Introduction

Terry Wright

In the long-running 'war of independence' between film and literary studies,[1] in which film is often taught (with some resentment) as an extra dimension within English departments, it is common for film critics to deplore attempts to discuss adaptation of literary 'classics' as 'jejune' and 'moribund'.[2] Dudley Andrew calls it 'the most narrow and provincial area of film theory'[3] while Robert Ray complains of the 'same unproductive layman's question (How does the film compare with the book?), getting the same unproductive answer (The book is better)'.[4] Such studies, we are told, often lack 'diacritical specificity', failing to recognise the differences between the two media and their 'respective materials of expression'.[5] Attempts to discuss the 'fidelity' of films to their original novels can also degenerate into exercises in pedantry, expressions of critical disappointment that a director's interpretation of the novel fails to match their own.

All the contributors to this volume are aware of these problems surrounding the discussion of adaptation. Many of them may be better known for their work on Hardy than on film. But none of them underestimates the power of film and the difference of its conventions from those of literature. Occasionally, it is true, they do claim that the book is 'better', or at least more complex. But one of the arguments that emerges frequently in the essays that follow is that the most 'faithful' adaptations, the most literal attempts to transfer Hardy to screen, are often the least successful as films. While remaining true to the 'letter' of his novels they fail to capture the 'spirit' of his writing, that quality so difficult to define which satisfies an audience that a film is genuinely 'Hardyesque', achieving similar effects on its viewers as the novel on its readers. I place these terms under erasure, within scare quotes, to draw attention to their problematic status, since it is precisely the 'essence' of Hardy's work which is under discussion. It is this that makes the study of adaptation such a useful pedagogic tool within departments of literature (and therefore, perhaps, so suspect in the eyes of those film critics, who are, with perfect justification, interested in films for their own sake).

There is an additional irony in the field of Thomas Hardy studies at the moment, as Peter Widdowson, one of the contributors to this volume, has observed, in that

> [w]here contemporary literary criticism is busy recasting Hardy's work as radically subversive in form and content — finding in a late nineteenth-century writer one whose texts simultaneously deconstruct issues of class and gender in particular . . . the most prevalent and popular late twentieth-century modes of reproducing his work, film and television, seem to return us to the older more conventional Hardy of Wessex, 'Character and Environment', and humanist tragedy.[6]

This is by no means universally the case; some of the film adaptations of Hardy's work, as we shall see, are as challenging in their own time and medium as the novels. But there is no doubt that some of the television adaptations to be discussed in this volume do appear to reproduce a somewhat outmoded version of Hardy: the 'good, little Thomas Hardy', producer of pastoral tragedies beloved and patronised by his contemporaries. What literary critics have come to regard as his strengths, his genuinely radical vision of the world, his experimentation with genre, his refusal to accept the moral and political conventions of his day, are not always reflected in those adaptations which are geared to filling the 'classic serial' slot for television, meeting the demands for entertaining, undemanding, acceptable family viewing.

Hardy himself, as I have argued elsewhere,[7] struggled to overcome similar expectations (the serial versions of his novels in family magazines such as *The Graphic* being the contemporary equivalent of television serials). Although at first he had to conform to some extent to the demands of his primary audience, and was only able to subvert them indirectly, he became increasingly open in his opposition to those demands. This may explain why similarly radical film-makers such as Roman Polanski and Michael Winterbottom, also prepared to shock audiences out of their complacencies, make the most powerful interpreters of his work.

This, however, is to prejudge the issue. The essays that follow will test these generalisations against the detailed evidence of a wide range of films, all of which are based more or less closely upon Hardy's work. In some cases, such as *Way Down East*, D. W. Griffith's silent movie of 1920, the reference to Hardy is not even acknowledged. In others, such as the series of BBC plays of the 1970s based upon his short stories, there is a deliberate attempt to reproduce on screen the authentic 'Wessex' of the tales. John Schlesinger goes out of his way to film some of the scenes of *Far From the Madding Crowd* in their 'actual' settings while Polanski and Winterbottom think nothing of transferring Stonehenge to France, Christminster to Scotland, or Casterbridge to California. What results, I hope, is a fascinating history of reception, interpretation, and recreation

which follows our understanding of Hardy and his 'meaning' through nearly a century of screening from the silent movies of 1913 and 1915 to the present day.

