HISTORY BOYS: ADAPTING THE PAST

Brian McFarlane
The most expensive ‘book’ that I have bought in living memory is Frank Miller’s graphic novel, *300.* (Now that I’m finished with it, I’m open to offers for an almost new hardback.) By chance, it cost almost the same as the ticket I had for the MTC’s production of Alan Bennett’s *The History Boys.* The profound point made here is that if you take adaptation seriously, it can be a very expensive business. As this is endemically practised in contemporary cinema – really, in cinema since the olden days – one can hardly avoid it, and only be grateful when, as in the case of *Romulus, My Father,* the original memoir could be borrowed from a library and, in that of *Becoming Jane,* if you’d read the Austen oeuvre, you didn’t need to read further.

This study is essentially based on how the Miller and Bennett texts have fared in transfer to the screen, but I mention the other two in support of my case that there is no avoiding the phenomenon in the cinema, and why would one try? Further, each of the four titles draws on a different kind of anterior text, and each in its way derives from a kind of ‘history’: that is, from a set of circumstances that had their referents in the ‘real’ worlds of the past, whether of early nineteenth century England or of upcountry Victoria or an English grammar-school education in the mid-twentieth century or of a battle in the ancient world.

The ubiquitous nature of cinematic adaptation keeps leading one to ask questions about what it means to us as viewers. In the most general sense, the word ‘adaptation’ implies ‘change’, ‘alteration’, ‘accommodation’; in relation to cinema, it usually refers to the taking of work conceived in one medium (novel, play, memoir, biography, poem, TV series and so on) and reconceptualizing it in terms of cinema. The mere – mere! – act of translating it to another semiotic system, one of audio-visual moving images will enjoin on the new work all manner of ‘change’, ‘alteration’ and ‘accommodation’. (In the case of *Becoming Jane,* it is not even a matter of adapting a precursor ‘text’ – unless one counts Austen’s letters as a text – but of re-imagining a possible interlude in the life of the great novelist. It seems widely accepted that Jane Austen did engage in at least a mild flirtation with the impecunious young Irishman, Tom Lefroy, but the degree of her emotional involvement has divided commentators. There is actually a scholarly book entitled *Becoming Jane Austen,* but its author is not credited on the film, though it details Austen’s supposed feeling for Lefroy.) What film adaptation – and the word should warn us of this – *is not* and *cannot* be about is providing us with the same experience as that offered by the earlier text.

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est’ effect. In his discussion he coins the words *hypertext* and *hypotext* to characterize the ‘relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted …’ The idea of this relationship is for some of us endlessly interesting, but – it is almost wearying to stress – the different media involved inevitably ensure, at least for the attentive reader and viewer, a radical difference in responses to the two or more versions.

**The graphic novel: new challenges in adaptation**

So, having braced myself, I bought and read my first graphic novel, Miller’s *300*, and must say at the outset that it offers a new challenge, new implications, for students of film adaptation. It is easy enough to say that, in this case, it is not just words set out linearly on a page that the filmmaker is adapting: indeed the words are not set out in this way but burst out all over the page, in bubbles and rectangles and ellipses: as well, though, and more significantly, the filmmaker now has to contend with what is already a visualization of the narrative action. What, then, is the filmmaker adapting here? Is he intent on making a film that will LOOK like the graphic novel? Can he expect the soundtrack to take its cue from KUNCH! and KRAK! and the like? Will he expect actors – on film, two-dimensional representations of actual physical presences – to speak in the large simplicities of the graphic novel’s characters?

