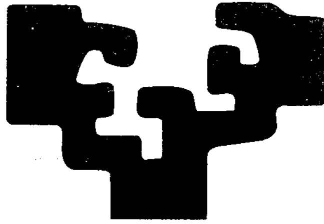
eman ta zabal zazu



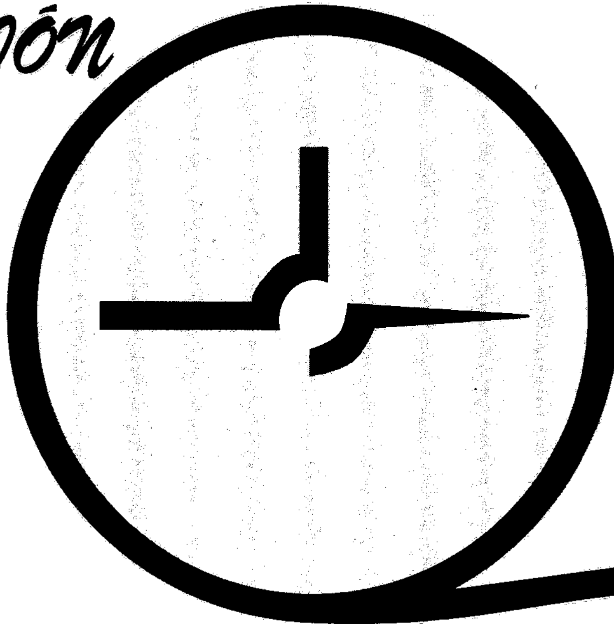
universidad del país vasco

euskal herriko unibertsitatea

DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGIA INGLESA Y ALEMANA

INGELES ETA ALEMANIAR FILOLOGI SAILA

TRASVASES CULTURALES:
LITERATURA
CINE
TRADUCCIÓN
2



Eds.: J. M. Santamaría
Eterio Pajares
Vickie Olsen
Raquel Merino

ixto González

Edita: FACULTAD DE FILOLOGIA
Dpto. Filología Inglesa y Alemana
Imprime: EVAGRAF, S. Coop.
Alibarra, 64 - Vitoria
D. L. VI - 187 - 1997
I.S.B.N. - 84-600-9413-8
Vitoria-Gasteiz 1997

THE MIMETIC FALLACY
Why Adaptations Disappoint

Jeremy STRONG
University of Stirling

A survey of criticism of screen adaptations of novels quickly reveals a dominant current; more often than not they are compared unfavourably to the source text. Two major reasons suggest themselves swiftly. The first concerns size or duration; many filmed adaptations are the occasion of simplification, compression and omission. Assuming an average film length of 120 minutes and nearly 300 pages (or 5 hours reading time) for the average novel, it's fairly obvious that the former is not going to contain the latter intact. So, adaptations are likely to provoke our displeasure because, put simply, we get less. This may explain the relative success of television serializations in that they are able to provide an equality of contact time, and hence content, with the written text. Another likely explanation concerns the relative status of screen and written texts generally. Adaptation may be perceived as an opening or sharing of a work, an increasing of access. There may be a desire to defend one's experience of the source text, an experience that is perhaps felt to be more intellectually demanding and select, by defining the adaptation as an ersatz or hollow text. The disparity of size or duration clearly assists in implementing this strategy of devaluation, enabling the critic (not necessarily academic or professional) to point to "key" absences and "drastic" alterations that render the new text fundamentally different... lesser than the original.

However, it is not on either of these issues that I wish to focus. Though they are both interesting and valid I believe that they may constitute something of a distraction or detour, leading us away from a more essential reason why we are inclined to disfavour adaptations. In seeking to understand how we appreciate and evaluate adaptations it seems practical to contrast the experiences of reading and viewing, to see if a faulty conception of either, or both, contributes to a situation where adaptations are swimming against the tide, so to speak, in terms of getting fair comparison with source texts. If so, then many instances of adverse comparison might be explicable not only in terms of individual and particular shortcomings or choices but also as the effect of a more general and fundamental phenomenon. I believe that the attribution of a mimetic capacity to verbal or written language is such a faulty conception.

