

APPLES AND ORANGES Some Musings On Feature Films from Literary Sources

By Michael Canning

-- *Well, I did read the book, but I haven't seen the movie.*

-- *Oh, I liked the film much better than the novel!*

-- *They really hacked up the book, didn't they?*

-- *But I did prefer the happy ending....*

Such are the clichés that often arise in post-movie conversation when the picture is based on a recognized literary source, and which, inasmuch as they imply a comparison between the novel and the feature film, betray the speaker's unawareness of two very different forms of expression.

Rather than try to assess a movie in terms of the book it stems from (or vice versa), a more profitable approach for gauging the rewards offered by each form would be ***to treat them as the very distinct vehicles they are.***

This is precisely what critic George Bluestone did in his landmark study *Novels into Film* (see "Source") wherein he produced a thoroughgoing analysis of the transformation of novels into motion pictures. Besides case studies of half-a-dozen filmed novels, Bluestone devoted a major essay to the distinctive--and in many ways antithetical--character of the two forms, which he classed "as different from each other as ballet is from architecture."

"The film becomes a different thing in the same sense that a historical painting becomes a different thing from the historical event which it illustrates. It is as fruitless to say that film A is better or worse than novel B as it is to pronounce (Frank Lloyd) Wright's Johnson Wax Building better or worse than Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake." In the last analysis, each is autonomous, and each is characterized by unique and specific properties." (Bluestone, page 5)

The novel, particularly the novel of some literary ambition, produces a private, discursive experience essentially made by one creator for an audience of one. The Hollywood feature film has been, and still basically is, a more public, visual, dominating experience produced by a multitude of persons for a mass audience. The novel is consumed in silence while its personal rhythms occur internally; the cinema uses all the resources of big screen presentation, music, and sound effects to undergird the story.

The fine arts novel is read by a relatively few (even when it is a best seller) with an impact that is fundamentally intellectual, while the movie adapted from that same novel will be seen by many multiples of that novel's readers with an impact that is primarily emotional. The novel engages one's mind for hours, days, even weeks; the

motion picture fully arrests one's eyes (and ears) for two hours or so (though memories of the experience can linger).

Further, crucial materials of the novel include figures of speech, linguistic symbols, fantasy elements, and an ability to play with time and space, while the story film is ineluctably realistic and literal, bound in time and space within the framed image. One should not expect the literary potency of long fiction to be translated into the emotive images of the movies.

The above preliminary remarks are prelude to a discussion of a representative collection of American motion pictures based on major novels by U.S. writers--competent or better than competent movies (offered chronologically) which use recognized works of fiction as a starting point to create a separate cinematic identity.

Among the cinematized novels most fully treated in Bluestone's book is *The Grapes of Wrath*, often cited as one of the best filmic adaptations of a major American novel. Cogently translated by Nunally Johnson from John Steinbeck's novel and directed by John Ford, the film supplies a good, eclectic mix of key Steinbeck moments and language to maintain much of the spirit of the book.

In Bluestone's careful analysis, he notes that, even in this successful adaption of novel to film, much is left out or altered in the movie's new rendering. Steinbeck's lyrical and commentary sections are dropped because they are at odds with the film's documentary feel. The author's anger and explicit indictments against conditions pressed upon the Okies are not that evident on celluloid. The last haunting scenes--a young woman's loss of a stillborn child and her offering of her mother's milk to a starving stranger--are understandably chopped (and could have never made it into a studio picture of the time). The uplifting end of the film, on the other hand, comes at a point, and with lines, only two-thirds of the way through the novel. Characters are switched, continuity is changed, major narrative lines are altered or blurred....



Yet, Bluestone notes: "the love of the land, family and human dignity are consistently translated into effected cinematic images" and he rightly credits cinematographer Gregg Toland (who shot the classic *Citizen Kane* the next year) with creating a pictorial mood of "brooding, dark silhouettes against light, translucent skies" which precisely reflects Steinbeck's prose and, in fact, reaches beyond what that prose can conjure up.

