

Film as Translation: The Case of Hardy

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In his fine study of modern verse drama, Denis Donoghue points out that the “poetry” in modern drama is to be found not so much on the single level of language, but in the concurrence in time of all the constituents of a particular scene, “the internal relationships ... acting together” (9). According to Donoghue, “a play is ‘poetic,’ then, when its concrete elements (plot, agency, scene, speech, gesture) continuously exhibit in their internal relationships those qualities of mutual coherence and illumination required of the words of a poem” (10). In semiological terms, these “concrete elements” may be seen as a network of different “languages”, different systems of signification functioning interactively to produce the total effect of a drama. Thus the metalanguage required to treat such a work is of necessity more complex, its forms of attentiveness more diverse (and perhaps uneasier) than in ordinary literary criticism. Much the same is true of film. In a film, the scenery, the gesture of an actor, even the background music may be considered as contrapuntal languages contributing to the “poetic” effect of the whole and requiring in the observer what one might call a cinematic rather than a purely literary consciousness.

We may posit, therefore, an essential difference or opposition between cinematic consciousness and literary consciousness, which can be brought into focus most clearly perhaps in a consideration of films based on novels. For one thing, films based on novels suggest a discrete instance of literary consciousness, representing the single language of the novels in their own plural language. Such films are in effect translations of the novels, and as such might be said to take a necessarily subordinate position *vis-à-vis* the original; where the film differs, according to this view, it may be faulted on principle. And yet this question, even with regard to literary translation, is not really simple. As Walter Benjamin has argued, “translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter ... do not so much serve the work as owe their existence to it. The life of the originals attains in them to its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering” (72). Benjamin goes on to state that “no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change” (73). Benjamin is suggesting that a translation comments critically on our changing perception of the original work in its “afterlife,” and indeed may be said to effect such a changing perception in permanent ways. As such, translation may be seen as one form of metalanguage.

Film as translation participates in this function with yet a further advantage: being a different medium altogether, it asserts its own claims to unique artistic life and independence from its source. In this respect, it corresponds to the last of Roman Jakobson's three types of translation, "inter-semiotic translation or *transmutation*" (233). According to George Steiner, such transmutation enforces the metalinguistic sense of translation as interpretation and becomes "a model of understanding and of the entire potential of statement" (261). Steiner is interested particularly in the musical settings of poetic texts, where each composition "is an act of interpretive restatement in which the verbal sign system is critically illuminated or, as the case may be, misconstrued by a non-verbal sign system with its own highly formal syntax" (419). He argues that such a musical setting "generates a construct in which the original and its 'translation'...coexist in active simultaneity" (419). When the musical setting is genuinely illuminative, "word and music perform an action of reciprocal clarification and enrichment in a structure whose centre is neither that of the verbal sign system nor that of the musical notation. As in great translation, so in a great musical setting, something is added to the original text. But that which is added 'was already there'" (Steiner 423). I would suggest that an analogous process is at work in a successful film translation.

Like any translation, however, a film asserts such claims on the original only in proportion to its power and success in terms of its own medium. It must first of all be more than a mere transmission of subject matter, for if it does not reconceive the work in its own terms, its claims on our attention must surely fade with time. Then indeed it suffers the embarrassment, like less ambitious literary translations, of being outmoded in a way the original work can never be. If a film's quality is permanent, however, it takes on a life of its own and alters our perception of the original subject. A parallel analogy might be to certain permanently enduring dramatizations of myths, which change our perception of older forms of the stories. *Æschylus*, for instance, altered forever the way we read certain parts of Homer, Chaucer altered our view of Virgil, and Shakespeare our views of both Virgil and Chaucer. One may wonder whether or not Gide, Anouilh, and Joyce have created similarly enduring changes in their own classical subjects. Of course, these myths have long been, so to speak, in the public domain, but it is conceivable that even our view of Hamlet has been altered significantly by our encounters with Coleridge, Earnest Jones, and Tom Stoppard. Significant metalinguistic comment, whether in criticism or translation, may force the

original in its afterlife to undergo such a sea-change.