The notion that great writing can evoke mental images is familiar. Creative writing classes echo to the injunction "show me, don't tell me!". In **The Craft Of Fiction**, Percy Lubbock remarks;

> the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be SHOWN, to be exhibited that it will tell itself. To hand over to the reader the facts of the story merely as so much information — this is no more than to state the argument of the book, the groundwork upon which the novelist proceeds to create.[1]

In his preface to **The Nigger Of The Narcissus**, Joseph Conrad makes a similar claim about his intentions as a writer;

> My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel — before all, to make you SEE.[2]

Assume that this is true, that language can work this way, that as we read a flow of images pass through the mind's eye; faces, figures, landscapes, tableaux. What would be the implications of this process for adapting, and for studying adaptations? Reading and adapting would be virtually analogous activities; in both cases words would function as stimuli, units of inspiration to be exchanged into hard visual currency.

A realizing through images would be the objective of both exercises, and a screen adaptation would be a reading par excellence, a definitive visualization by an individual, or collaborators, for whom this fleshing out or imaging of the written text has become a labour far more prolonged and intense than most novel-readers employ. What a privilege then to experience an adaptation, to hitch a lift on such commitment and application, whether the source text be treated with reverence or subjected to a degree of revision and innovation.

However, we rarely discuss adaptations in such generous terms. The experience of the adaptation as the perfect or definitive reading is rare, if not unknown. Great novel plus great film-maker will not often equal Art Squared. Second-rate novels making first-rate films, and vice-versa, is a more common — if depressing — formula. So, what are the implications for reading and adapting if language does not have a mimetic capacity? If not, then they become radically dissimilar — even irreconcilable — activities. Words, especially descriptive passages, assume different functions and values for each process. In reading, whilst they have a referential character, this character is not necessarily redeemed in any specific or comprehensively visual sense; they will be understood, assigned relevance and narrative weighting, imagined without imaging. In adapting, the referential character is necessarily specific, a denotative value has to be assigned to words, either through inference, invention, or a mixture of both. For example, if a hero-figure drives a red sports car, an adaptation obliges him to drive a particular model, a physical, manufactured, branded object, whilst a reading will put him behind the wheel of a connotative vehicle with the properties of redness, sportiness and other associated values — a convertible — in that it might be a different specific car for different readers or may well remain as any-car, a

"type". Of course, if a reader assigns specificity (in this instance of manufacturer and model) to an open or referent-less description it does not follow that this necessarily entails visualization; fixing the reference may only be functioning to clarify or amplify the connotative and associative values implicit in the original "open" description. My thinking "E-Type Jaguar" may help to imbue the novelist's "red sports car" with such qualities as "fast", "expensive", even "eye-catching" without my having to form a mental picture. Even if I do form such a picture — which I do, having thought about it for long enough — the image may well be epiphenomenal, not causally involved, in the aggregation of values clustered about the term "E-Type Jaguar".

Although introspection suggests to me that the activity of novel-reading does not hinge on, or even significantly involve, a transformation of written material into inner pictures this still leaves me with that queer faculty — the mind's eye — and an obligation to explain its slothfulness in this arena. Mental images have been the subject of contemplation and puzzlement for a very long time. Aristotle cites them as a fundamental component of memory, resembling the thing they represent in a picture-like fashion:

> The nature of memory and its process has now been explained as the persistent possession of an image, in the sense of a copy of the thing to which the image refers.[3]

Descartes[4], in **Meditation Six**, focuses on the difference between thinking of an object by forming a mental picture, and conceiving of an object without forming a mental picture. The difference between a pentagon and a hexagon can, he points out, be both imaged and understood. Whereas the difference between a chiliagon (a 1000 sided figure) and a 999 sided figure cannot be imaged, but can be understood without difficulty — an early indication that comprehension is not always contingent upon visualization. Cognitive Science has been the site of more recent debate about the nature and function of mental imagery, with the development of two competing views; Pictorialism, which "holds that mental displays are employed in some cases of cognition"[5] and Descriptionalism, which "argues that all cognition requires a linguistic format"[6] and hence that imaging is not picture-like at all but a form of propositional computation.

Whichever view or intermediate position one prefers, the most pertinent factor in understanding how language can evoke mental images is the effect of prior knowledge or familiarity. Clearly, a word cannot evoke an image if one does not know (or even incorrectly believe to know) its meaning; equally, other words may cue a different image for each receiver, such as "mother", "home" "best-friend". A possible explanation for the critical reception of many adaptations is that the source-texts enjoy this property of openness, offering a certain latitude of signifieds from the same signifiers to any number of readers who concur in their appreciation and all relish the writer's most apposite choice of

words. As an exercise in interpretation, in making extrinsic, the adaptation only exposes the fractures and discordance already latent in the reception of the source-text. However, this explanation still couches the disappointment phenomenon in visual terms, as the film-maker's story-elements (of character, setting, etc) not looking the way that every reader sees them in the written text. Although this well expresses the difficulties of adapting, and the impossibility of securing universal approbation, any explanation that posits significant mimetic activity, or visualizing, as a factor in the novel is a red herring.

