CHANGE IS NOT A CHOICE

BRIAN McFARLANE CONSIDERS THE ARTS AND MANIFOLD SOURCES OF ADAPTATION IN FILM

My title is taken from a line in Spike Jonze's eccentric and brilliant recent film, *Adaptation*, and it's applicable to the processes of adaptation in the world of flora and fauna as well as to the filming of literary texts. In recent months, Australia has been awash with films derived in one way or other from literary—and other—antecedents, sometimes with meditations on the nature of the artists at work as well, and the idea of adaptation has been brought into the forefront with unusual explicitness. Indeed, it is worth noting that the 2003 Oscar ceremony overwhelmingly honoured adapted works, across a range of categories.

In discussion of films, there are few topics so likely to occasion outrage as the matter of adaptation, especially of novels into films. In a discourse ranging from the foyer tetchiness of 'It wasn't like that in the book' to the most learned exegeses, everyone feels free to have a go, and the weight of opinion is rarely in favour of the film. Casual comment is rarely premised on the notion that not to make major
Change is not a Choice

changes is impossible as the narrative moves from one medium to another: changes will inevitably be dictated by the strategies and techniques peculiar to each; the film is likely to be informed by a very different sensibility from that governing the novel; the time lapse between novel and film may mean that the film appears in very different ideological circumstances, which will make their presence felt on the film; the fact that film must reach a much wider audience than even a best-selling novel may have serious implications (not necessarily of a crudifying kind) for the way it goes about displaying its narrative. Further, an imaginative film-maker may have been excited by an idea or motif or plot element—whatever—in a novel and then proceeded to make something new as a result of that stimulus. It could, indeed, be argued that if the film-maker has nothing new to say about a novel, it may be best to leave it alone. There are any number of reasons why the film version of a novel may not ‘feel’ like its precursor: whatever the yearning for fidelity (the very term gives a moral cast to the whole enterprise), this is an impossible dream in any serious sense.

Adaptation is a film about film-making, about the creative impulse and its accommodation to commercial imperatives, about the adaptation of a New Yorker story into a novel and in turn a film, as well as about the adaptation of species. In a short, brilliant sequence in which the history of the natural world (a caption introduces it with ‘Forty billion years earlier’) is encapsulated in a series of rapid dissolves, the processes of natural adaptation are sketched in their headlong, irreversible, evolutionary mutations. The film begins on the set of Jonze’s previous film, the equally eccentric Being John Malkovich, the writer of which, Charlie Kaufman (Nicholas Cage) is having serious problems with his next project. This is the job of turning real-life author Susan Orlean’s book The Orchid Thief, in turn based on her short story, into a film. Charlie’s problem is partly that he wants the film to be essentially about orchids, while his producer, Valerie (Tilda Swinton), with an eye on the box office, has a distinct feeling that flowers aren’t as commercial as plots and people.

Real-life writer Charlie has a fictional twin, Donald (Cage again), and Donald is assailed by none of Charlie’s compunctions about integrity. After attending the screenwriting classes of real-life screenwriter Robert McKee (played by Brian Cox), recently in Melbourne, Donald knows exactly how to fashion a hugely saleable genre-based script. Oh, and Susan (Meryl Streep, immensely more fun than she is often allowed to be) goes off to Florida to interview the gap-toothed orchid thief himself, John Laroche (another real-life character, played by Chris Cooper), while the by-now-besotted Charlie goes to meet her in New York.
From here on, reality and fiction become inextricably intertwined, as do the notions of genre film-making and its art-house cousin. The film has sly fun at the expense of genre solutions to plot problems, seeming as it does, in its own plotting, to resort to such solutions, but it also recognises the forlornness of Charlie's wish to be free of the tyranny of narrative.

John Laroche likes orchids 'because they're so adaptable'; well, some fictions, like some flowers, are more readily amenable to the process than others. Fearless film-makers may well be advised to heed Darwin's gnomic utterance 'Adaptation is a journey,' which the film quotes, even if they run the risk of, in Charlie's misguided words, 'ruin[ing] it by making it a Hollywood thing.' The days when Hollywood vulgarians were routinely chastised for gutting novels and melting down what's left in a sort of generic stockpot are long since past. While other film industries, Britain's especially, were being more decorous in their approach to classic and/or popular novels, Hollywood butchers, as often as not, were content merely to make masterpieces.