On the other hand, the subjects of most novels, products of a romantic and consciously historical age that stressed originality, are generally assumed to be a kind of personal intellectual property—modern theories of the death of the author and the relative importance of the critic as reader notwithstanding. The case of Hardy may be a good test of whether film versions of modern novels attain to the more exalted sense of intersemiotic translation discussed above. We may ask if James Schlesinger's *Far from the Madding Crowd* and Roman Polanski's *Tess* have permanently affected our views of these stories, rendering them effectively into myth-like narratives of the public domain.

Both films are luxuriantly naturalistic in setting and as faithful as possible to Hardy's texts. As such, they fulfill the requirements of a conscientious translation in serving their originals. As they excel in their own terms, however, they may fulfill the even higher requirements of artistic translation, creating an enduring space for themselves. Perhaps Hardy's well known pictorialism particularly lends itself to this sort of treatment. It would be much harder, for instance, to imagine a good film of *Ulysses*, or even *USA*, though we can think of such experimental, modernist equivalents as *Citizen Kane*. The Hardy novels seem made to be filmed on realistic locations.

When we look more closely, however, the seeming ease of translation into film disappears. The collaborative nature of a film makes it of necessity less controlled than the effort of one artist might be. The layering of metaphor, which one expects to find upon close reading of a novel, is necessarily reduced, or at least made less exclusively linguistic. It would be interesting, I think, to imagine a meter of some sort counting the words of the original as the images on the screen flash by. We would see that the meter runs quite slowly in passages of dialogue, where Hardy's own language is for the most part employed, but the settings and other visual images would dissolve hundreds of Hardy's words at a stroke. The pages of description that go to describe the different valleys of the Great and Little Dairies, for instance, are accounted for by a few careful camera shots. Obviously, much of Hardy's linguistic subtlety may be lost here, unless it can be suggested somehow in purely pictorial terms. When we meet Tess' father in the novel, he is described as follows:

The pair of legs that carried him were rickety, and there was a bias in his gait which inclined him somewhat to the left of a straight line. He occasionally gave a smart nod, as if in conformation of

some opinion, though he was not thinking of anything in particular. An empty egg-basket was slung on his arm, the nap of his hat was ruffled, a patch being quite worn away at its brim where his thumb came in taking it off. (5)

The narrative language of this passage wonderfully places Durbeyfield for us. We are made aware by these few strokes of language of his business, his infirmity, his absurd posturing, and his lowly social class (why, after all, is he walking and habitually obliged to take off his cap?). The narrator informs us that although Durbeyfield may seem to outward appearance to be contemplating matters of some import, he is really thinking of nothing in particular. This is exactly the sort of narrative richness that is necessarily lost on film. But the film may compensate by lavishing its attention on pictorial details, as well as stressing such advantages as an actor's authentic sounding dialect. The attentive viewer will note as readily as the attentive reader that Durbeyfield is of the "walking" class, and that he is returning, presumably with some money to squander, from market. And whereas Hardy must go to considerable pains to reproduce the dialect he wants on the written page, the film does this almost effortlessly.

Another example of this trade-off of effects occurs in the sheepwashing scene of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The scene takes place at the end of May, and is the setting of Boldwood's first proposal of marriage to Bathsheba. The camera, of course, reproduces the details of the sheepwashing quite readily and easily creates the *ambiance* of pleasant and warm weather. But it cannot easily replace Hardy's mixture of symbolic imagery and psychology. Boldwood, we are told, has "by this time grown used to being in love" (122), so much so that he is emboldened to ask for Bathsheba's hand, feeling "himself adequate to the situation" (122). Hardy's describes the setting as follows:

The outskirts of this level water-meadow were diversified by rounded and hollow pastures, where just now every flower that was not a buttercup was a daisy.... To the north of the mead were trees, the leaves of which were new, soft, and moist, not yet being stiffened and darkened under summer sun and drought, their color being yellow beside a green—green beside a yellow. From the recesses of this knot of foliage the loud notes of three cuckoos were resounding through the still air. Boldwood went meditating down the slopes with his eyes on his boots, which the yellow pollen from the buttercups had bronzed in artistic gradations. (122)

Apart from simply setting the scene, the description here functions on a richly symbolic level. Boldwood's unaccustomed discovery of the possibility of love is reflected in nature and suggested by the profusion of flowers as well as the softness and moistness of the leaves. And indeed something of the absurdity of his situation is suggested by the notes of the cuckoos, whose song, we remember from long tradition, is "unpleasing to a married ear." A wonderful stroke is Hardy's description of the pollen on Boldwood's boots, implying the fertility in which he would like, for the first time in his life, to participate. This kind of multi-leveled suggestiveness, common in Hardy's novels, simply cannot be put on film. What the camera must do in compensation is encourage us to search for signs of this emotion in the actor's features. In other words, our search for significance here uses not so much the methods of the literary critic as those of the art historian. The film calls us to that sort of subtle visual observation.

