# Rethinking the NOVEL/FILM DEBATE

**Kamilla Elliott**
*University of California, Berkeley*

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org



First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typefaces* ITC New Baskerville 10/12.5 pt. and Bodoni Poster Compressed
*System* LaTeX 2ε [TB]

*A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.*

ISBN 0 521 81844 3 hardback

# Contents

# List of Illustrations

# Introduction

This is not the book I intended to write, although that book haunts the margins of this one. The original book (on Victorian novels and their film adaptations) was stymied by problems, paradoxes, and polarizations in novel and film studies more generally. Recent publications on the subject express a mounting dissatisfaction with the paradigms and methodologies that govern the field. At the heart of the novel and film debate lies a particularly perplexing paradox: on one side, novels and films are diametrically opposed as "words" and "images," at war both formally and culturally. J. Dudley Andrew, the most widely reprinted scholar of literary film adaptation, is one of many to argue "the absolutely different semiotic systems of film and language."[1] On the other side of the paradox, novels and films are integrally related as sister arts sharing formal techniques, audiences, values, sources, archetypes, narrative strategies, and contexts.[2] Oddly, interdisciplinary scholars do not adhere to one or the other side of the paradox: they rather occupy both.

Unable to discover the roots of the paradox inside novel and film studies, I turned to prior word and image discourses, where I found its recent origins in the two main branches of the eighteenth-century poetry and painting debate. One branch categorically differentiates poetry and painting along word and image lines, classifying the two arts as separate species, as in Lessing's famous distinction between poetry as temporal and painting as spatial. The other identifies them as sister arts, setting up rhetorical family resemblances through interart analogies, as in Simonides of Ceos's frequently cited analogy: "Poetry is a speaking picture; painting is a mute poem." Categorical differentiators recommend separate spheres for poetry and painting; interart analogizers foster sibling incest and sibling rivalries. Chapter 1, "Analogy and Category," ponders the problematic application of the eighteenth-century poetry and

painting debate to the study of novels and films. Given the hybrid verbal–visual nature of illustrated novels and worded films, the wholesale application of categorical tenets developed for poetry and painting to novels and films is at worst inappropriate and at best partial. It is further demonstrated in Chapter 1 that category and analogy are not so opposed as they at first appear but rather collude to foster the word and image divide, even in hybrid word and image arts. Indeed, Chapter 2, "Prose Pictures," and Chapter 3, "Film Language," delineate how word and image wars wage within as well as between illustrated novels and worded films, most intriguingly in analogies that speak of words as pictures and of pictures as language. While these analogies imply affinities, they more often foster word and image wars. Chapter 2 outlines how novelists, reviewers, editors, and literary critics have used analogies of prose as painting and illustration as commentary to subjugate, denigrate, and excise novel illustrations. Chapter 3 traces how, in a similar vein, filmmakers, reviewers, critics, and historians have used analogies of film images as language to minimize, excoriate, ignore, and exile film's words. In both discourses, analogy joins with category to press novels and films into word and image camps as "pure" word and image arts. They are proclaimed categorically pure, but paradoxically so, by interart analogies.

Chapter 4, "Cinematic Novels/Literary Cinema," carries the examination of intra-art analogies into a discussion of interart analogies. It examines the paradox that novels are deemed "cinematic" when novels are defined as "words" and words are decreed "uncinematic." It shows how, among all branches of novel and film studies, literary film adaptation places the greatest pressure on the debate's central paradox. From the categorical side that opposes novels as words and films as images, adaptation emerges as a theoretical impossibility, for words and images are everywhere declared untranslatable, irreducible, *a priori* systems – even by poststructuralist critics like J. Hillis Miller. But from the analogical side that speaks of "cinematic novels" and "literary cinema," adaptation appears as the logical, even inevitable, outcome of interart analogies, as cinematic novels *become* cinema – the discursive word made aesthetic flesh.

Interart analogy and interart adaptation feature prominently in this book as highly revelatory points of interdisciplinary rhetorical and aesthetic exchange. Furthermore, because of its pivotal position between the eighteenth-century poetry and painting debate and the twentieth-century novel and film debate, the nineteenth-century novel features prominently in this book. If interart analogies like cinematic novels and literary cinema cast novel and film as sister arts in the twentieth and

twenty-first centuries, analogies of cinematic nineteenth-century novels construct a strangely anachronistic ancestral relationship between them. In the 1940s, Sergei Eisenstein forged a widely followed argument that "from Dickens, from the Victorian novel, stem the first shoots of American film esthetic."[3] In the 1970s, Christian Metz concurred and expanded:

> Inasmuch as it proposes behavioural schemes and libidinal prototypes, corporeal postures, types of dress, modes of free behavior or seduction, and is the initiating authority for a perpetual adolescence, the classical film has taken, relay fashion, the historical place of the grand-epoch, nineteenth-century novel (itself descended from the ancient epic); it fills the same social function, a function which the twentieth-century novel, less and less diegetic and representational, tends partly to abandon.[4]

The idea expressed here is not simply that the nineteenth-century novel influenced western film, but that it in some sense *became* film, while the modern novel evolved in a different direction. This aesthetic history place film in the literary family tree, giving the nineteenth-century novel filmic as well as literary progeny. Metz's contrasts between these media place film in a literary critical context, in that they resemble nineteenth-century comparisons of poetry and prose. For example, J. S. Mill wrote in 1833: "The truth of poetry is to paint the human soul truly; the truth of fiction is to give a true picture of life . . . the novelist . . . has to describe outward things, not the inward man."[5] Such theoretical and rhetorical lineages require interdisciplinary scrutiny.