Why? Because imaging is not a necessary component in the reading process for many written transmissions; a suggestion that may be hard to reconcile with the predominance of vision in reading the "real" world. Most of us find vision absolutely necessary in transacting the business of everyday life, in making sense of our environment. It is the primary factor enabling us to recognize friends and colleagues, to walk through doorways and not into walls. Turn out the lights and the reverse can happen, for perception is a key corollary to comprehension; seeing really is believing. For example, we sometimes hear sounds that we cannot properly explain, if they persist and we are curious enough, we approach the source to "see what's going on". We trust the evidence of our eyes to name and explain the phenomenon, whether it be a window moving in the breeze or a machine or vehicle in the street outside. How much more rare it is to need one of our other senses to tell us what our eyes cannot; invariably a "closer look" will rectify situations of incomplete knowledge.

The novel, however, is necessarily a world of things already named, and the process of comprehending its contents is therefore vastly dissimilar. Whereas the real world presents us with data for the senses, features and qualities which fuel a naming process, the novel can translate this experience into a linguistic transmission, but doesn't stop there. This data which describes properties is merged with appellative terms, the conclusions or names that one would otherwise have to attribute oneself for comprehension to occur. Experiencing the real world our sensory input can be equated to adjectives; we have to provide our own nouns. The pleasure of the novel is the fashion in which it approximates, but is not the same as, sensory experience, in combination with the extent to which it delivers the appellative and discriminatory conclusions we must otherwise reach ourselves.

The descriptive elements in a novel are not therefore image-creating in the sense of affording an object or situation a nameable status, and thereby making it comprehensible. The use of a noun entails conferring fairly exact, sometimes precise, status instantly. Sense in the novel is not built up through an examination of parts to result in a sum, or recognition; rather the sum is already given and those parts which may be given serve not to constitute it, but as supplements, as elaboration or qualification, variation or fugue. Images do not therefore play any significant causal role in the reader's progress through the narrative.

However, this is not to claim that the verbal description of images — writing that relates visual experience — is a peripheral or flawed element of novelistic style. Quite the opposite, one of the principal pleasures of the novel is its figuration of vision, the manner in which it can animate through metaphor and unlikely adjective an activity which we habitually employ in a literal manner, for orientation and taxonomy. Consider the following extract from **Cannery Row:**

> In the morning when the sardine fleet has made a catch, the purse-seiners waddle heavily into the bay blowing their whistles. The deep-laden boats pull in against the coast where the canneries dip their tails into the bay. The figure is advisedly chosen, for if the canneries dipped their mouths into the bay the canned sardines which merged from the other end would be, metaphorically at least, even more horrifying.[7]

Though this passage draws attention to the metaphor process itself, it well demonstrates how its contents are not the semblances of physical subjects, but are imagined at a remove from our spatial and temporal reality and thereby quickened. To adapt such a passage would not be easy; a filmed image of the sardine fleet arriving at the canneries might be both beautiful and exciting, but will not necessarily make the viewer think in terms of mouths and tails. A voice-over could restore this suggestion, but would then be functioning in a rather contrapuntal manner with the literal physical image. Of course this is not necessarily an inferior mode; however, it indicates that adaptation is more than a transposition of material from one medium to another. It would involve a division of material in the relocation to a mixed medium, with some elements expressed visually and others orally. One of the pleasures of the novel may well be its unity, the fact that it takes us into an entirely mediated world and talks us through it instead of showing us around with occasional commentary.

The description of young Charles Bovary's hat at the beginning of **Madame Bovary** is another useful example of how novelistic description functions differently to an examination of a detailed image or real-world object:

> It was one of those hats of the composite order, in which we find features of the military bear-skin, the Polish chapska, the bowler hat, the beaver and the cotton nightcap, one of those pathetic things, in fact, whose mute ugliness has a profundity of expression like the face of an imbecile. Ovoid and stiffened with whalebone, it began with three big circular sausages; then, separated by a red band, there alternated diamonds of velours and rabbit-fur; after that came a sort of bag terminating in a cardboard polygon, embroidered all over with complicated braid, and, hanging down at the end of a long cord that was too thin, a little cluster of gold threads, like a tassel. It looked new; the peak was gleaming.[8]

As the description continues it becomes no easier to "see" the hat; rather it becomes harder should one try to hold such a "mass of detail.... so large a bloc or gestalt"[9]. If one tries to employ the mind's eye it is swamped with words rather than them acting as detailed brush-strokes or a tightening of focus. However, the reader does develop a feel of the hat; of its eclectic and ridiculous nature; a description takes place which is in no sense an aid or instrument for visualization. Rather like its wearer, the reader is made palpably aware of the hat, and of its potential to embarrass, without having a complete view of it.