*300* is only the most recent adaptation from this source. Miller’s previous brush with the screen was on *Sin City* (2005), known in the US (and on DVD) as *Frank Miller’s Sin City*, which he co-directed with Robert Rodriguez, and which bears the credit: ‘BASED ON THE SIN CITY GRAPHIC NOVELS BY FRANK MILLER’. These bits of information perhaps point to Miller’s having the status of graphic-novel royalty, and on *300* he is co-executive producer. His are, of course, not the only graphic novels adapted to the screen in the last few years, but they are perhaps among those most concerned to find cinematic parallels to the visual styles of their originals. The Wachowski brothers wrote and directed *The Matrix* (1999) from their own graphic novel, and James McTeigue directed *V for Vendetta* (2006) from a screenplay by the Wachowskis, ‘Based on the graphic novel illustrated by David Lloyd’. The films that bear least visual resemblance to their source works include Sam Mendes’ *Road to Perdition* (2002), from a graphic novel by Max Allan Collins and Richard Piers Rayner, much revised by screenwriter David Self, and David Cronenberg’s *A History of Violence* (2005), from...
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the graphic novel by John Wagner and Vince Locke, and screenplay by John Olsen. The cinematographer on *Perdition* was the great Conrad L. Hall, who won an Oscar for his evocation of Depression-years America, but whose images belong wholly to the screen rather than to Collins and Raynor’s graphics.

I have no idea what aficionados make of the screen versions of their favourite graphic fictions. Adapted films in general tend to get rough handling from gently nurtured critics, and it is no doubt easy to be dismissive if one has grown up with Jane Austen, Henry James, Thomas Hardy and that push. Having, as I said, laid out a large sum of money for 300, I had my first sustained encounter with the mode of the graphic novel, or rather my first since childhood obsessions with the *Phantom* and *Superman* ‘comics’, as one called them then, even when they were of extended length as distinct from strips in journals and newspapers. What, I seriously wondered, is to be had from such reading? Well, to start with there is some real beauty in the art work, in its line and composition and its muted hues; even, on occasion, a look of painting, a comment which, I realize, reeks of the patronage of finding something to praise in terms of an older, more established art form. There are also moments of sly modern wit (confronted with a bizarre and bejewelled figure borne aloft by slaves, Leonidas ventures: ‘Let me guess. It’s Xerxes, isn’t it?’) and scepticism (‘There’s never been a holy man who lacked the love of gold,’ says Leonidas, as he seeks out the Ephors in their rock-top aerie). And there is no missing its wildly emphatic narrational mode. In case you might, key motifs spill over the page in sprawling red letters: PERSIANS!
or NOW as the occasion demands.

As everyone must by now know, 300 (like the old 20th Century-Fox film, The 300 Spartans, (André DeToth, 1961) which in fact inspired Miller), is the story of the doomed defence of the pass of Thermopylae in 480 B.C. by the eponymous force of Spartans, later joined by the Athenians ('philosophers and boy-lovers' as they are derisively described), against the might of the marauding Persian invaders under their king Xerxes, until they are betrayed by a hideous-looking freak who makes the Elephant Man seem like Brad Pitt. The Spartans are distinguished by their dress: black jockstraps and cloaks; the Athenians as often as not dispense with the jockstraps; and the mimisy Persians, replete with armour, jewels and cross-gartering, are much more fully clothed. There is a lot of high-sounding talk about 'the only FREEMEN the world has ever known' standing up to an army 'vast beyond imagining'... poised to devour Greece', and the whole is divided into five chapters with the headings: HONOUR, DUTY, GLORY, COMBAT and VICTORY, the last referring not to the immediate outcome of this unequal conflict but to long-term defeat of oppression by those who stand firm for higher ideals.

When one turns to the film, it is hard to resist the idea of the graphic novel's standing in relation to it as a sort of storyboard. The latter has been defined as follows: 'A film storyboard is essentially a large comic of the film or some section of the film produced beforehand to help film directors, cinematographers and television commercial advertising clients visualize the scenes and find potential problems before they occur.' Or more succinctly, and more directly to my purposes, as 'A means of pre-planning a sequence of individual shots for a film by means of a series of drawings, somewhat like a comic-strip.' Director Zack Snyder (who also co-authored the screenplay, with Kurt Johnstad and Michael B. Gordon) is on record as saying:

The beautiful thing about Frank's book ... is the prose that goes along with his drawings. It's not just an illustration; there is his poetry. The way that he structures the prose is as important as the drawings to me. I wanted to think of a way to preserve and honor his prose, as well as his imagery, in the film. This suggests a level of attachment to the original that does indeed seem to accord it the status of storyboard in relation to the film, though the storyboard is of course a practical tool, not an art form in itself.