It can be argued, I think, that in certain cases this necessary difference in the film's approach improves on the effect of the original. The scene where Gabriel Oak's dog drives the sheep to their deaths is one example. In the novel, it is the occasion of one of Hardy's frequent and sometimes inept excursions into irony:

George's son [the young dog] had done his work so thoroughly that he was considered too good a workman to live, and was, in fact, taken and tragically shot at twelve o'clock that same day—another instance of the untoward fate which so often attends dogs and other philosophers who follow out a train of reasoning to its logical conclusion, and attempt perfectly consistent conduct in a world made up so largely of compromise. (38)

The film accomplishes the dog's execution with stark realism and without comment, and the scene achieves an eerie, quiet effectiveness lacking in the novel. Where Hardy retreats uncertainly to an authorial perspective, Schlesinger lets his images make their point. The scene in the film suggests in purely visual terms that nature has somehow gone cruelly and tragically awry, and creates a disturbing mood that persists throughout the film.

In the gurgyle scene, where rain from a water spout washes out the flowers Sergeant Troy has planted on Fanny's grave, Schlesinger's camera and Hardy's prose perform differently but equally well. The novel makes the motives of Troy's subsequent departure perfectly clear:

Sanguine by nature, Troy had a power of eluding grief by simply adjourning it.... The planting of flowers on Fanny's grave had been perhaps but a species of elusion of the primary grief, and now it was as if his intention had been known and circumvented. Almost for the first time in his life, Troy, as he stood by this dismantled grave, wished himself another man. (315)

In the film, we are left to imagine this, but the gruesome image of the water pouring from the spout onto the grave and the image of Troy's anguish do not leave us in doubt about his feelings. As in the scene with the dog, the camera in purely visual terms creates an image that resonates with effective symbolism.

Indeed, in some scenes the films eliminate clumsiness or outworn conventions that mar our appreciation of the originals. Hardy's works often employ conventions of Victorian melodrama that prove obstacles for modern readers. One of the problems with *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, for instance, is a series of rather contrived coincidences that we tend to overlook in our effort to delight in the novel's many virtues. Hardy probably considered it a taut structuring device to have Car Dutch and her sister, the two brutish women who threaten Tess in her most vulnerable moments at Trantridge, reappear as fieldworkers at Flintcombe Ash. Similarly, the man from Trantridge who insults Tess at an inn in town shortly before her marriage and is punched by Angel for his trouble is the very same man who later accosts her in her helpless circumstances on the road, and then turns out to be the field boss at Flintcombe Ash. Polanski mitigates the crude effects of this last coincidence by ignoring the scene of the confrontation at the inn. The second coincidence is made more plausible and chilling. The man accosting Tess on the road is given a spontaneous, menacing quality that he lacks in the novel; the extended coincidence there renders him almost unintentionally comic to a modern reader. Polanski is particularly subtle in dealing with the two rough girls. To avoid an artificial coincidence, he does not have them reappear in the film, but he does show various country girls with similar features, as if to suggest the reappearance of the type.

The real independence of the films, however, is to be judged by whether or not they change our conception of the characters themselves. And perhaps they do. Both Schlesinger and Polanski interpret their sources from a modern perspective, and are able to present certain things that Hardy, constantly constrained by Victorian censors, could at best merely hint at. The realistic

rape or seduction scene in *Tess* (Polanski may have had his own troubles in mind here as much as Hardy's text) is an obvious example. Hardy was very nearly forced to leave the scene out of his novel altogether and his prose surely throws a delicate veil over the event: "Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive..." (62-63). In the tradition of Clarissa, Tess is not even allowed, presumably for modesty's sake, to be conscious during the rape. Polanski, on the other hand, is free not only to restore realism to the rape, but to complicate the issue in his own way by suggesting a role for Tess' innocent, confused, and budding sexuality.

