as well. In the final analysis, of course, both the criteria used and the particular choices made are subjective, in the sense that they are based, first, on my knowledge of and experience with literary and film study and, second, on my appraisal of what material would appeal to scholarly and general readers, yet also prove useful in the classroom.

I do not know, of course, any more than anyone else, how to decide *objectively* what works, literary or cinematic, should be thought *major*. Among other prominent rankings, the American Film Institute has compiled a list of the “100 Best American Films.” A number of the films I have selected, but by no means all, are on this list. If there is a comparable list for nineteenth-century American novels and short fiction, I am not familiar with it, but most of the literary texts chosen for this volume would likely be on it. But then even if such a list did exist, its authoritative value would be dubious. The canon of literary study remains very much in dispute and can hardly be said to be fixed or stable, as scholars such as Paul Lauter have shown.<sup>6</sup>

In planning this book, the status of both authors and works was in fact a preliminary condition. That I considered them *major* was a necessary, but not sufficient reason for inclusion. Another important purpose of this volume is to exemplify different aspects of the *process* of adaptation. In making the selections from among major works by major authors, I have picked formally and culturally interesting adaptations, by which I mean those that can be shown to have served the cinema in some significant or revealing fashion. For example, the fictional text might offer technical challenges (e.g., how do you film a novel with prominent antirealist elements such as *Moby-Dick*?) or the context of the adaptation might be interesting from the viewpoint of Hollywood history (e.g., in the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Hollywood's problematic engagement during the 1920s with racial politics). The film might constitute an important part of a director's oeuvre, with the source thus inserted into two expressive series, one literary and the other cinematic. As the contributors to this volume demonstrate with skill and insight, these films all hold interests that, while determined to some degree by their status as adaptations, also derive from their insertion within the history of Hollywood and the larger cultural role that the movies played in twentieth-century America, which was in part, as it remains, furthering the reach of honored, significant, and popular literary texts.



8 *R. Barton Palmer*

#### NOTES

1. Keith Cohen, *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). See also his *Writing in a Film Age: Essays by Contemporary Novelists* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1991).
2. Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," in James Naremore, ed., *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 61.
3. Robert Stam, "Introduction," in Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 9–10.
4. Dudley J. Andrew, "Adaptation," in Naremore, ed., *Film Adaptation*, p. 35.
5. Stam, "Beyond Fidelity," p. 68.
6. See especially Paul Lauter, *Canons and Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).



## 1 A very American fable: the making of a *Mohicans* adaptation

---

*Martin Barker and Roger Sabin*

In 1936 the second major screen version of James Fenimore Cooper's (1789–1851) *The Last of the Mohicans* was released by a small outfit, Reliance Pictures, through United Artists. The film did very well at the box offices, and made a star of its lead male, Randolph Scott. Curiously absent from histories of 1930s Hollywood cinema,<sup>1</sup> it has been fondly remembered by many viewers, and still plays on television quite regularly. It also provided the basis for Michael Mann's 1992 remake; Mann credits the screenplay by Philip Dunne as a prime source for his own ideas. In 1997 we published a book about the long and extensive history of adaptations of *Mohicans*, across the media of film, television, animation, and comic books.<sup>2</sup> We tried to set the 1936 film in its production and cultural contexts. And in one important respect we got it wrong. This essay recounts what we discovered when an opportunity came subsequently to do further research in the archives.<sup>3</sup> A very telling story emerges, which has implications far beyond this particular film.

Cooper's novel was originally published in 1826. More than any other, it made his name as an "American author." Not the first, it was undoubtedly the best-known of his "Leatherstocking" tales which tell the life of Nathaniel Bumppo, or Hawkeye, the frontiersman who fictionally patrolled the forests of the North East – and who encountered the real circumstances of the French and English wars for control of America. *The Last of the Mohicans* is the story most directly concerned with that encounter, tying Hawkeye into the real historical circumstances of the siege, surrender, and massacre at Fort William Henry in 1757. The core of the narrative is the friendship between Hawkeye and his two Mohican friends Chingachgook and his son Uncas – the last two of this people whom Cooper writes as the *ur*-tribe of the Delawares – and their efforts to save the two daughters of the English Colonel Munro from the villainous intentions of the Huron Magua. In the novel the younger girl, Alice, dies with Uncas, who has fallen in love with her, leaving Cora to depart America with Major Duncan Heyward, the stiff British officer

who has been changed by his encounters with the wilderness. Hawkeye returns to the wilderness, with the grieving Chingachgook.

One of the central themes of our book was that this story, so well known for its evocative title (but much less well known in detail), had the peculiar virtue of being almost infinitely adaptable. Its themes of wilderness, the origins of “America,” the interrelations of race and sexes, could therefore be made to resonate with the particular concerns and tensions of each successive moment when it was reworked. In the case of the 1936 adaptation, we could point to a large number of changes. Much of the violence of the original story was toned down. Little of the original dialogue survived; instead, characters talked as though they were straight out of a family adventure movie. The characters of Alice and Cora were for some reason reversed, and the surviving Alice ends up with Hawkeye. But it was hard to say which counted as major, or minor, alterations. Some did look significant. For example, we pointed to the visual diminution of the “wilderness” into parkland. This connected with inserted dialogue in which Hawkeye becomes the mythic voice of a new conception of the frontier: as a land waiting to be developed into towns, cities. As an expression of the will during the Depression to industrialize the countryside in order to save the collapsing rural economies, this made and still makes sense.

We were particularly struck by one major narrative alteration. In the released version the narrative is topped and tailed by episodes not found in the novel. The story opens in Europe with a grandiloquent scene in St. James’s Palace where George II is listening to his ministers debating the worth of trying to save America, and is persuaded by the prime minister to see it as the “raw materials of an Empire,” to be tamed and exploited for England’s purposes. But having embroidered this theme of a conflict between the interests of the English and the colonials, in which Hawkeye must take the side of the latter and face rough “English justice,” the film solves this with an ending in which Hawkeye is forgiven, becomes a scout for the English, and of course gets the girl. Trying to make sense of this, we borrowed a claim from Dan Georgakas, that at this point Hollywood may have been responding to a quiet request by Franklin D. Roosevelt to make films which would challenge America’s dominant isolationism.<sup>4</sup> Films showing that Europe and America share common interests could have been valuable – especially in the light of the increasing saber-rattling in Germany, Italy, and Spain.

On reflection, we came to doubt this account, for a number of reasons. Above all, it depends on the possibility that Roosevelt foresaw the coming European war. The temptation to see him in this way may be part of an attractive mythologization on which David Culbert has