The Victorian novel plays a central role in mediating these discourses, as well as in the aesthetic practices fed by and feeding these discourses. It is not to my mind coincidental that British Victorian novels and novellas have been more frequently adapted to film than any other body of literature, including Shakespearean plays (and Shakespeare is the only author from his period to be so frequently adapted). I have located over 1,500 film and television adaptations of British Victorian prose fiction (1837–1901). Given the erratic nature of film records, this list can only be a partial one. Numerous Victorian novels have been filmed more than 20 times – some over 100 times. This fact renders film adaptations of Victorian novels particularly rich and variegated places for examining interdisciplinary exchanges across decades, genres, and nations. Chapter 5 examines multiple adaptations of a Victorian novel, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, not only to illustrate these multiple variables but also to grapple with a second dogma that has plagued novel and film studies: adaptation and the problem of content. Adaptation lies between the rock of a post-Saussurean insistence that form does not and cannot

separate from content and the hard place of poststructuralism's debunking of content, of original and local signifieds alike. If words and images do not and cannot translate, and if form does not and cannot separate from content (whether because of their mandated insoluble bond or because content is simply an illusion), then what remains to pass between a novel and a film in adaptation? Scholars are faced with two choices: they must either treat adaptation as a theoretical impossibility (though adaptation's cultural ubiquity renders those who do so ostriches with heads buried in the sands of philosophical and semiotic abstraction), or they must find some way to account for what passes between a novel and film in adaptation without committing semiotic heresy. This critical bind is, to my mind, largely responsible for many of the problems plaguing adaptation studies in particular and novel and film studies in general and for the pervasive sense that adaptation scholars lag behind the critical times. For example, Robert B. Ray regrets the lack of "distinguished work" and the absence of a "presiding poetics" and Brian McFarlane ascertains that "it is depressing to find at what a limited, tentative stage the discourse has remained."[6] Chapter 5 highlights a number of heretical ways in which critics, filmmakers, reviewers, and audiences have dared to split form from content in the criticism and practice of adaptation and investigates ways in which these heretical spaces have been used to foster additional interdisciplinary rivalries far more fraught and insidious than those arising from categorical distinctions of novels and films. These heretical splits are by no means limited to formal concerns: they open up spaces in which cultural, historical, and contextual concerns also enter interdisciplinary exchange.

Although heresies run rife in the rhetoric and practice of adaptation, officially, critics adhere to both dogmas: to the unbridgeable word and image divide and to the indissoluble form and content union. As a result, a structurally constrained model of analogy has been the only officially sanctioned model of adaptation from film's earliest days, for it is the only one to account for adaptation while avoiding semiotic heresy. Under this model, films locate analogous, already complete signs in their own lexicons that approximate literary signs: hence, content need not be split from form to pass from novel into film and words do not metamorphose into images. This model rejects any essential or inherent connections between novels and films apart from structural ones. In so doing, it strengthens the word and image divide, for it typically mandates that films find visual equivalents for verbal signs, ignoring the transfer of novel words to film words or novel illustrations to film pictures. Chapter 6, "Adaptation and Analogy," demonstrates the limitations and problems of this officially sanctioned model as well as two other unofficial analogical models

of adaptation (the literalized analogy and the psychoanalytic analogy). It concludes by recommending a new (but also old) analogical model for adaptation: the looking glass analogy. This recommended model is not an abstract philosophical one, but a model gleaned from interart rhetoric and aesthetic practice, from interart analogies and certain interart adaptations. My research indicates that a model so gleaned will prove more valid than abstract ones in a field where theory and practice have been so greatly at odds. It moves toward resolving the analogical/categorical paradox, toward bridging the word and image divide, and toward opening a credible space in the form and content fusion.

There are of course limitations to such a study. In dealing chiefly with mainstream and hegemonic rhetorical and ideological currents, it, of necessity, omits many individual and minority voices. But in focusing on problems that persist across several centuries, disciplines, arts, technologies, and many theories, it aspires to clear ground for new critical voices and approaches and for those voices, protesting unheard, to be heard. A second limitation is that, in tracing specific threads from various interart and intra-art discourses into the novel and film debate, there was neither time nor space to follow the poetry/painting debate into the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, to address the rarified practice of book illustration later in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, or to investigate a host of other word and image forms, like magic lantern shows and comic books, that fed into film.