300: overblown or a clamorous rendering of myth?

The film has been widely derided, both here and abroad. The very astute and responsible UK reviewer, Philip French, has called it 'a ridiculous rendering of the ancient world', while, in the US, the Village Voice reviewer found it 'a ponderous, plodding, visually dull picture', and indulges himself in facetiousness and sarcasm at the film's expense. It's not my intention to defend the movie on artistic grounds, but it doesn't appear to me any more foolish and tiresome than, say, Troy (also much trashed). I read the graphic novel after seeing the film and can't be sure how I'd have reacted to the film if I'd known something about Miller's work in advance. There were certainly times when it was palpably absurd and I wondered to whom it was meant to appeal: it seemed too gory for children and too silly for adults.

Not knowing the novel at the time of viewing, and having to rely on my notes made during viewing, I'd have to say that I found the tone frantically overblown, from the moment that the film's title is splashed, blood-red, on the screen. And
the language which Snyder was so concerned to 'honor' is wildly over-the-top as a voice-over intones about men 'baptised in the fire of combat', all of this emphasized by a deafening soundtrack that is alternately portentous and mind-numbing. The comic-book simplicities of the language – men are 'fired to serve, to fight, to kill, to show no pain or mercy!' – underscore the ditto of the images, as Spartans, sporting improbable six-packs, stand around languidly like sulky male models.

All this is put before us in the first few minutes, setting the tone for the rest of the film. My point is that, if it seems foolishly extravagant as a film, it may appear as something different if one accepts it as an adaptation of a graphic novel whose aim is not any kind of realism but, rather, a posturing, clamorous rendering of myth.

As far as 'plot' goes, Snyder and his co-writers have followed in slavish fashion the lines laid down by Miller. ‘A Persian messenger awaits’ – an audience, that is, with Spartan king, Leonidas (Gerard Butler) – and following rejection of his suggestion of Sparta’s ‘submission to the will of Xerxes’, an offer already turned down by those Athenian ‘boy-lovers’, he is tipped into a handy pit. Battle is now inevitable; there is consultation with the Ephors (hooded priests in touch with the Oracle and described disrespectfully as ‘diseased old mystics’) in a visual mimicking of Miller’s temple; the action then moves to Thermopylae from which the 300 plan to repel the invading hordes. ‘Into that narrow corridor we marched’, says the voice-over, for a moment recalling Tennyson (‘Into the valley of death/Rode the six hundred.’), whose commemoration of a similarly doomed enterprise has a comparably rhetorical ring. The arrival (on a golden throne carried by slaves) of Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro), who appears to be accoutered for a fancy-dress ball (baubles, bangles and jewels, much body-piercing, and a sort of gold fish-net posing pouch), is the occasion for further such echoes as Leonidas defies him with: ‘The world will know that few stood against many’. Think of Agincourt, the Battle of Britain, and Custer’s last stand, as well as the Charge of the Light Brigade: why then does 300 so signally shrivel by comparison when one recalls how such famous encounters have so moved hearts and minds? Most probably it is because of Snyder’s adherence to the two-dimensionality of Miller’s prose and images. The battle scenes, as hordes of computer-generated Persian ships fill the screen, as spears rain through the air and bodies hurtle over cliffs, are no more or less ridiculous than those in Troy or Alexander, and they have their moments of visual splendour, in the murky colours that reproduce Lynn Varley’s contribution to the graphic novel.