And formal adaptation is not the only kind of relationship that may exist between a film and an earlier fiction. Gavin Miller's undervalued (underseen?) Dreamchild (1985) is a reflection on Alice in Wonderland, on the connections between the 'real' Alice (as child and old woman) and the fictional heroine, and on the processes of narrative and narration over several media. Patricia Rozema's Mansfield Park (1999) draws on Jane Austen's diaries and world as well as on her novel. Both films suggest productive interaction with their famous predecessors. The most recent exploration of the enmeshment of film with fiction, and with the life that creates it and those who are shaped by it, is Stephen Daldry's masterly The Hours (2002). His first film, Billy Elliot (2000), evoked with unsentimental rigour and compassion the straitened environment of a northern England mining community and a protagonist at odds with its macho expectations. His follow-up film, awaited with tense interest, takes for its starting point a novelist, Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman—awarded the 2003 Best Actress Oscar for this role), who finds herself stifled in suburban Richmond while she longs for Bloomsbury, and ultimately walks into a river with stones in her pockets. Her famous novel of London life, Mrs Dalloway (1925), is the book that hovers over the whole of this beautiful and strangely passionate film.

It is more directly adapted from Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel The Hours (1998), which explores the lives of three women in three different places and periods, interrelated through Woolf's story of Clarissa Dalloway and her plans for a party. David Hare's screenplay is as deft in its
Change is not a Choice

negotiations of these shifts of scene as the novel. When the film drops back from Woolf's watery demise to twenty years earlier, we hear the author announcing to her patient husband Leonard (Stephen Dillane) that she has found the opening sentence to her novel. It is to be: 'Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.' Whereas Virginia Woolf is writing the novel, Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), an unhappy Los Angeles wife and mother in 1951, is reading it, on the birthday of her nice husband (John C. Reilly), whom she does not love and who has bought the flowers for the occasion. In New York 2001, Clarissa (Meryl Streep) is also saying she'll get the flowers for the party she is preparing for her ex-lover Richard (Ed Harris), who has won a literary prize and is dying of AIDS.

Three sets of lives are set in motion by a miracle of mise-en-scène, editing (Peter Boyle) and cinematography (Seamus McGarvey), colluding with Ann Roth's costume design and Maria Djurkovic's production design. As a result of these superlative collaborators, we move effortlessly among the worlds of Sussex in the 1920s, LA in the 1950s and New York fifty years later, unobtrusively but unerringly drawn to see history repeating itself—but not quite. Flowers, parties, the preparation of food and its waste, a well-meaning but disruptive visitor, the repression of emotional needs, the place of children in the pattern, the chance of suicide: these are but some of the themes, images and motifs, intricately intercut for echo effect, that feed into the richly textured pattern of the hours these three women live before us. Just as Mrs Dalloway's day leads her to an interrogation of her own life, to what she has missed, for good and ill, so each of these three women—her creator, her reader and her namesake—examine the purpose of their lives, and it is not a coincidence that Richard always calls Clarissa, committed as she is to life, 'Mrs Dalloway'.

The film offers not merely an 'adaptation' of Cunningham's novel but, as well, a meditation on other possible relations between film and the literary. Cunningham, happy with the film, has described it as an 'improvisation on an improvisation' (Sight & Sound, February 2003). Flowing in and out of the troubled minds of its three women (almost like three manifestations of a single protagonist), Daldry's film explores the ways in which great works of literature might affect people's lives. It demonstrates how film might draw on that medium's own specific kinds of editing to acquire a mobility in time and space that at least rivals if not exceeds the novel's. And it suggests how film might be as allusive as a novel while drawing on audiovisual moving images as opposed to words on a page. For some, it will be impossible to watch it without echoes of, say, Marleen Gorris's beautiful adaptation of Mrs Dalloway (1997), starring
Vanessa Redgrave; or of Eileen Atkins' definitive account of *A Room of One's Own* (1990) on television, an echo made more insistent by Atkins' brief, telling appearance in *The Hours* as the florist who sells Clarissa her flowers.

All three of the key women are superbly played: Kidman, much more than just a prosthetic nose, mines Woolf's unanswered needs for complexity and pathos; Moore, as Laura, curiously abstracted as if drifting glazed through the barren domesticity of her life, merely confirms her position as perhaps the best film actress alive; and Streep imbues Clarissa with a passionate warmth that irradiates her dealings with her stricken ex-lover, her shrewdly together present partner Sally (Allison Janney of *West Wing*), and her daughter Julia (Claire Danes).

