

**Eötvös Loránd University
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THESES

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**CHARACTER FUNCTIONS IN NOVEL AND FILM:
AN ANALYSIS OF THREE HENRY JAMES NOVELS AND THEIR
FILM ADAPTATIONS**

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In my dissertation I compare three Henry James works, *The Europeans* (1878), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The Golden Bowl* (1904) and their film adaptations. In two cases (*The Europeans*, *The Golden Bowl*) the adaptation is the work of Ismail Merchant and James Ivory, the renowned producer – director duo, while in the case of *The Portrait of a Lady* I am dealing with Jane Campion’s adaptation of the novel.

The main focus of my work is the examination of the changes in the narratives that have been carried out during the adaptation process, as well as the examination of the reasons for the changes. This task necessitated the thorough examination of the literature on adaptation theories, and, due to the literature’s abundance and contradictory nature, the choice and even the development of one’s own comparative method. As the title of my work implies, I am examining the characters’ original and modified narrative functions to keep track of the effected alterations.

The term “character function” is used in a special sense in my work, which is partly based on Brian McFarlane’s approach outlined in his work *Novel to Film* (1996).

McFarlane himself primarily relies on Roland Barthes’ narrative theory and applies it to the comparison of novels and films. As it is known, Barthes distinguishes two main groups of functions in any narrative: distributional functions and integrational functions, which are also called functions proper and indices, respectively. By functions proper Barthes and McFarlane mean actions and events in the narrative, while indices comprise, for example, notations of atmosphere, or representations of place (13).

Functions proper can be further divided into cardinal functions (nuclei) and catalysers. Cardinal functions open up alternatives in the story, while catalysers are small

actions, for example, laying a table at which an important conversation is to take place (14).

McFarlane's ultimate aim with the above taxonomy is to determine what elements of a novel are subject to adaptation proper, and which ones are transferred directly into film. As for the distinction between transfer and adaptation, he says the following: "the transferable elements of the novel are those that are not tied to one or other semiotic system" (20), while for adaptation he applies Dudley Andrew's definition: "the matching of the cinematic sign system to a prior achievement in some other system" (qtd. in McFarlane 21). McFarlane's view is that cardinal functions are transferable, while indices are more broadly open to adaptation than to the directness of transfer (21).

I have long found McFarlane's theory problematic, and try to prove in my work that his cardinal functions do not go intact from the text to the screen. As for the distinction between adaptation and transfer, my view is that film can only use the cinematic sign system, whatever information is inferred by a viewer from a film it was projected through cinematic signs, which means that cardinal functions are also projected through cinematic signs. All in all, I find the distinction between transfer and adaptation ambiguous, at least in this form.

McFarlane's major inspiration, Barthes, had already acknowledged that his concept of cardinal functions was based on Vladimir Propp's theory of narratology (qtd. in McFarlane 24). Propp's landmark work, *The Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928) interprets function as "an act of character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of action" (8).

Propp's functions are much less concrete than McFarlane's cardinal functions. The acts of characters are described without any context in them, there is no time base to refer to, there is no reference to geographical locations, to social status, to character traits other than the ones necessary for fulfilling the function in the story. As for these functions' transferability, Propp already found them intact in the 100 Russian fairy tales he used as working material. Alan Dundes in his introduction to the second American edition of Propp's work then suggests that these patterns manifest themselves "in a variety of cultural materials" (3) and concludes that they could be useful in analysing the structure of various literary forms or films. My point is that what is actually transferred from novel to film is something similar to these Proppean functions.

McFarlane's other reason for the examination of cardinal functions, apart from their supposed transferability, is that with their help "one could determine whether the film-maker has aimed to preserve the underlying structure of the original or radically to rework it" (25). In my work I demonstrate that if some of McFarlane's cardinal functions are changed, or even omitted, we do not necessarily perceive a radical change. Changes in functions in the Proppean sense, however, would certainly generate a film perceived by most viewers as having no connections with the novel, or at least one seriously deviating from it.

In my comparisons of novel and film I use the word function in a modified sense, though maintaining the main elements of Propp's definition. For me, function is made up by the acts of one character, defined from the point of view of another major character and their significance for the course of action.

The difference between the original and my definition is twofold:

1. Acts are considered from all the other major characters' points of view. The reason for the change is that in a fairy tale all actions are viewed from the hero's point of view. As novels tend to be more complex, the characters often fulfil different functions in their different relationships.

2. Instead of a single act of one character I am talking about "acts" of a character – contrary to fairy tales, one function is performed through several acts in a novel.

Similarly to Propp's functions, if one of these functions is changed, we certainly have an intense sense of betrayal, sometimes even outrage, we feel we are not treated to the story we were promised by a reference to the book and author. For this reason I find the examination of these Proppean-type functions possible and fruitful, something that can constitute part of the methodology applied when comparing novel to film.