Recent critics of the novel and film debate argue that formal approaches have been overdone, need no more doing, and require undoing by cultural studies and poststructuralist scholarship.[7] However, these newer approaches have done little to bridge the word and image divide or to resolve adaptation's problem of content. The problems of the field cannot be resolved by exchanging new theories for old. Indeed, such changes may serve only to exacerbate the problems. Feeding novel and film studies into some recent theoretical paradigms would exacerbate word and image polarizations. For example, to gender words male, images female, and hybrid arts androgynous, after feminist models, or to read literary film adaptation as a subversive subjugation of the phallic to the presymbolic realm under psychoanalytic rubrics, or to feed canonical literature and popular film into Marxist class categorizations of high and low art would not serve to unravel false oppositions of novels and films, but would rather intensify them and place them in the service of new ideological oppositions. Thus, although my study is significantly informed by postmodern theory and cultural studies and draws on some of their methodologies, it does not espouse them as overarching structures.

Rather, it demonstrates their limitations in resolving the field's central problems.

If this book does set up a methodology, it is one that tests aesthetic theory with aesthetic practice. It shows repeatedly how theory has obfuscated a clear understanding of aesthetic practice and of intra- and interdisciplinary dynamics. Novel and film studies are particularly hospitable to a critique of theory from practice, since there is often no clear demarcation between theorists, academic critics, novelists, filmmakers, reviewers, and reader-viewers. For example, Sergei Eisenstein, who mainstreamed both the analogy of the cinematic novel and of film "language," was theorist, critic, and filmmaker. Novelists like Joseph Conrad, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner became screenwriters. Novelists like Fitzgerald, Leo Tolstoy, and Virginia Woolf have written about the novel's relationship to cinema. Other novelists are academics: semiotician Umberto Eco wrote a novel, *The Name of the Rose*, and later critiqued its film adaptation; Anthony Burgess has been professor, novelist, screenwriter, film reviewer, and adapter of literature to theater and film – he even composed music for a theatrical adaptation of one of his novels, *A Clockwork Orange*. Moving across this fluid continuum from abstract philosophers and elite artists to mainstream novelists and filmmakers to popular reviewers and mass audiences enabled me to probe some of the field's contradictions between abstract theory and actual aesthetic practice: for example, the paradox that adaptation is theoretically impossible yet culturally ubiquitous. But the methodology has proven constructive as well as deconstructive: studies of aesthetic practice not only debunk critical paradigms, they also suggest new ones.

Another limitation of this book's focus on the novel and film debate is that it, of necessity, shares in many of the debate's imbalances. I am fully aware that film is not merely a word and image art, but that it draws on other artistic forms and technologies. While my last case study does pay some attention to film music, additional studies of film music are needed to put further pressure on film's synecdochal definition as "images," as are analyses of other arts and technologies on which film draws. Similarly, in the course of my research it became manifestly clear that theatrical adaptations of novels form crucial intertexts between novels and their film adaptations – many early film adaptations record theatrical adaptations – but such intertexts receive short shrift in this book, just as they do in the novel and film debate. Chapter 4, however, does reopen the question of film's relationship to theater. Recent critics rightly protest novel and film studies' neglect of pulp fiction, screenplays, novelizations, and films that

adapt other films, which this book too must minimize in order to maintain its focus on the central problems of the debate.[8] This book further shares the debate's preoccupation with the Victorian novel, and does so to excess in order to exorcise some of its ghosts. 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. While many twentieth-century novels have been adapted, it is rare to find one that has been adapted more than once. None has been adapted anywhere near the number of times as the average canonical Victorian novel. Finally, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* shares the debate's imbalanced attention to Anglo-American films and Anglo-American criticism, though like that debate, it does ponder a handful of French critics, a few films from other continents, and some television adaptations. In spite of these necessary limitations, it is my hope that this book will clear ground for future scholars to foray freely among all of these neglected areas.

Another limitation of this book lies in my decision to limit the number of novels and films used for the case studies. Researching hundreds of films and dozens of novels over the course of a decade, I determined that any number of novels and films would serve equally to problematize and expose theory and rhetoric from aesthetic practice. It was tempting to cite multiple texts and films in order to showcase (show off) my painstaking and extensive research. However, because this book addresses a wide historical swath and several interdisciplinary discourses, I discerned that citing multiple books and films would tend to create analytical scatter and encyclopedic gloss, while sustaining fewer case study materials in depth and detail across centuries and discourses would maintain greater clarity and force of argumentation, provide clearer continuity and connections between the various debates, and enable greater analytical depth and interpretive nuance. While each case study is, as far as any case study can be, representative of the dynamics it illustrates – indeed, some are especially so – each inevitably contains idiosyncratic elements. However, standing on an extensive base of primary and secondary materials, I am confident that any idiosyncrasies do not affect the central arguments of this book. While other case study materials would certainly provide variations on the themes, they would not essentially change or undermine them. Without recourse to a multivolume format, these were choices I had to make.

## A Note on Terminology

I resist the dominant terminological trend that makes films and books alike "texts" on two counts. First, it obviously confuses an interdisciplinary discussion. Second, I join numerous film and visual arts critics in opposing the colonizing application of terminology derived from language and linguistics to film and pictorial arts. I cite some of these critics and explain this objection further in Chapter 1.