Much of Bluestone's discussion shows how successful the Johnson-Ford adaption was, and he finds much of the reason in the way Steinbeck wrote his novel:

"If the film carried these striking equivalents of Steinbeck's prose, it is partly due to the assistance which Steinbeck offers the filmmaker, partly to the visual imagination of the filmmaker himself. Except for the wheeling omniscience of the interchapters, the novel's prose relies wholly on dialogue and physical action to record character. Because Steinbeck's style is not marked by meditation, it resembles, in this respect, the classic form of the scenario." (Bluestone, page 163)

Ford's casting, too, contributes much to the film. Members of his rough stock company of actors--players like John Carradine, John Qualen, Jane Darwell, Russell Simpson, and Charlie Grapewin--embody fully the rough, rural folk the tale needs. Unforgettable also is Henry Fonda as Tom Joad, whose character assumes greater prominence and gravity in the film than in the novel.

There is a one-liner which may explain much of the reason for this splendid movie's achievement, and how different the creation of film is from the creation of literature. Bluestone, in an interview with John Ford, says the venerable director, when asked about *The Grapes of Wrath*, remarked: "I never read the book."

Another film version of a notable novel in this series also triumphs on its own because of its specific strengths as a motion picture. *All the King's Men*, Robert Rossen's 1949 adaption (he directed and wrote the screenplay) of Robert Penn Warren's 1946 Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel graphically captures the place and period--combining realism with pictorial excellence--and does it with a much tighter, rawer script than was usually the case with Hollywood products. The film also contains one bravura turn: Broderick Crawford in his greatest performance as Willie Stark, plus a number of excellent smaller roles.

Crawford does not so much act as **personify** Stark--perhaps the best kind of film-acting there is. He embodies wonderfully the instinctive politician the novelist envisioned: "Willie knew what was happening, but he didn't know why." Rossen's and Crawford's Stark is a cruder, less clearly motivated character than Warren's pol, but probably more emotionally potent than the protagonist of the novel. In his more than 40 years of acting, Crawford never had a better role.

A common test people often make when viewing films made from novels is picturing whether the characters on the screen match the mental pictures of those characters already in the reader's mind. The match is often unsatisfactory. Bluestone cites, on this point, a film commentator of the 1920's, Thomas Craven, who noted:

"I doubt if the most astute and sympathetic reader ever visualizes a character; he responds to that part of a created figure which is also himself, but he does not actually see his hero.... For this reason all illustrations are disappointing."

(Bluestone, page 23, footnote)



Yet some filmic illustrations can still be exceptionally vivid and lasting, like Fonda's Tom Joad and certainly Crawford's

Willie Stark. How many people can now read Warren's novel (after having seen Rossen's movie) and *not* visualize images of Broderick Crawford spitting out his speech to a crowd of "hicks?" or, for that matter, read Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath" and not see the earnest, plaintive face of Henry Ford? Another strength of the film comes from its character roles. Here again, physical embodiment, such as Mercedes McCambridge's Sadie Burke or Walter Burke's "Sugar Boy," is what the movies can deliver--vivid human vignettes that give richness to a picture. On the other hand, some of the film's leads, outside of Crawford, seem thin or opaque. The best example of this is Joanne Dru, a pretty but dramatically bland actress who lacks the weight for the role of the troubled Anne Stanton.

The novel's forte can be its combination of literary characterization with the convincing description of a social and cultural milieu; the movie's power is in its creation of an energetic human force against a convincing rural Southern setting. Their power seems separate--but equal.

Among the most ambitious novel-to-film tasks undertaken by an American director was John Huston's *Moby Dick* (1956), based on Melville's magnum opus. Given the gigantic, protean density of this Great American Symbolic Novel, a wholesale rethinking was obviously necessary for a film version. Screenwriters Huston and Ray Bradbury (of science fiction fame) had to excise great chunks of the story of the white whale and find a tighter focus, which they did by concentrating on the passion for vengeance of the relentless Captain Ahab (Gregory Peck). The film script thus distilled the novel into one character study of obsession, pictured against the spectacular setting of the whaler's sea.