It may not be crucial to a full enjoyment of Daldry's film to have read Cunningham's novel, but to know something of Woolf and *Mrs Dalloway* will almost certainly ensure a richer experience in viewing the film—at least for those who like things literary as well as cinematic. A more extreme case of a film's being informed by an earlier text is Todd Haynes' fiercely intelligent *Far from Heaven*, a 1957-set reworking of Douglas Sirk's lush 1955 melodrama *All That Heaven Allows*. All films (and novels and plays) depend on our knowing something else: they all in one way or another hook into aspects of our shifting and various realities: why, then, should one of those aspects not be a novel or a film? Most adaptations don't require this, but I am writing here of films that do not conform to the conventional idea of an adaptation as an autonomous work. Just think where Tom Stoppard would be if he couldn't count on audiences knowing something of *Hamlet* when they go to see *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* on stage or screen. Or his play *Travesties* if audiences had never heard of James Joyce or *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Or *Earnest* itself if one knew nothing of the Victorian novel. This is not remotely intended as an offspring of the fidelity approach to adaptation and its criticism but, rather, as the restating of the truism that no art happens in a vacuum.

Cathy Whitaker, the Dior-decked heroine of *Far from Heaven* (and those ample skirts are redolent at once of a relief from postwar austerities and of a subtle imprisonment of women in a notion of 'femininity'), falls in love with a man who is not Only The Gardener, as in Sirk's original film, but The Black Gardener. Unlike the Jane Wyman character in the earlier film, who was a widow with a staid middle-aged beau, Julianne Moore's Cathy has a husband whose suppressed homosexual desires finally overwhelm him in the *Saturday-Evening Post*-style Connecticut town in which they live their smothered lives. It's as if the film reinhabits the Sirk world with permission to acknowledge the kinds of love
that Back Then were unable to speak their name. The magnificent Julianne Moore
never misses a beat as the perfect wife and mother (another fifties wife and
mother with some points of contact with her Laura in *The Hours*) whose
achievement of perfection has been at the expense of her truest impulses, and few
things in recent cinema are more affecting than her farewell to the gardener at
the station, when he tells her it wouldn't be 'wise' for her to think of visiting him
in his Baltimore relocation. He has gone there because life has been made intolerable for him in Hartford by racial malice deriving from his association with Cathy.

Not really an adaptation in the usual sense, and not in any sense patronising
about the greater liberality of expression allowed to either its characters or its
director, *Far from Heaven* generates the sense of an echo chamber in which
ghostly voices remind us that this is what it was like then. Not that it safely
confines either prejudice or repression to a bygone decade: there is no comfort­
ing sense that one is merely watching a period piece. It does, however, gain
immeasurably in its affective power from the sense of palimpsest it generates for
those familiar with Sirk's necessarily more *implicit* critique of the strictures of a
narrow society. The autumn beauty of the townscape (the women's costumes
seem colour-coded in harmony with nature as they make their way to gossiping
lunches) points up the moral squalor of the society it bathes in its glow.

Perhaps the least popular of recent adaptations has been Neil LaBute's version
of A.S. Byatt's *Possession*. Those who admire the novel, which moves between late
twentieth-century academics on the track of a literary mystery and the nature of
the liaison between the (fictitious) Victorian poets Randolph Ash and Christabel
la Motte, may well feel that the film skims a lot of the novel's pastiche Victoria­
an. Of course it does, but film is simply not the medium for rendering hundreds
of pages of journal entries, letter exchanges, pseudo-mythic tales and long narra­
tive and reflective poems. The film concentrates, as films are apt to do, on
relationships and the emotions involved, rather than on more cerebral matters—and,
on rereading the novel, I'm not wholly sorry. Yes, Byatt's book is an
ambitious, vast, sprawling piece of work, but it is also sometimes overelaborate and
a touch pretentious in a faintly show-off way that gets in the way of the develop­
ment of the two character sets.

