

ISSN:0976-8165



The Criterion

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL. 15 ISSUE-1 FEB. 2024

15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Adaptation Poetics: A Kaleidoscopic Study of Victorian Fiction in Films

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10795602>

Article History: Submitted-17/01/2024, Revised-16/02/2024, Accepted-22/02/2024, Published-29/02/2024.

Abstract:

Advent of Cinema has made it possible to adapt Victorian novels to create films which mesmerize and regale its audience. Literary texts provide raw material which has already been read and has earned the respectability conferred by the gleaming reputation and popularity of the authors. The decision of a filmmaker to choose a novel to adapt can depend on the novel's popularity, familiarity of the public with it, and moreover commercial success also plays a prime role, along with the cinematic potential of a novel.

In today's unquestionably fast world of technological progress where people struggle for leisure time, there may have been many who would have enjoyed film adaptations of classic Victorian novelists whose works are successfully adapted into films. Among others, there are examples of remarkable Victorian novelists like Charles Dickens, Brontë sisters: Emily, Charlotte, Anne and Thomas Hardy. The novels written by these writers were prolific and voluminous and readers often find no time to read them but nonetheless, there is a desire to know about the great works of these authors.

The film should remain faithful to the original work, conveying the same feeling, atmosphere, plot and characterization even though scenes, characters and conflicts are changed in an ideal scenario. To understand film adaptation it becomes imminent to analyze and understand the way literary expression informs, extends, shapes and limits it. The most stimulating question in film adaptation of Victorian novels is to understand, how close the adapted material must resemble the chosen source. In reality, the exact reproduction of the novel's content is not possible.

Keywords: Film adaptation-Victorian Novels- Books- Novels- Films -Technology- Intertextuality- Different versions- Different Mediums- Fidelity- Reader – Audience.

Literature has always provided films with a variety of source material and Victorian novel has the potential to reach a wider audience when its delicate and nuanced narrative is transformed into a visual feast. This complicated process of transfer of the written narrative on celluloid for an audience is known as film adaptation. Since the development of screenplays from the beginning of cinema, film adaptation is one of the important features of cinema. Interestingly, the advent of cinema is a very recent and remarkably, a short period compared to over five hundred years of printing-press culture. Cinema has become a major conveyor of the narratives of novel. John Harrington in *Film And/As Literature* explains, “while other art forms have taken centuries to flourish the span of single lifetime has witnessed the birth and maturity of film” (ix).

Victorian novels have been portrayed successfully to create films with which to mesmerize and regale its audience. Literary texts provide raw material which has already been read and has earned the respectability conferred by the gleaming reputation and popularity of the authors. The decision of a filmmaker to choose a novel to adapt can depend on the novel’s popularity, familiarity of the public with it. Moreover, commercial viability also plays a prime role, along with the cinematic potential of a novel. To understand film adaptation, it becomes imminent to know the way literary expression informs, extends, shapes and limits it. The most stimulating question in film adaptation is how close the adapted material must resemble from the chosen source. In reality, the exact reproduction of the novel’s content is not possible.

In today’s unquestionably fast world of technological progress where people struggle for leisure time, there may have been many who would have enjoyed film adaptations of classic Victorian novelists whose works are successfully adapted into films. Among others, there are examples of remarkable Victorian novelists like Charles Dickens, Brontë sisters: Emily, Charlotte, Anne and Thomas Hardy. The novels written by these writers were prolific and voluminous and readers sometimes find no time to read them but there is a desire to know about the great works of these authors.

In an ideal scenario, film should remain faithful to the original work, conveying the same feeling, atmosphere, plot and characterization even though scenes, characters and conflicts are changed. Thus, Alexia L. Bowler and Jessica Cox write in *Introduction to Adapting the Nineteenth Century: Revisiting, Revising and Rewriting the Past*, a collection of essays,

Film adaptation in its broadest sense is a phenomenon that extends to and permeates multiple arenas of contemporary life. There exists between ostensibly distinct areas of society and cultural production an intertextual and

metatextual dialogue, which continues to act as a process of renewal of creative endeavors. What is relatively new in the adaptive practices, however, is the active theorizing and engagement with the process. (1)

Walter Benjamin and neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School focused on the relationship of cinema to ideology, theorizing the culture industry, and the impact that art forms based in mechanical reproduction have on traditional conceptions of art and aesthetic experience. Technological advancement has made it possible to view these classic works in a capsule form through film adaptation. Film adaptations, therefore have created a niche market for audiences who may sometimes watch the film and may not have read the novel due to time constraints.