Besides the above functions I have also found the introduction of secondary functions necessary. These carry some relevant information in connection with the characters, but changes in them do not steer the fabula into a new direction. These functions are not the same as McFarlane's catalysts, since the latter very often do not carry any relevant information about the characters.

McFarlane also suggests that the identification of mythic patterns in the original text and its film adaptation might be worthwhile, for, according to him, cardinal functions *and* mythic patterns are both transferred and not adapted (25). This I have found quite natural, since myths are constituted by the streamlined, pure functions of the involved characters that are very similar to cardinal functions. The identification of functions has helped me to reveal the mythic patterns behind all the three novels and films I have examined.

The Europeans and *The Portrait of a Lady* strengthen the mythical patterns of the original texts. They stress the eternal elements of the base plot, which in the first case is the myth of a youth partly changing an ill-functioning society, partly saving someone from it, whereas in the second case it is a young woman's search for the meaning of life.

The more time-bound elements, for example, the criticism of the aesthetic elements in Eugenia's behaviour, are less in focus, the reason for which is obvious: the issue is of less importance for 20-21st century viewers than it was for James's contemporaries. Another time-specific element, the presentation and criticism of a Puritanical lifestyle, however, did receive emphasis; even added scenes are included to stress the theme. Although director and producer duo Ismail Merchant and James Ivory never said that this extra attention was intentional, one still suspects a willingness to appeal to large American audiences behind the step, as those are likely to be pleased by references to their moral firmness and to the roots of their super-power status.

In *The Golden Bowl's* case the mythical patterns are less conspicuous; one can say that several myths are mixed in this novel in fragmental forms. Some of the myth fragments also appear in the film, but there they fail to integrate into a whole, which I consider the prime reason behind its failure.

From the above it is already apparent that the analysis of changes in character functions led me to the examination of motives behind the changes. Besides, I also wanted to see how the changes in functions had been achieved. Most drastic changes are effected by adding extra scenes, but I try to demonstrate that various dramatization methods, such as dialogisation and a tool I have labelled "unfolding", also play an important role. So does "style": the systematic use of cinematic devices, for example,

shots, sound effects, editing etc. David Bordwell notes that in narrative films “syuzhet and style coexist and interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator’s construction of the fabula” (53). This process Bordwell calls narration. Since style also has a capacity to narrate, it is also able to indicate changes in character functions. For this reason I have found that a close examination of the filmic tools applied in each scene of each film is inevitable if I want to register all the changes.

The original question, however, that led me to the problem of adaptation theories was the following: why did the 1980s, 1990s see an unprecedented surge in demand for Henry James-based screenplays? In order to answer this question, the heritage¹ and post-heritage films’ political and economic background had to be examined, as the James adaptations are classified as such films. In this field I have found several comprehensive studies, among which there is a consensus that the heritage film is a reaction to the social neo-conservatism and economic neo-liberalism of the Thatcher government, while the post-heritage film is an answer to heritage film criticism.

Secondly, the heritage film’s trademark characteristics had to be identified, an issue which has remained controversial despite the high number of works concerned with it. In my work I make an attempt to prove that the heritage film’s heavy reliance on sight reinforces a forward-pointing trend in the history of film adaptations, as it emphasises that the adaptation is a piece of art in a new genre with its own semiotic system.

¹ The heritage film is a typical film of the 1980s, early 1990s in Britain. Most heritage films are based on novels that constitute part of the literary canon, they deal with the problems of the top echelons of society, tend to use well-educated actors with accomplished accents, and devote much attention to sight: to beautiful interiors and scenery (*British Cinema in the 1980s* 73-98).

Thirdly, I also had to consider and attempt to identify those characteristics of James's fiction that are likely to have attracted heritage-filmmakers. In this field research is scarce, and the answers given are general and could basically apply to any author.

I have found that closeness to myth is one great possibility for film to attract big audiences, and is a major source of heritage film success. Respected, canonised Henry James demonstrates the same affinity for myth/not much displaced myth or romance, thus, regarding their set of characters, and what follows from that, their structure (the causal direction might be the reverse), his work can be regarded as perfect raw material for heritage filmmakers. Skilled scriptwriters then could easily cope with the difficulties deriving from James peculiar style, and the genre of film in itself does away with a lot of James's sometimes tormenting ambiguity.

The large-scale success that avoided James in his life has so far avoided the films based on his texts as well. I expect adaptation attempts to continue though. As the heritage and post-heritage movements proved the compatibility of box office success and critical acclaim², a feat many had already thought impossible to achieve, film producers and directors are likely to continue experimenting with these two movements' favourite source materials.

² We only have to think of the double success of *Howards End*, another Merchant-Ivory work, which is also widely regarded as a quintessential heritage film.

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