The first three essays address general questions about screening Hardy, questions of narrative, of visual awareness, the 'painterly' qualities of his writing, and the difficulties of reproducing 'Wessex' on screen. My own contribution investigates earlier claims that Hardy was a 'cinematic' writer, deliberately renouncing some of the modes of representation characteristic of written narratives in order to reproduce modes of 'seeing' which anticipate cinema. I focus on three aspects of narrative characteristic of Hardy's work: his use of particular observers or focalisers, his employment of restricted narrators, and his taste for ellipsis, a tendency to omit direct representation of key moments in his stories, which appear only indirectly or in fragmented form in his discourse. If these narrative techniques can be labelled 'cinematic', I argue that it is also the case that films can create a 'Hardyesque feel' to their work by reproducing them (or their cinematic equivalents) on screen.

Roger Webster also explores the visual quality of Hardy's writing with particular reference to his interest in painting and the visual dynamics associated with Turner and the Impressionists. The danger, however, as Webster observes, is that whereas Hardy's use of 'painterly' techniques was radically experimental, producing new ways of seeing people and landscape, the use of 'painterly' material in film often succeeds only in stabilising a conventional image of Hardy and Wessex. Schlesinger's experimental angles of vision and mobile tracking, in fact, come closer to reproducing the effect of Hardy's 'moments of vision' than more deliberate allusions to painting.

Simon Gatrell begins by distinguishing between the material aspects of Wessex, which are relatively easy to reproduce, and Hardy's metaphorical landscapes, which film finds harder to handle. In close focus on scenes from Jack Gold's *The Return of the Native* and Phil Agland's *The Woodlanders* he shows how these directors respond to the challenge of Hardy's complex representation of the heath and the woodland within the bounds that Hardy set. Michael Winterbottom, however, deliberately rejects the paradigm of Wessex, and in switching Christminster from Oxford to Edinburgh and Casterbridge from Dorchester to Kingdom Come, he demonstrates more clearly than any that it is not the specific location, but 'the power of place to shape human lives, and the power of human beings to transform their own environment' that lies at the heart of Hardy's creation.

These general explorations of the problems, challenges, and opportunities of screening Hardy are followed by three historical essays on specific attempts to translate Hardy to film, firstly in the silent era, secondly to

television (the successful BBC series of short stories in the seventies), and thirdly in the nineties. There is not a great deal that Peter Widdowson can say about the early silent films based explicitly upon Hardy's novels, since nothing appears to have survived of them apart from a few stills. It is significant, however, that Hardy himself took a keen interest in them, aware of their capacity to boost sales of the novels. Widdowson also discovers that D. W. Griffith's 1920 film *Way Down East*, ostensibly based upon a play by Lottie Blair Parker, shares several key plot elements with *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, including a mock marriage (as in the serial versions of Hardy's novel), a home-administered baptism, and a real marriage to the idealistic son of a 'stern old puritan'. Widdowson detects a number of additional similarities between Griffith's film and Hardy's novel (the heroines of both are victims of prejudice, bigotry, and sexual double standards), all confirming his suspicion that Griffith deliberately pushed his film closer to Hardy's novel. At least one silent film to some extent based upon Hardy can therefore be said to survive.

For reasons about which one can only speculate (perhaps he was considered too serious and tragic a writer for the 'entertainment' business) Hardy's work was ignored by film-makers for nearly forty years, from the late 1920s to the late 1960s (apart from two attempts to film a short story). In the seventies, however, the BBC turned to some emerging playwrights of the calibre of Dennis Potter, David Mercer, and Ken Taylor for a series of six adaptations of Hardy's *Wessex Tales*. These are the subject of Roy Pierce-Jones's chapter, which considers their success in capturing some of the qualities of the original stories in stark comparison with a more recent (and fairly disastrous) attempt to turn 'The Melancholy Hussar' into a feature-length film.

The 1990s rediscovered Hardy as a source of film, according to Judith Mitchell, not so much because of a nostalgic desire to return to a more stable and straightforwardly narratable past but because he can be seen to share many postmodern anxieties and uncertainties:

> As in the 1890s, men as well as women in the 1990s found themselves facing new versions of feminism and profound shifts in gender roles, and Winterbottom's adaptation of *Jude*, rather than harking back to a fantasy of historical stability or suggesting the possibility of easy solutions in the present, functions instead to reassure its audience that gender relations have always been problematic, and that bewilderment in the face of such changes is an understandable response.