In **Narrative Discourse** Genette argues that "the very idea of showing, like that of imitation or narrative representation... is completely illusory"; that all written narrative can do is tell "in a manner which is detailed, precise, 'alive', and in that way give more or less the *illusion of mimesis*"[10]. I would argue that Flaubert's description is a fine example of this illusion; its mixture of metaphor and specific reference can convince the reader that there are observable elements and qualities as for a physical object. There is an enumeration of terms which should help to fix an image; its constituent elements, shapes, materials, relative dimensions. We are not simply informed that it is hideous and ridiculous; those very qualities which, when apprehended visually, make it so are related to us until we feel that no further possible effort could be made to help us see. Finally, we reach such a full understanding of the object described that it becomes nearly inconceivable that we should possess this knowledge without the intervention of some of the same mental mechanisms employed by our most treasured and reliable sense.

The creation of a mental image of Charles Bovary's hat would depend on a number of factors. If one had seen an adaptation in which it featured then an image might be drawn from memory, possibly quite whole and vivid. But such a memory would make trying to image the hat differently very difficult; for example, try forming a mental image of James Bond without seeing an actor who has played the part. There is a small chance that the description might cue a memory of something similar, experienced in the real world; in which case the resultant mental image might not match the description in many respects. The most likely possibility is that one has memories, and corresponding images, of most of the hat's constituent parts — bowler hat, rabbit fur, gold threads, etc. These images may be evoked separately, but become more shifting and unstable as the amalgam is added to, until a workable image becomes untenable. If one takes the mimetic theory of language literally, or only semi-metaphorically, then the process of novel-reading would involve this dredging of the layers of memory for images which chime with the words; only abstract and non-physical states and concepts would be exempted from this whirlwind tour through the mind's photo album.

Thankfully, the exercise of reading is not conducted thus; the eyes read, the imagination reels, but the mind's eye is relaxed. Unlike erecting a tent or cons-

tructing a bird-table, reading a novel does not involve the picturing of a completed object; which is why the former exercises are better served by diagrammatic instructions than purely written ones. The pleasure of the novel is likely to be the pleasure of NOT seeing, but of an alternative form of contact and sense-making. There is unquestionably the pleasure of the allusion to sensory experience — in varying degree according to style — of playing with the comprehension-forming dynamics of our data-gathering faculties. It is unquestionably a mediated experience, of telling rather than showing, diegesis rather than mimesis, but its success resides in the blurring of these distinctions and the reader's impression of near-mimesis, of the all-but-seen. In rendering spectacle truly visible, and sound truly audible, the screen adaptation reveals the extent to which novels hinge on mediation. The second-rate novel may indeed make a better film if the original does not well convey experience "as", rather than "by" words, for its qualities are not contingent upon mastery of form. If an adaptation disappoints us then, in its presentation of character or setting, we are tempted to affirm that they have been interpreted wrongly, mis-cast, ill-played, mis-understood. But an understanding of language, and of the experience of the novel which recognizes the mimetic fallacy and its pleasures, suggests a more sweeping explanation; it is not that they are seen wrongly, but that they are seen at all.

NOTES

[1] Lubbock, Percy. THE CRAFT OF FICTION.
Cape, 1972, p. 62.
[2] Quoted in Wagner, Geoffrey.
THE NOVEL AND THE CINEMA
Associated University Presses, Inc. 1975, p.11.
[3] Quoted in Tye, Michael. THE IMAGERY DEBATE.
M I T Press, 1991, p.2.
[4] Ibid, p.3.
[5] Rollins, Mark. MENTAL IMAGERY; ON THE LIMITS OF COGNITIVE SCIENCE.
Yale University Press, 1989, p. xiv.
[6] Ibid. p. xiv.
[7] Steinbeck, John. CANNERY ROW.
Mandarin, 1990, p.1.
[8] Flaubert, Gustave. MADAME BOVARY.
Penguin, 1992, pp.1-2.
[9] Marshall McLuhan, quoted in Giddings, Robert, Selby, Keith & Wensley, Chris.
SCREENING THE NOVEL; THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF LITERARY DRAMATIZATION.
[10] Genette, Gerard. NARRATIVE DISCOURSE.
Blackwell, 1980, pp.163-164.