What is all this worth as a film for those not addicted to graphic novels? Probably not much: there is too much standing around and declaiming; there are some very strange accents (oddest of all is that of Australia’s David Wenham, as Dilios, who loses an eye but jokes about having a spare); and there is virtually no scope for acting (though Lena Headey as Queen Gorgo and Dominic West as Theron do what they can with a few tense exchanges). The over-emphatic manner of

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everything, whether of battle in full cry or of Gorgo’s haranguing the Council back in Sparta, wearies with its insistence and fails to keep at bay what the screen’s mimetic capacity in the matter of realism has led us to expect. Which brings me back to my starting-point: if I had been a reader of graphic novels, would I have made something more/else of it? All right, a film is a film, and I’ve said this many times myself in repudiating the follies of ‘fidelity’ criticism in relation to adaptation. What 300 makes me wonder, though, is whether it has acted out of a sense of obligation to its anterior text, that it has wanted to look and sound like the latter, and, if I’m not interested in the original, then that is bad luck for me because there isn’t much else to compel the attention. On the other hand, fans of the graphic-novel mode may well be fascinated to see how film deals with it: this is a film that wants to look and sound like its original, and high-minded adaptation scholars like myself can go jump. (We also ‘jump’ of course at all those endlessly literal-minded BBC TV adaptations of classic novels – and are right to do so, but that is another matter.)

The History Boys: from stage to screen

There are so few eye-witness accounts of what went on at Thermopylae that it is pointless to be asking about the film’s obligations to historical ‘truth’. Alan Bennett’s The History Boys and the film adapted from it focus on a batch of grammar-school sixth-formers who have returned to school for a further term to prepare them to take Oxbridge entrance exams. They are constantly faced with questions about history and truth; the play and film are also drawing on Bennett’s own personal history, on his own experiences as a grammar-school boy; and the same might be said of Nicholas Hytner, who directed both play and film and who gets into the film a crack at his old school, the academically elite Manchester Grammar. At one level, what is being adapted then are aspects of personal history, never mind the more conventional notion of a play’s being adapted to film.

However, the latter is the more usual basis for this sort of discussion and what is unusual is being able to see a performance of a play one week and the film version the following, which was my experience here. In the Melbourne Theatre Company’s excellent production, the play ran to three hours without inducing longeurs; the film comes in at a leaner 106 minutes. Even seeing the two so close together, I have difficulty in pinning down what’s been omitted from
the film, with the exception of a brilliantly camped-up acting out of a scene from the 1946 melodrama, *The Seventh Veil*. The play, as performed by the MTC at any rate, unfolds in a series of short theatrically contrived scenes, set in a non-realist décor of chairs and columns, and what seems like smooth transition from one brief sequence to another in the film would seem merely disjointed on the stage, where even vestigial changes of furniture, etc, take time in a way that cinematic cutting doesn’t. And whereas plays are almost nothing but dialogue, the film can make points mutely (or with a soundtrack accompaniment) through camera movement, angle and distance, through adroit cutting, through highlighting this or that aspect of *mise en scène*. Film’s mobility in space and time will normally be more apparent than that of the staged play; the latter will gain in the matter of direct personal contact of player and audience, leading, as happened in the MTC’s production, to bursts of applause at the end of episodes of particular theatrical effectiveness.

At the heart of Bennett’s play, and of the film, is a conflict for the allegiances of the history boys. Hector (Richard Griffiths), with his easy charisma, enters into and incites the spirit of their camp carry-on, inspiring them by his own immersion in both history and literature (not to mention film and Gracie Fields). His rapport with the class is challenged when the headmaster (Clive Merrison), a geography graduate from Hull, but desperate for his school to achieve the kudos of Oxfbridge, employs the youthful Irwin (Stephen Campbell Moore) to train the boys like thoroughbreds for the entrance exams. Irwin is slick and knows about tricks for passing exams, even though he looks and is ‘only five minutes older than we are’ as one boy says, and though, as it transpires, he’s not the full-package Oxford graduate – he’s ‘only’ Bristol and an Oxford Dip. Ed. The Headmaster enthuses that Irwin ‘comes highly recommended’, to which sardonic Dorothy Lintott replies, ‘So did Anne of Cleves’.