The Claim too, in transporting *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to the American wild west, succeeds in capturing a sense of Hardy's exploration of masculinity in that novel. For the western as a genre is obsessed with masculinity and its relation to domesticity, representing 'men in flight from

the domestic restraints of Victorian culture'. The (literally) fallen heroes of these and other adaptations of Hardy in the 1990s, Mitchell argues, reflect Hardy's complex and subversive attitude towards men's place in a binary gender system, and towards gender itself as a suspect determinant of identity.

The remaining essays in this volume focus on individual attempts to translate some of Hardy's best-known novels to the screen (there have significantly been no attempts to film the so-called 'minor' novels). Keith Wilson, author of the only full-length study of the many attempts to transfer Hardy to the stage, focuses here on the first modern feature film of a Hardy novel, John Schlesinger's *Far From the Madding Crowd* of 1967, which is ironically much closer to the original than Hardy's own stage adaptation of this novel. Wilson finds the characterisation of the two leads, Bathsheba and Sergeant Troy (Julie Christie and Terence Stamp), unconvincing, lacking the psychological depth that the novel provides for them through their past. While praising some of the visual qualities of this film, the dazzling set pieces such as the sword-play in Maiden Castle (not in the novel but authentic enough to the region), Wilson draws attention to some problematic details, which, as he recognises, are partly attributable to unresolvable differences between film and fiction.

Rosemarie Morgan identifies a different set of problems in Jack Gold's attempt to screen *The Return of the Native*, which results in a stagey version of the novel, theatrical in a pejorative sense. Morgan objects especially to the generic switch from tragedy to pastoral romance, which flattens all the dissonance of Hardy's novel. What should disturb and challenge its audience is submerged beneath the nostalgia of historical romance. Hardy's sensual and rebellious heroine is similarly reduced to mere prettiness.

Philip Allingham in chapter ten takes a close look at three versions of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*: the two produced for television and the more ambitious, less closely based feature film *The Claim*. Allingham focuses in particular on the way each of these adaptations deals with the difficult twenty-year interval between the first two chapters of the novel, when Henchard sells his wife, and the remaining action. There are problems here not only of continuity but of the complex relationship of past and present. Allingham also considers the way Robert Barnes, one of Hardy's most successful illustrators, handles this issue, for it seems clear that these illustrations formed an important bridge from the written word to its visualisation not only in the minds of Hardy's readers but in those of some of the directors too.

John Paul Riquelme celebrates the way in which Polanski's *Tess* manages to incorporate many of the dissonant elements in Hardy's original novel, itself 'a book of displacements and dislocation' both in style and

narrative. Polanski's film goes beyond realism, beyond what Beckett calls 'the plane of the feasible', calling attention to its own cinematic techniques, the grain of its own voice. Among the dissonances Riquelme notes in the film are the grain of its leading actress's voice and the use of rack focus, especially in the confession scene, which prevent audiences from consuming the action as 'realistic', disturbing its relation to the events and objects depicted. He also draws attention to the way Polanski creates a simulacrum of Stonehenge and of Tess's boots, both of which occupy a 'genuinely illusory space' on screen.

Richard Nemesvari, in his analysis of London Weekend Television's version of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which is in many respects more 'faithful' to the original than Polanski's *Tess*, returns to the question of genre, arguing in particular that its imposition upon the story of the limited conventions of television romance undercuts Hardy's complex mixture of melodrama and the grotesque. In the sympathetic portrayal of the villainous Alec D'Urberville Nemesvari finds echoes of the 'redeemed rapist' of modern soap opera. All the ambiguities surrounding Hardy's complex novel are thus flattened for a modern audience deemed incapable of coping with such difficult material.

In the final essay of the volume Robert Schweik compares two equally different versions of Hardy's final novel *Jude the Obscure*, the BBC version of 1971 and Michael Winterbottom's 1996 film. Schweik looks at five scenes as they appear in both versions; in nearly every case, the greater freedom with the original that Winterbottom allows himself enables him to produce a more recognisably Hardyan film. Literal fidelity is found to be less important than more significant aspects of film-making, of the way films can achieve sometimes shocking effects equivalent to those produced by the original novel.