The film could hardly duplicate Melville's rambling musings on whaling--there is neither time nor means to do so--but it does create vivid, authentic images of the ship *Pequod* and her master. It cannot conjure up the complex symbolism of the whale but must struggle to achieve some sense of the mysterious creature through photographic and special effects--this in a pre-*Jaws* era.

In one section, the film tries to transfer one of the novel's great set pieces rather directly: the scene where Father Mapple (Orson Welles) delivers his sermon from a stark New Bedford church prior to the whale boats leaving port. The sermon is used almost intact, a showy speech for a showy actor with a famous delivery and tone. Yet here fealty to the literary source seems to stop the picture in its tracks and break the momentum of what appears to be a sturdy sea epic for some pieties that don't really mesh with the rest of the film.

Huston's *Moby Dick* makes the case for Thomas Craven's point about illustrating literary characters on film: Gregory Peck simply cannot incarnate the unfathomable megalomaniac that is Ahab. The actor, with a career to that time of smooth and sympathetic romantic leads, may have relished playing against type, but in this instance he has too great a legacy to surmount, no matter how mightily he tries..in fact, trying mightily makes the portrait even less effective, more wooden than menacing.

Another American literary touchstone, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, offers another case study in the translation from novel to film but not an entirely successful

one. Some of what the 1957 movie version of the novel offers is obvious: the visual richness and the sensuous sense of place that European location shooting can give (though most of the key Spanish scenes in the film were shot in Mexico).

The film's minus is fundamental: the difficulty of creating a script that is both somewhat faithful to Hemingway yet makes for real human conversation on screen. Hemingway has been classified by some critics as having a "cinematic" writing style, but, in fact, his terse, very clean diction--powerful and inimitable on the page--can be stilted and unreal when actually emitted from an actor's mouth--and it often does in this picture. Here the average moviegoer waits for the stilted dialogues to end so the movie can get on with what it does best, i.e., show the flavor and hues of Paris or a bull fight in a Spanish town in fiesta regalia.

Hollywood had to, of course, yield to other conventions in such adaptations. While in Hemingway's novel the principal characters--Jake Barnes, Lady Brett Ashley, Mike Campbell--are rootless 20-somethings, *young* people floating in a between-wars Europe, 20th Century Fox (the producing studio) felt it had to go with stars of repute and "maturity," thus casting, respectively, Tyrone Power (43), Ava Gardner (35), and Errol Flynn (48) as their slightly creaky representatives of the "Lost Generation." As well as too old, Power was probably too pretty for Jake Barnes, and, instead of incarnating the careful reticence of the novel's mouthpiece, the actor offers us rigidity.

Another concession to the public in the days before a rating system was the gingerly, bowdlerized treatment of the novel's key sexual element: Jake Barnes's impotence, a key symbol for Hemingway of what had happened to so many fighting men who suffered in the War. While such a dysfunction would be openly treated--even flaunted--in today's movies, studios in the 1950's had to tiptoe around such a delicate subject in what was a "family" picture. The inability to plainly state Jake's dilemma robs the film version of considerable drama and pathos.

Earlier in this essay I criticized the persona of Gregory Peck representing Captain Ahab. There is a simple test for this kind of incongruity: who would possibly visualize Greg Peck when reading about Ahab in *Moby Dick*? Besides, everybody knows he is really Atticus Finch!

Which brings us to *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), a beloved picture from a beloved novel wherein Peck completely embodies the upstanding Finch, one of the classic heroes of moviedom. In fact, in an American Film Institute poll of 2003, Atticus Finch was named the No. 1 "hero" in movies.

This adaptation is perhaps one of the best examples of how a filmic adaptation can retain much of the spirit--if not the letter--of the original material. In this case, as with *The Grapes of Wrath* and *All the King's Men*, an immensely popular and critically acclaimed novel was eagerly pursued by Hollywood producers to get a version out while the public reception was hot. The striking difference with this film was the author's



interest in and involvement with the production.

Harper Lee's novel, set in the mid-1930's, was released in 1960 and was an explosive success, proving to be a long-running best seller and winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Producer Alan J. Pakula and director Robert Mulligan got the playwright Horton Foote, himself a Southern writer steeped in traditions of the South, to adapt the work, and his screenplay achieved very accurate equivalents of Lee's book. Lee herself later remarked that "I think it is one of the best translations of a book to film ever made."