**Education and truth in The History Boys**

Both play and film focus on serious matters related to education and history. In preparation for the all-important entrance exams, truth comes to seem like a necessary casualty of originality. It’s the latter that Irwin says they need to stress: ‘What’s truth got to do with it?’ he asks rhetorically, if everyone else is writing the same unimpeachable but dull responses to, say, the holocaust. The film maintains the sense of the boys’ being under the pressure, not just of the imminent exams, but of reacting to the opposing approaches of Irwin and Hector. And in the beautifully exact performances of Stephen Campbell Moore and Richard Griffiths in these roles, each is given his due. Irwin is attractive enough to seduce the class’ would-be stud Dakin but is himself a kind of failure in his own eyes as well as in dealing with his sexual ambiguity. On the other hand, Hector, humane and humanist, is also inadequately
Film’s mobility in space and time will normally be more apparent than that of the staged play; the latter will gain in the matter of direct personal contact of player and audience. attuned to the reality of the boys’ scholastic needs, and tries to grope the boys to whom he gives a lift on his motor-bike (‘more appreciative than investigatory’, he claims). The boys themselves – and one or two of them, under the camera’s discerning eye, look a bit too old for the classroom – are written and played with a disparateness that distinguishes each from the others, but the disparateness is unobtrusively respected by each other and by Hector. There is a Muslim, a fat boy, a Christian (‘The things I do for Jesus’, he says as he accepts that it’s his turn for Hector’s bike), a Jewish gay (‘I’m small, I’m a Jew, I’m homosexual, I’m fucked’), a sporting jock, and the lubricious Dakin (Dominic Cooper) who has his eye on the Head’s secretary (‘Fiona’s my Western Front. Last night I thought we were up for the big push.’) before transferring his ambitions to Irwin. Listing them makes them seem too consciously cross-sectional, whereas what is just as interesting as their individuality is the way they constitute a group, with a more or less common goal, and the way in which Hector’s laissez-faire approach has engendered tolerance among them.

Watching the film, one can easily accept Hytner’s remark: ‘I have never known actors so in sympathy with each other, so quick to generate between each other real thought and feeling, and to erase the distinction between theatrical illusion and real life.’ No wonder he wanted to retain the original National Theatre cast for the film, and managed to do so, in spite of the dubieties of potential financiers faced with names not of household celebrity.

The film takes on all of the play’s interests, on character and thematic levels, and Hytner, acclaimed as he is for his theatrical career, reveals himself again, as he did in bringing Bennett’s The Madness of King George to the screen, a consummate film director. Whereas the play is not realistically set, film’s voracious demands for a realist *mise en scène* (demands resisted only rarely in such exceptions as *Dogville* [Lars von Trier, 2003] or in the adapting of Miller’s graphics in *300*) are met with fluid movement around several schools and colleges and several towns and cities. Bennett has said: ‘… the film, like the play, is about the school [as was his *Forty Years On*, 1968] and the outside world scarcely figures’, and the brief excursions beyond its bounds offer no more than glimpses of a wider world that seems apt for these boys about to emerge from the school cocoon. Nevertheless, Hytner has not settled for the easy realism that comes so naturally to film. Not merely does he retain the intense theatricality of the boys’ send-ups of scenes from *Now Voyager* and *Brief Encounter* (the latter, with Jewish gay Posner as Celia Johnson is oddly touching, as well as very funny), but in the film’s final sequence, in the school hall following the memorial service for Hector, he has the good traditional teacher, Mrs Lintot (Frances De La Tour, brilliantly truthful and acidulous), question the boys about their after-lives. They sit there in their school uniforms and talk of their older selves as if these are other people they happen to know. This is as little ‘realistic’ as some of the sophisticated dialogue the boys are allowed,
but as Hytner says, ‘you never doubt that it’s part of the daily banter of a Sheffield teenager’. Hytner also knows how to use a montage sequence as film shorthand for a range of activities associated with the exam preparation, a cinematic device that we’ve long since accepted as part of the conventions of realism.