Are there, then, any conclusions to be drawn from these detailed explorations of so many different attempts to transfer Hardy to the screen (apart from the fact that literary critics are notoriously difficult to please)? One thing is certain: anyone who had not realised it before should soon become aware of the complexity of Hardy's novels and the difficulty of translating them into a different medium. No other nineteenth-century writer, in my view, raises as many questions as he does, questions about genre (the astonishing mixture of the grim and the grotesque), about politics (his sensitivity to class issues combined with an absence of instant remedies), and about gender (his subversion not only of conventional bourgeois morality but of all suggested solutions to the problem of human sexuality).

It takes directors of the power and originality of Polanski and Winterbottom, I would argue, to engage fully with these questions, to have the confidence to depart radically from fidelity to the 'letter' of the original

novels. Schlesinger too, I suggest, by being prepared to experiment with the conventions of cinema as Hardy did with the conventions of fiction, achieves similar effects in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. The gifted group of writers engaged by the BBC to transfer the Wessex Tales to television also succeed, I think, in producing through the medium of television effects comparable to those achieved by Hardy's novels. All these productions challenge their audiences as Hardy challenged his readers, forcing them out of conventional attitudes and responses. How these directors achieve this, finding cinematic equivalents for Hardy's complex literary effects, is the main subject of the essays that follow.

NOTES

1. Erica Sheen, 'Introduction', in Robert Giddings and Erica Sheen (eds.), *The Classic Novel: From Page to Screen* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.1.
2. James Naremore, 'Introduction: Film and the Reign of Adaptation', in James Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation* (London: Athlone Press, 2000), pp.1 and 15.
3. Dudley Andrew, 'Adaptation', *ibid.*, p.44.
4. Robert B. Ray, 'The Field of "Literature and Film"', *ibid.*, p.44.
5. Robert Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation', *ibid.*, pp.57–9.
6. Peter Widdowson, 'Thomas Hardy at the End of Two Centuries: From Page to Screen', in Tim Dolin and Peter Widdowson (eds.), *Thomas Hardy and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.178.
7. T. R. Wright, *Hardy and His Readers* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

1 'Hardy as a cinematic novelist': three aspects of narrative technique

Terry Wright

Narrative theory has generally been recognised as an area of common concern between film and fiction, for novels and films share what Harris Ross has called a 'vocation' to tell a story. From the perspective of their consumers too, it can be argued that 'spectators of film . . . and readers of novels share the same task, to create a coherent story from the information provided by the art work'.[1] In comparing some aspects of narrative technique to be found both in Hardy himself and in the films based upon his novels therefore, I hope to contribute something to the discussion of 'Hardy on Screen' which can appeal both to film and literary critics.

The three aspects of narration on which I wish to focus are firstly his use of particular observers or focalisers (the cinematic equivalent for which is the filtering of what is seen by the camera through the 'eyes' of a particular character), secondly the employment of restricted narrators so characteristic of Hardy's work (the way in which Hardy, even when supposedly employing an 'omniscient narrator', limits the narrator's knowledge to what is observable simply from the outside), and thirdly his use of ellipsis, the gaps and discontinuities in his narrative which force readers to supply what they cannot see. Both narratology and reader-response theory, I suggest, have made this a particularly fruitful way of comparing narrative technique in fiction and in film. All three devices, I will argue, are employed by Hardy and also by the directors of films based upon his novels in an attempt to give a 'Hardyesque' feel to their adaptations. Clearly I will need to make what Stanley Fish at an early stage of his career identified as one of the most difficult connections to establish between narratological description of the formal properties of the texts to reader-response analysis of the 'effect' these structures have upon readers and spectators,[2] but the attempt, I think, is worth making. It is at least a stage further forward than earlier impressionistic attempts to locate what was 'cinematic' about Hardy's work.

Earlier links between Hardy and cinema were far from complimentary about the comparison. Joseph Beach gave the title 'Movie' to his chapter on *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *The Woodlanders* because of

their supposed narrative 'technique of slapdash facility and looseness'. While demonstrating 'the vivid art of startling pictures full of movement, constantly shifting, and never failing in excitement and variety', Beach complained that Hardy tells his story only 'in outline, just enough so that the reader may keep abreast of the action, never lingeringly, so that he may get the relish, the intimate significance, the sense of being on the inside'. Hardy can therefore be accused of giving us 'hardly more than the scenario of a movie'.[3] John Wain was being more positive when he identified some of the devices central to *The Dynasts*, 'panoramic views dissolving into close-up, for instance', as 'cinematic'.[4] Joan Grundy included under the title 'Cinematic Arts' those optical effects which interested Hardy as much as they did the early film-makers: panorama, diorama, magic lantern shows.[5] But it was precisely his self-limitation to what could be seen (from the outside) that earned him David Lodge's classification as a