The filmmakers' respect for the novel and its author was also evident when they invited her to witness filming *Mockingbird* on the Universal lot. Lee was present on the set for three weeks and had much praise for the re-creation of her hometown Monroeville, Alabama, into the fictional Maycomb. She was also struck by how much Peck resembled her lawyer father, the template for Atticus. The two remained friends for the rest of Peck's life.

Casting, too, was crucial, with Peck, of course, the keystone. Indelible, too, were the two young children of Finch, Scout and Jem, played by Mary Badham and Philip Alford, non-actors who both walked away from film careers. One key change from the book to the film was a change in the narration. The fictional *Mockingbird* has Scout, the child, narrating the action, offering a mixture of the naïve and the knowing. Foote adapted the narration for a fully mature Scout (voiced by Kim Stanley), musing back on her childhood, which may reflect even better what the author felt about her recalled youth.

Hollywood magic, too, helped transform what was a fine book into a great movie. Though some critics had characterized Lee's novel as "cinematic" in how scenes were constructed, Foote's screenplay and Mulligan's direction provided true cinematic flow with carefully paced and edited set pieces. Further, a sense of 1930's period was solidified by the rich, velvety black-and-white photography of Russell Harlan and the exquisite, elegiac music score by Elmer Bernstein, highlighting one of the best credit sequences in motion picture history. That sequence, delicately examining the possessions in a child's cigar box, sets the scene for Scout's world as eloquently as any descriptive prose.

By the 1970's, the franker treatment in the American commercial cinema of language and social relationships--especially sexual ones--allowed Hollywood to deal with more mature themes, including those in major novels. One novel that needed that openness to work in film was Milos Forman's version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, released in 1975 and adapted from Ken Kesey's cult novel of 1962.

The relatively long gestation of the film was opportune--and perhaps necessary--for it allowed the picture to be made with a candor simply impossible at the time of the novel's appearance, with an actor who seemed made for the part--Jack Nicholson--and with a director (Milos Forman, unknown in the United States when the novel appeared) whose foreign sensibility gave the film a special quality.

Jack Nicholson does for the incorrigible Randle Patrick McMurphy what Fonda, Crawford, and Peck did for their respective protagonists. He creates a definitive

personality that is unlikely to be separated from the novelistic character for people who know both works. And as good as Nicholson had been in other roles in the early Seventies (*Five Easy Pieces*, *The Last Detail*, *Chinatown*), for many, like *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby, “Nicholson slips into the role of Randle with such easy grace that it’s difficult to remember him in any other film.”

Director Forman and co-screenwriters Lawrence Hauben and Bo Goldman take advantage of a shift in point-of-view between novel and film. In the former, there is a first person narration by a character in the book thought to be unable to speak (clearly a perspective not available to a movie), who describes and, therefore, distances the reader inevitably from the character of McMurphy being described. In the film, the “third-person” camera focuses directly, literally on Nicholson as McMurphy, and focuses on him rather relentlessly, since he figures in almost every scene. The camera’s concentration, the tough and credible dialogue, and the look and sound of Jack Nicholson make for a bravura performance, one rightly anointed with an Academy Award.

Cuckoo’s Nest, like other films cited above, is also strengthened by the quality of its supporting players. The second major role, the extremely difficult one of Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher), is given more dimension in the film than in the novel, where she is depicted (from afar) as an alarming cold vixen. In the film, Forman and Fletcher are able to impart a firm understanding of the character that makes her relations with the patients she supposedly serves all the more poignant. As for the other parts of patients in a mental hospital (some actually played by real inmates of such an institution), most observers agreed, along with Canby, that “all of (them) are very good and a few of them are close to brilliant,” probably more rounded than their fictional equivalents.

So you liked the book better than the movie? Or the other way around? But **there is no need to**, anymore than there is to compare the solo experience of being at home with a good book in an easy chair with the public experience of being in a darkened theater staring at a flickering light on a wall.

Source: Geroge Bluestone, *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1957

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