Literary texts are successfully adapted to film and various novels from the Victorian period, like Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) and *Great Expectations* (1861). Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1892), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Film adaptation theorizes the various contexts that form the basis of adaptation and has contributed to this new and emerging area of interdisciplinary research on two distinct art forms novel and film. These novels have been selected keeping in view their popularity as film adaptations, especially keeping the filmmakers and the film adaptations success in mind.

Novels which are widely adapted, share the features suggested by Erica Sheen in the book *From Page To Screen: Adaptations of the Classic Novel*, "take the question of fidelity as their primary critical point of reference" (2). The most important perspective which reflects here is that to what extent and level, Victorian film adaptations can create versions which are true to their literary originals. As Laura Carroll puts it in the chapter she has co-authored in *Victorian Literature and Film Adaptation*, adaptation is "a fundamentally binary textual system, involving a book and a film pair standing in a simple and common-sensical relation of an original and a copy" (227).

Consequently, it is assumed that there are common parameters for comparing stories that are presented in these two genres as different as novels and films. Joy Gould Boyum asserts in *Double exposure: Fiction into Film* that "the rhetoric of fiction is simply not the rhetoric of film and it's in finding analogous strategies whereby the one achieves the effects of the other that the greatest challenge of adaptation lies" (81). Therefore, art of filmmaking comes into existence where they invent methods and techniques to successfully venture in this new territory of creativity. Moreover, novels as they are original, provide standards for judging the relative success or failure of their adaptations.

Recent publications on this subject reflect an increasing dissatisfaction with the paradigms and methodologies in the field of film studies. The issue of Victorian film adaptation because of the opposed ‘words’ and ‘images’ between them is nothing short of a complex paradox. The perspective of the filmmakers and the original meaning of the novel makes this topic a reason for stimulating and creative discussions. Similarly, J. Dudley Andrew in *Concepts in Film Theory*, the most widely reprinted scholar of literary film adaptation, is one of many to argue about “the absolutely different semiotic systems of film and language” (103). Kamilla Elliott says in *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* only “a structurally constrained model of analogous, already complete signs in their own lexicons that approximate literary signs” can account for the otherwise unaccountable ability of film adaptations to provide audio visual equivalents of novels (4).

Thus, it seems ‘Adaptation Poetics’ is integral to the process of filmmaking. Like all postmodernist interpretations of literary texts that rely on intertextuality to supersede the authorial voice, adaptation uses intertextuality to give meaning to the film versions of Victorian novels. The story of novels comes to life virtually turning into a complex field of cultural renewal due to multifarious interpretations by filmmakers using techniques, methods and cinematic feats to reflect that on screen. Although it seems in this process, the writer loses the authority in the process of filmmaking like Roland Barthes’s suggests in the essay “Death of an Author” regarding the text, the film directors however retain verisimilitude, “realism” being an aspect of the nineteenth century novels, thus somehow keeping the essence, the unique stamp of the author in the finished product.

The area of film adaptation studies may not be a distinct theoretical school of criticism but in adapting literary works of fiction to cinema, the intention of the author has been retained by the filmmakers. Like Roland Barthes’s “Death of an Author,” Andrew Sarris’s auteur theory gives a corollary statement of how film directors take over the role of an author in film adaptations. It analyzes the novels reflecting its multiple expressions, its ability to give shape to ideas, feelings and personal orientations of the filmmakers and these novels being the repository of raw material for the rising number of *auteur* film directors. The relationship between novels and film, and the differences between the ‘original’ text and the film adaptation, making this a relevant and worthy area of research.

Essentially, adapting these novels into films involves two media, which have their own different techniques, conventions and consciousness. Varied aspects of film production, that is, camera work, cinematic codes and authorship has been the field of study for film critics. Due to so many changes there is no specific ‘Poetics of Adaptation’. To understand this

complex field further, films borrow from the dramatic convention, and Aristotle's *Poetics* provided the earliest poetics of drama. Novel is a genre that does not perform but narrates, so adapting novels into film would require a poetics.

Aristotle's *Poetics* held that the common feature of all art forms is imitation. Similarly, the concept of catharsis speaks volumes about the effect films have on an audience. Aristotelian dramatic elements are pioneering and magical in defining adaptation poetics which include plot, characters, thoughts, diction, melody and spectacle. These dramatic elements are important to understand that films not only offer the written and verbal aspect but also 'theatrical performance,' 'music,' 'sound effects' as well 'moving photographic images' whereas the dependence of novels to words makes it a 'single-track' medium.