More important than any of this in the film’s appeal is the sense of character complexity that is so skilfully sustained in the performances of both boys and staff. The bringing together of Hector and Irwin, with their different priorities, avoids a clichéd confrontation of two ideologies by finally suggesting that, despite weaknesses in each, they both know more about boys and education than the Headmaster will ever know (‘if this were a 1940s film, he’d be played by Raymond Huntley’ as someone remarks), and the last scene with unerring discrimination gives everyone his/her due. History may be, as sporting star Rudge (Russell Tovey) says, ‘just one fucking thing after another’, but in the weeks preceding the entrance exams the history boys have been encouraged to sort out the truth if it can be found, whether in great events or in personal matters. When the boys sing ‘Bye bye blackbird’ at Hector’s memorial service they are acknowledging an influence that made their lives richer and it is done without any sentimentality. As to Bennett who has written his own screenplay, the viewer has the sense of being in the presence of a master of character, structure, dialogue and mood; and in Hytner he seems to have found the ideal interpreter. ‘The world we had created together [i.e., with the actors] was the world we wanted to film’, wrote Hytner about transferring the play to the screen, and that doesn’t seem so very far away from Snyder’s intentions vis-à-vis Miller’s graphics.

The enduring questions of adaptation

300 and The History Boys, both concerned with history, both made by directors on record as wanting to adhere as closely as possible to the precursor text, and both adapted from works with their own legions of followers, will no doubt have found their own audiences. Those who are interested in the art of adaptation will find themselves asking different questions of each. How has Snyder dealt with the images and prose of Miller’s graphic novel? To what extent has he sought to maintain its two-dimensional impact? Does knowing the film’s source, and Snyder’s stated intentions in regard to it, make any difference to how one responds to it? Is there any point in simply saying ‘a film is a film is a film’ whatever its antecedents, and judging 300 by the same criteria as we might apply to, well, The History Boys? The latter, film as well as play, has required complexities of those involved in it and those watching it; but does this, of itself, make it any ‘better’ than 300? If we can respond to the film of The History Boys without knowing the play, is 300 just as susceptible to a virgin viewing? I may seem to be edging away from my usual position on adaptation,17 but I can’t help feeling that the graphic novel phenomenon and its translation to the screen may instigate a new element in the discourse. As far as I know there is no sustained study of the graphic novel on screen; all I am flagging here is a sense of being challenged by an approach to, and a kind of, adaptation I hadn’t considered before.

There seems to me no point in ignoring the phenomenon of adaptation and just insisting on the autonomy of film. For one thing, adaptation has been an integral element of the cinema’s history for most of its hundred-odd years. For another, it is a matter that everyone feels free to hold opinions on. And for yet another, and perhaps most persuasive, the way one art form is inspired by and goes to work on another is of itself a matter of endless fascination to many of us. We don’t have to succumb to tedious discussions of fidelity to the precursor text of whatever kind, and we don’t need to succumb to the irrelevance of finding one version of the text ‘better’ than the other, to respond to what has been characterized as ‘the process of convergence and exchange’ among the arts.18 If the experience of a work in one medium is made richer for us as a result of our knowing it in another, that is enough grounds for serious study as well as serious pleasure. •

Endnotes

1 Frank Miller (Story & Art) and Lynn Varley (Colours), 300, Dark Horse Books, Milwaukee, Oregon, 1999.
3 Le Faye, Deirdre, (ed.) Jane Austen’s Letters, OUP, Oxford, 1995. See letters to JA’s sister Cassandra on 9 January and 14 January, 1796, pp.183, for specific references to Leyfory. There are scattered throughout these letters other oblique references to him.
5 Gédard Genette, Palimpsests: Literary in the 2nd Degree (Translated by Chana Newman and Claude Doubinsky), University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln & London, 1982, p.5.
6 Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini’s American Splendor (2003) is another example; it sets out to ape the visual style of the graphic artist whose life it is depicting. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Storyboard
8 300, Production Notes, p.3.
11 Alfred, Lord Tennyson, The Charge of the Light Brigade.
12 In this relation, it could also be argued that all biopics are, in this way and in some degree, ‘adaptations’.
16 Hytner, op. cit.