All this touches on what may be the most significant contribution of both these films: the reimagining of Hardy's heroines as essentially modern women before their time. Bathsheba, as Schlesinger perceives her, is clearly a type of modern woman struggling to pursue her independence in a society reserved for and dominated by men. This is implicit, perhaps, in Hardy, but it is subsumed in other concerns. Bathsheba's tragedy in the novel results to a considerable degree from the womanly vanity in her nature, which urges her to toy with the affections of Farmer Boldwood. But Schlesinger plays this motive down by ignoring an important aspect of the early scene in the Forum. Hardy notes that the "*début* in the forum, whatever it may have been to Bathsheba as the buying and selling farmer, was unquestionably a triumph to her as a maiden" (90). The one flaw in this triumph of flirtation is her seeming inability to attract the attention of Boldwood:

The numerous evidences of her power to attract were only thrown into greater relief by a marked exception [i.e., Boldwood]. Women seem to have eyes in their ribbons for such matters as these. Bathsheba, without looking within a right angle of him, was conscious of a black sheep among the flock. (90)

This vanity is the real origin of her momentous prank of sending Boldwood the valentine card. While Schlesinger has Bathsheba's servants discuss the matter of Boldwood's indifference to women, as if to suggest something of the challenge it offered her, the personal element of the slight to her vanity is ignored. The result is to emphasize her more modern, feminist motives. Polanski's *Tess* too is a more modern woman than in Hardy. Her actions seem rather the result of independence of mind than innocent submission to the crass expectations of her society. "Did it never strike your mind," she

defiantly retorts to Alec in a line from the novel which the film emphasizes, “that what every woman says some women may feel” (65)? When she does behave submissively to Angel later in the film, Polanski gives the scene a feminist edge that a Victorian reader would not have recognized.

This reconceiving of the characters in the films creates certain problems however. Whereas Alec d’Urburville is something of a stock Victorian cad in the novel and thus quite clearly villainous to its intended audience (Hardy’s insistence on his association with the devil seems completely natural in this context), Polanski’s d’Urburville, seen in what is in effect a modern psychological setting, is a much more ambiguous figure. To a modern audience, he has a pleasant side that will not be overwhelmed (even with the help of slicked hair and side-whiskers) by his conventional Victorian role as the devil of the story. The danger of Alec remaining too sympathetic may be one reason Polanski left out the rather artificial scenes of his religious conversion. In any event, Tess’ adamant refusals of his continuing romantic suit—her ultimate allegiance must be, after all, to the outlines of the well-known plot—strike us, as they do Alec himself, as more perverse than natural. Similarly, Angel Clair’s virtues, especially when united with what a modern audience perceives as priggish high-mindedness, fail to move us. Such ambiguities may be implicit in Hardy’s novel—certainly Angel does not live up to the suggestions of his name in most respects—but as readers willing to be involved in the necessary archeology of feeling and imagination, we must accept Hardy’s characters ultimately as they were aimed at a Victorian audience. Thus as readers we know that Bathsheba’s independence is undone by her womanly vanity, and that for Tess there was really no question of preferring the villainous Alec to the morally virtuous Angel. Hardy’s Tess, as he was careful to indicate, was an outraged “pure woman” before she was an outraged woman. The films, however, as independent modern reworkings of the stories, do not enforce these choices, and this creates new and modern tensions in the old plots.

I do not intend to suggest that such differences are necessarily undesirable, or without precedent. Any translation is to some degree a comment on the original work, an imaginative reassessment of its possibilities. When Æschylus took up and modernized the story of Agamemnon, he added psychological concerns, typical of his own day and alien to Homer’s, which permanently changed man’s view of the myth and of Æschylus’ source in the *Odyssey*. The tradition of the myth, in T.S. Eliot’s sense, was at once joined and irremediably altered. Its dynamic relations as part of the western imagination

changed. As Steiner argues, following Eliot, even our reading of Shakespeare and Chaucer involves a certain intralingual translation into an idiom of modern understanding (28). “Every generation,” he reminds us, “retranslates the classics, out of a vital compulsion for immediacy and precise echo” (29-30). The intersemiotic translation of film operates out of a similar compulsion. Whether or not the film versions of Hardy will effect much of a change in our own view of his work is, of course, debatable—it is simply too early to tell—but I think in some ways they will, and if so, it will prove not so much a distortion of Hardy’s intellectual property as testimony and tribute to the enduring quality of his imaginative genius.

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