The conflicts and questions arising between novels and their film adaptations analyses Victorian literature about adaptation on the fidelity question. Many differences are studied between the two forms, the process of transfer of a Victorian novel into a film and the marketing mechanics used by the filmmakers to make the film a commercially viable product, for the viewers with the aim of tracing an 'Adaptation Poetics' in the study. The poetics of film adaptation is concerning the *matter* of the novel, *transfer* meaning the process of filmmaking and *form* as film meant for the audiences. These three terms are further broadened to understand the subtleties of the process of film adaptation of Victorian fiction with the help of the different methods and techniques employed by filmmakers to transform these novels into film form.

I

Literature has been considered as an artistic form of expression whereas films are considered as a mass medium. Just as the writers tried in the Victorian age, to adopt the populist approach of giving the public the novels they wanted, the same can be said of these films meant for all types of viewers. Part of gaining that respect is to see how film adaptations, when adapted from beloved novels, are similar to these novels, and how the two forms are different.

After the era of silent films when sound system was introduced, Brian McFarlane in *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* writes that "[m]ainstream cinema has owed much of its popularity to representational tendencies it shares with the nineteenth-century English novel" (8). These similarities arose and developed from early cinema, as Keith Cohen writes in *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange*, "more or less blatant appropriation of the themes and content of the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel" (4). Silent films, then borrowed their stories, features, and conventions from realistic, bourgeois

nineteenth-century English novel. According to Sergei Eisenstein, they were especially indebted to the work of Charles Dickens, who “bore the same relation to [his readers] that the film bears to the same strata in our time” (Bloom 206). Though Dickens did not live to see the advent of cinema, many of his novels received successful stage adaptations during his lifetime, and many critics and filmmakers have remarked on the ‘cinematic’ qualities in Dickens' narrative sensibility, descriptive power and penchant for abundant detail, most notably filmmaker and theorist Eisenstein in his influential 1944 essay, “Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today.”

Brontës sisters are a fascinating set of writers who grew up in poverty, reading widely and writing novels rich in imagination. The stormy sisterhood published their novels under the non de plumes as Currer Bell, Ellis Bell and Acton Bell and died in their thirties. As children, Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte made up their imaginary worlds, and as young women that continued. It was in their apprenticeship as children blossoming them into such great writers. Improving from childhood stories to novels, the sisters would work after their father had gone to bed, reading and talking over their plans and projects. Along with their brother Branwell, the girls began to immerse themselves in an insular fantasy world of imaginary heroes and romances, writing down the stories in tiny script. As Charlotte’s friend and biographer Elizabeth Gaskell puts it, “while doing so they would pace their parlour like restless animals” (Orel 108).

Brontës published their novels under pseudonyms as young women , and then died in their thirties from tuberculosis, influenza and typhus. Emily died in the year 1848 at the age thirty, Anne died in 1849 at the age of twenty- nine with Charlotte left to walk in the parlor alone. Brontës have been adapted extensively, more than other writers and every year new adaptation comes up to highlight the popularity of these novels. Filmmakers have been drawn to the Brontës almost from the beginning of filmmaking, as early as 1910. The magnetism of the sisters’ rich and powerful imaginative literary lives has continued to fascinate readers in the present day. The enduring attraction of film, and later television, productions of the Bronte novels has significantly influenced perceptions of the sisters, and given many new readings and interpretations of their works.

Thomas Hardy is an inspiration for film directors from the very inception of cinema. The nature of Hardy’s text is amiable for film and television as he is known as a cinematic writer. The novels of Hardy are regarded as cinematic in their scope and power, and they have inspired some of the most interesting adaptations of fiction for the big screen. Hardy’s novels are apt case studies to show how the novel has evolved and how the text can take new form

when adapted for films. The films based on his novels give an insight on so many new levels, interestingly Hardy lived to negotiate screen rights with film producers and to see his novels put before the camera. Hardy often expressed puzzlement and diffidence over this new medium, a “scientific toy,” as he once called it, but he grasped the potential of film to expand his readership into new areas.

II

Victorian fiction is also known for its attempt to combine imagination and emotion with the neo-classical ideal of the accessibility of art for everyone. Likewise, cinema is a mass medium and film adaptations of the concerned Victorian fiction circulate literature to people who might not have read such works. Victorian novelists were more concerned to meet the tastes of a large middle-class reading public than to please aristocratic patrons. This is also a source of fascination and inspiration for filmmakers.