> cinematic novelist, . . . one who . . . deliberately renounces some of the freedom of representation and report afforded by the verbal medium, who imagines and presents his materials in primarily visual terms, and whose visualisations correspond in some significant respect to the visual effects characteristic of film.[6]

Lodge claims that Hardy 'uses verbal description as a film director uses the lens of his camera' in ways that 'can be readily analysed in cinematic terms: long shot, close-up, wide angle, telephoto, zoom, etc.'. There is even a passage in *Far From the Madding Crowd* that anticipates the specialised vocabulary of film criticism, describing the way Bathsheba's many beauties 'struck upon all his [Boldwood's] senses at wide angles'.[7] This does not, however, make the work of adaptors any easier; Lodge argues that 'it is difficult for film adaptation to do justice to Hardy's novels precisely because effects that are unusual in written description are commonplace in film'.[8] Neil Sinyard has also called Hardy 'so intimidatingly visual as to make the camera seem almost redundant'.[9]

I want to challenge that view, considering examples of narrative technique in Hardy which critics such as Lodge and Sinyard have labelled cinematic alongside attempts to translate them onto screen, to find what Brian McFarlane has called 'cinematic equivalents' for these techniques. One key difference, as McFarlane points out, is that 'there is, in film, no such instantly apparent, instantly available commentary on the action' as is supplied by the 'omniscient' narrator of prose fiction.[10] I place scare quotes around 'omniscient' here because the narrator in prose fiction is rarely as omniscient as s/he is sometimes thought to be: there are degrees of knowledge which range from total to highly restricted. Many film critics, however, would deny that there is any such thing as a cinematic narrator. 'In watching films', David Bordwell argues, 'we are

seldom aware of being told something by an entity resembling a human being'.[11] Others claim that it does make sense to talk of a 'cinematic narrator', programmed by the implied author to present certain information to the audience.[12] That narrator 'is not a human being',[13] of course, nor should s/he be identified solely with voice-over: 'voice-over', as Sarah Kozloff argues, 'is just one of many elements, including musical scoring, sound effects, editing' and camera-work, all of which contribute to cinematic narration.[14] The point is that stories get told in film, as they do in fiction, and the language developed by narrative theory to discuss the techniques employed in the process helps us to discuss them.

The failure, for example, to distinguish between the author, the implied author, the narrator, and the focaliser, a distinction commonplace in academic criticism, leads to some embarrassingly crude moments in the 1998 television production of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which not only opens with a voice-over narrator pontificating about fate in a caricature west-country accent presumably designed to suggest Hardy himself, but later introduces a Hardy lookalike who happens to encounter Angel and Tess as they emerge from Wellbridge Manor after the confession scene. In the novel, as Richard Nemesvari explores in greater detail later in this volume, Hardy invents an unnamed character, 'a cottager of Wellbridge, who went out late that night for a doctor' and therefore observed the 'two lovers in the pastures, walking without converse, one behind the other'.[15] Hardy carefully embeds this character's story within his narrator's, adding a certain verisimilitude, a sense of these events having actually happened. In defence of the film, it could be argued on both critical and biographical grounds that these layers of narrative distance (author – implied author – narrator – focaliser) don't fully succeed in masking Hardy's personal involvement with Tess, the sense generated by the novel that she is a real person about whose fate he genuinely cares. But bringing the author so literally into the frame oversimplifies what the novel makes much more complex.

Such 'invocation of a hypothetical or unspecified observer', as Lodge remarks, 'is one of the signatures of Hardy's narrative style'.[16] As in the cinema, action in Hardy's fiction is often seen from a specific vantage point, a particular angle. Lodge gives the example of *The Return of the Native*, which opens with what he calls 'an emotionally loaded establishing shot of the *mise-en-scène*', Egdon Heath. 'Humanity appears on the scene', to quote the famous heading of chapter two, in the form of an initially unnamed old man with the appearance of 'a naval officer of some sort or another' (as in the cinema we are given merely visual information). The old man, later identified as Captain Vye, now becomes the focaliser,