True, the present-day story in the film lacks some of the cutting edge of Byatt's
account of academic ambition and skulduggery and it speeds up the rapproche­
ment between the two young investigators, Roland Mitchell, research assistant
based at the British Museum, and Women's Studies lecturer Dr Maud Bailey.
Whereas in the book there is a long wary lead-up to their final and touching union, the film makes a character and casting decision that undermines such a possibility. Instead of Roland's being from an urban lower-middle-class family and partly in awe, partly resentful, of the patrician Maud, so that their inching towards each other manages to be convincingly a matter of convergence of interests and of mutual feeling, in the film he is an American wise-guy type with permanent stubble. In the interests no doubt of US distribution (another factor that helps to account for 'changes'), he is played by Aaron Eckhart, who has worked to better advantage in earlier LaBute films, such as In the Company of Men (1997). This Roland has no class chip to dislodge from his shoulder but rather has to deal with a lot of tiresome old-hat anti-American cracks. In other words, this is an example of adaptation that doesn't work: 'Americanness' doesn't provide here as resonant an 'other' as class does in the novel. Gwyneth Paltrow can now do British in her sleep—one is irrelevantly reminded of con-woman Barbara Stanwyck in The Lady Eve (1941) telling her shyster father 'I've been British before'—and she ought to have been enough sop to the US markets. However, the film hasn't done very well in any markets. It makes one wonder if there's much point in taking on something as ambitious as Possession if it jettisons much of what made it at least a coterie success.

Jeremy Northam as Randolph and Jennifer Ehle as Christabel embody both the passion and the constraint of the Victorian romance but they too are working on more limited material than the novel's ceaseless flow of diaries and letters allows. The network of academic rivalries is perforce reduced in scope. I was reminded of how Karel Reisz and his great cameraman Freddie Francis differentiated the modern and the Victorian sequences of the not dissimilar The French Lieutenant's Woman (1981): in Possession, despite some sharply effective editing, the gap between different worlds is elided.

Byatt at one point writes of the 'persistent shape-shifting life of things long dead but not vanished'. This has some relevance to the most conventional example of film adaptation seen over the last few months or so: Philip Noyce's version of Graham Greene's The Quiet American. 'Conventional' is not here a pejorative term. There is about this engrossing account of a three-way relationship (Fowler, a cynical British journalist; the seemingly naive young eponym, Pyle; and Phuong, Fowler's Vietnamese girlfriend and object of Pyle's attentions) a sense of the 'persistent shape-shifting' that the lapse of fifty years may have brought about. Set in 1952, Greene's clear-eyed account of dangerous 'innocence' at work in the moral and political complexity of South-East Asia now seems
agonisingly prescient. There is of course serendipity at work in our viewing the film at a time when US interference in ‘exotic’ countries is at its most threatening for some decades; but the arguments about such interference, however they are couched and with reference to whatever sort of regime, offer persistent shape-shifting without destroying the emotional core of the original. Indeed, in the finely shaded performance of Michael Caine as Fowler, and the emblematic cultural resonances of Brendan Fraser’s Pyle and Do Thi Hai Yen’s Phuong, Noyce ensures that the drama of personal affections and loyalties retains its emotional as well as its symbolic power.

There are no rules about film adaptation, and it’s not only novels that get adapted. Roman Polanski’s powerful Holocaust drama The Pianist is adapted by British screenwriter Ronald Harwood from the autobiography of celebrated composer–pianist Władysław Szpilman, a Polish Jew who survived the Nazis. It no doubt takes ‘liberties’ (another of those admonishing terms often used about adaptation, where ‘change is not a choice’) of selection and compression in the interests of cinema’s passion for narrative shape. By now, of course, it’s pretty generally acknowledged that (auto)biography is itself an act of adaptation, that the ‘life’ in question will have been shaped in such a way as to give it the coherence of a work to be read, a coherence that was almost certainly not true of the life as lived. And Rob Marshall’s Chicago, in which showbiz glamour is frantically intercut with the realities of Prohibition-era low-life, is derived from the stage musical of the same name. The stage version, in turn, was inspired by the brilliant black film comedy Roxie Hart (1942) and it from a play by Maurine Watkins. Marshall’s film vies with Daldry’s The Hours as the recent film that makes the most dazzlingly apt use of editing as it exercises film’s capacity for rendering the adjacency of adjacent worlds. Novels from, say, Middlemarch to The Hours work at this but are denied the resources of film’s seamless scene-switching.

One of the academics in Byatt’s novel writes of Ash that he feared ‘his individual being would not be extended by progeny’. The way the cinema of 2003 is shaping, there appears to be every reason to suppose that a whole variety of literary and theatrical forms and even old films can expect to have their lives extended by progeny in the form of films derived from them. Whether those progeny respect their parents is another matter, but the most interesting progeny are likely to be those that accept the inevitability of change and carve out new paths for themselves, simultaneously asserting indebtedness and autonomy.