Regarding the cultural work that Victorian adaptations perform today, Dianne F. Sadoff posits in *Victorian Vogue: British Novels on Screen* that “[h]eritage film morphs, travels, and productively forces us to imagine ourselves in different but not unrelated historical dilemma and difficulties as we seek to live within and survive our own millennial age of anxiety” (xxii). Film adaptation of Victorian fiction has repeatedly been an inspiration for filmmakers. The text is adapted and the novel is made relevant to new audiences.

Victorian literature and film adaptation has generated enduring interest to the cinematic treatments of Victorian novels. So powerful is the attraction of this subject that Simone Murray has complained about the predominance in adaptation studies of films based on the nineteenth-century (Murray 10) .

Numberless commentators on adaptations have noted the similarity between two touchstones of novelistic and cinematic mimesis. In his 1897 preface to *The Nigger of “Narcissus”*, Joseph Conrad wrote, “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel- it is, before all, to make you see!” (x). Sixteen years later D.W. Griffith echoed Conrad, “The task I am trying to achieve is above all to make you see.” Movies and novels, as commentators from George Bluestone to Brian McFarlane have argued, share the primary charge of helping their audience envision imaginary worlds (Lewis 119).

Tom Gunning in his essay “An Aesthetic of Astonishment”, proposed a very different narrative of cinema’s origins, contending that many early films were based of “aesthetic of astonishment” whose audience “does not get lost in a fictional world and its drama, but remains aware of the act of looking, the excitement of curiosity and its fulfilment.” Gunning’s

“cinema of attractions” which emphasizes the carnival appeal of powerful individual images and sequences over sustained narrative, goes a long way toward explaining why, despite the alleged influence of the nineteenth-century English novel on early film, there are hardly any silent Victorian novel films (Shepherdson 78).

The forms and themes of Victorian novels certainly had a pronounced impact on early cinema. After the aesthetic development of the dialogue-driven, synch sound feature merged more closely with that of the bourgeois realism of the nineteenth century English novel. Even here, however, important distinctions should be made among the several legacies that nineteenth-century English novels left twentieth century cinema. As Kamilla Elliot puts it:

The Victorian novel looms monolithic: first, as the link pin between poetry and painting and novel and film debates; second, as film’s most immediate and loudly proclaimed parent; third, as a particularly problematic, anachronistic locus of cinematic novel analogies; and fourth, as a body of literature offering multiple adaptations of single novels. (7)

The history of adaptation studies since McFarlane wrote *Novel to Film* has increasingly sustained assaults on these assumptions. Imelda Whelehan contends that films’ ability to beget their own literary offspring in the form of novelizations has “destabilized the tendency to believe that the origin text is of primary importance” (3). Sarah Cardwell rejects comparative page to screen analysis in favour of “a non-comparative, ‘generic’ approach” whose primary context for analysis is the common features television adaptations of classic novels share with one another (77). Ginette Vincendeau collects a series of essays and reviews adopting just such a generic approach to the “museum aesthetic” of “heritage Cinema” whose “concern’...is to depict the past, but by celebrating rather than investigating it” (xviii). Kamilla Elliot, subjecting literalized and structural analogies between avowedly verbal novels and visual films to rewardingly close critique, proposes “looking to rewardingly close critique, proposes “looking glass analogies” as a superior alternative (209).

Robert Stam, citing the ubiquity and normality of adaptation, suggests that it was “less an attempted resuscitation of an originary word than a turn in an ongoing dialectical process” (64). Linda Hutcheon, driven by a determination to broaden the field beyond novels and films to the whole range of adaptation, focuses on “the politics of intertextuality” that seek to explain how adaptations have been perceived and received “as adaptations” (xiv). Instead of seeking to establish once and for all the textual relations between particular films and their Victorian sources in particular, the films’ success in using medium-specific devices

to convey the same effects as the source's verbal, lexical, and literary devices- they seek to provoke, develop, extend, and resolve more general questions about adaptation, intertextuality, and the continued fascination with the cultural capital that is offered by nineteenth-century English literature and literary culture.

Other contributions question more sharply the continuing value of comparisons of novels and films in the light of the criticism many adaptation scholars have recently levelled against such studies. Ellen Moody considers a wide range of influences and concludes by defending the primacy of the recognized author of eponymous source texts of films as the only basis for a practical, feasible methodology of "close comparative reading" (Bloom and Pollock 169). Christopher Palmer, by contrast, urges that in teaching adaptations, "the literary texts are not [to be] treated simply as transparent preludes to the films" (Bloom and Pollock 226).

Whichever positions they take on the relations between adaptations and their eponymous source texts, all critics agree that even if they offer limited frameworks for everything adaptation studies might want to say, can provide focal points for more general arguments by reframing Victorian fiction and Victorian culture. They remind one as well that even the allegedly original Victorian classics have been framed- packaged and presented in many ways, but never unframed- from their first appearances.

Instead of considering the adaptation of particular sources, Mary Sanders Pollock focuses on the adaptation of particular techniques, such as shifting points of view, treating them as transmedial phenomena rather than the properties of any single medium. In their different ways, Laura Carroll and Pollock demonstrate that book to film analyses, though they are poor masters for adaptation but make excellent servants if they are consciously chosen and productively applied.

In addition to providing a fresh look at specific Victorian novels, critics suggest several ways in which adaptation study can move scholars to reconsider, reconceptualise, and reorder nineteenth-century studies. The organizational principle, which assimilates adaptation study to literary history, persists in Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo's *Literature and Film* 2005. The most obvious alternative, organizing a collection of adaptation case studies according to the release dates of the adaptations, as Stam and Raengo do in *A Companion to Literature and Film* 2004, substitutes cinema history for literary history. Reconsidering the fiction of the long Victorian period produces a new canon shaped by adaptation, this exercises in canon revision suggest that canons, whose very definition suggests eternal endurance, are always works in

progress. The products of individuals and institutions that hope to project their tastes and values not only forward onto their students but also backward onto previous generations. The ultimate goal is not to present a new, improved, and definitive view of nineteenth century English literature and literary culture but to remind one of the radical contingency of the culture that is so often proposed. As Laura Carroll puts it, “to destabilize the tendency to see either the novel or the film as fixed in its meanings, or as having a kind of documentary authority (226).

Films are happier and more glamorous than novels and O’Brien and Borden derive four principles of adaptation, “Simplify the plot, glamorize the characters, optimize the premise and romanticize the ending” (O’Brien and Borden, 114-115). Joy Gould Boyum takes this one step further, suggesting that what is important to remember is that “there is no single type of correspondence between films and their literary sources’. Boyum writes that in assessing a film adaptation it is not really that the book is compared with the film but rather interpretation with interpretation:

[f]or just as we readers, so implicitly is the filmmaker, offering us through his work, his perception, his vision, his particular insight into his source. An adaptation is always, whatever else it may be an interpretation. And if this is one way of understanding the nature of adaptation, and the relationship of any given film to the book that inspired it, it’s also a way of understanding what may bring such a film into being in the first place: the chance to offer an analysis and an appreciation of one work of art through another (61-62).

Another group of critics does not believe that fidelity is the central aim of adaptation. Erica Sheen argues persuasively that classic English novels cast as long a shadow over academic writing on adaptation as they do over specific adaptations themselves because the replacement of individual authors with filmmakers as the producers of socially powerful discourse “effaces the presence of the intellectual in the production system”(7). As Sheen’s analysis implies, however, it is not only individual authors but also the ideal figures of the individual author and the intellectual that scholarly attention to adaptation valorises. Thus, Victorian novelists and their novels have remained as pivotal for adaptation theorists as for filmmakers.

Victorian novels have well-ordered stories of rich and varied characters set against a believable social canvas having potential of film adaptation. Their prodigious length, density of incident, accretion of detail, and psychological penetration all pose what one might call

exemplary challenges to cinematic adaptation. The attempt to rescue the nineteenth century novels that have engendered apparently more adventurous film adaptations requires to break with the traditional practice of reading the novels as sources to which the films owe due respect and instead treat both novels and films with equal respect.

Victorian novels and their film adaptations follow a code of Aristotelian dramatic elements which are pioneering and magical in defining plot, characters, thoughts, diction, melody and spectacle. These elements are applied in film translating into screenplay, actors, dialogues, language, music and audience. These common features bind the novel and film together translating the text from page to screen to please an audience literally and visually. The film rides on the shoulders of many creative minds, beginning from the director, producer, actors, cameraman and other technicians. It is a creative as well as a business venture, thus making it a challenging task but also supposedly effacing the writer in the venture. In my opinion the writer does not die but remains alive through the film.

Nevertheless, filmmaking provides an impetus to fiction, a deep engagement with the creative thought process necessary for longevity of the work. It is a way to ensure an interesting take in the other medium for readers who have already read the book. The complete visual experience a film gives, makes the less realized portions of literature more concrete. The briefly touched upon portions of a film can make viewers go to the novel to relish them in a more contemplative manner. The novel's ability to make one "see" something that is not there, and the film's ability to present the viewer with all the details he/she could not visualize gives the reader/ viewer a dual benefit and ensures an activism imminent for future growth of the subject.

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