The Interior Crisis: Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Novel and Film

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In an interview with novelist and poet Michael Ondaatje, novelist and poet David Malouf made a distinction between novel and film that identifies a frequent complaint that is central to the debate about whether or not film is a more limited art form than novel. Malouf said:

> What I'm interested in, in books, is that interior world. But people often look at the books and say, Oh, these will make great films, because they see that minute by minute there's a visual sense working there. And you have to keep saying to them, no, there's nothing there that finally matters that can be presented in a film.[1]

Linda Seger echoes this, not from the viewpoint of a novelist but from that of a successful scriptwriter. In her practical guide to scriptwriting, Seger says 'Film doesn't give us an interior look at a character. A novel does'.[2] Apart from the loss of the novelist's style,[3] this is the single strongest complaint lovers of the novel and novelists themselves make against film: film, which favours visible action, cannot get at the psychological depths that the novel can.

But is this a fair complaint? One way to test this is to compare a scene of 'interiority' in a novel with such a scene in an adaptation of the novel that is patently attempting 'fidelity'. The grounds for testing for fidelity are not difficult: when a film takes over most of the plot incidents, especially the ending, most of the characters and their characteristics, as well as the novel's historical period, a relatively faithful adaptation is intended. To compare a film adaptation with a source novel for the purpose of exploring each

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art form is not to commit the 'fidelity fallacy' so much deplored by McFarlane.[4] And so it is safe to take Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*[5] and compare it with the 'faithful' adaptation written and directed by Christopher Hampton in 1996.[6]

Consider the sequence in both novel and film in which Winnie Verloc kills her husband. This sequence is a mixture of thought, feeling and, luckily for the film, many actions.

The murder takes place in Chapter XI of the novel, although some preparation concerning Winnie begins earlier. In Chapter XI the narrator is fully ironic towards double agent Adolf Verloc and sympathetic to Winnie. Verloc's inner states are described and analysed by the narrator or signified by gesture and direct speech. At the beginning of the Chapter Verloc's inner states are the more detailed, while Winnie's are dominant only in the latter part of the chapter.

Basically, Verloc is not an evil man; but he is obtusely self-centred, patronising of Winnie, self-pitying, self-justifying, and at times grandiose about his past achievements. This is enough for a calamity, however unintended, for those around him. The narrator tells us, 'Mr Verloc never meant Stevie [Winnie's mentally handicapped brother] to perish with such abrupt violence [by a bomb Verloc planted on him to blow up Greenwich Observatory]. He did not mean him to perish at all'. But then the narrator imputes this self-centred and callous thought to Verloc: 'Stevie dead was a much greater nuisance than ever he had been when alive' (p.229). This self-centredness makes itself manifest in his dialogue with Winnie. His comments include such self-pitying, petulant remarks to the silent Winnie, sitting immobilised, her hands over her face, as: 'I made myself ill thinking how to break it to you. I sat for hours in the little parlour of the Cheshire Cheese thinking over the best way. You understand I never meant any harm to come to that boy' (p.231). He outdoes his obtuseness, his inability to understand Winnie's feelings, with 'Do be reasonable, Winnie. What would it have been if you had lost me?' (p.234); and later, he surpasses this with a crude and cruel accusation: 'Don't you make any mistake about it: if you will have it that I killed the boy, then you've killed him as much as I' (p.258). After collapsing into the sofa aware

only of his own need for creature comforts, 'reposing in that pathetic condition of optimism induced by excess of fatigue' (p.261), Verloc actually thinks he can try his charms: ' "Come here", he said in a peculiar tone, which might have been the tone of brutality, but was intimately known to Mrs Verloc as the note of wooing' (p.262). Within seconds Winnie stabs him with the carving knife dutifully laid out with the roast beef for his evening meal (pp.262–3).

Throughout most of the chapter, Verloc's dialogue and his action, which twice include his insensitive attention to yet another of his creature comforts, the ravenous eating of the meat laid out for him (pp.231–2, 253), are counterpointed by Winnie's few gestures, her very few comments, and a considerable amount of narratorial description of her inner crisis. Verloc's inner states are manifest. His being 'not much of a psychologist' (p.229); his lack of profundity, yet also, somewhat ironically stated, his humanity; his 'marital indulgence' (p.233) and his need for petty prestige and self-pride (pp.235–38)—all there is of Verloc is expressed in this scene by his gestures and self-revealing dialogue, explanatory of why he just cannot understand Winnie's grief. The narratorial analysis reinforces gesture and dialogue, but hardly develops it. In this respect, Verloc—the outer and the inner man—are easy to transpose from the silent graphemes on the page of a novel to film's dialogue and visible action.

Yet film can use so much more than dialogue and action. For instance, it can instantiate nonverbally (and instantaneously) much about a character in the apt casting of an actor. This is a contentious point for novel lovers. The casting fixes a certain character as a certain actor and that actor may be very different from what the reader with his 'mind's eye' has been envisaging. Indeed, each reader may well have his own visual conception of a character and no two visual conceptions may agree. Moreover a reader may feel his conception is violated and pre-empted forever by film. Leon Edel, partisan of the novel and great Henry James scholar, regrets the loss of the 'mind's eye' and feels film is killing it. He concludes

> ... when a novel gives us the thinking man as well as the acting

> man, it makes possible an extraordinary enlargement of life. We know only our own thoughts, never the thoughts of others. Fiction, by invoking the use of the verbal imagination—that is, by making us active and imaginative readers, rather than inert picture-watchers —gives us the magical sense of being in relation with the world and with our fellow men and in ways that we can only rarely be, even though we are alone in a room with a book.[7]

However, apt casting can give us a character to 'read' and interpret just as we do in life. And the casting of Bob Hoskins as Verloc is apt. Although Hoskins is not taller than Stevie as in the novel, he is able to reveal the character of Verloc as part of his physical 'presence' in the film. His Verloc has an infantile quality about him, a baby-like pudginess, the legacy of his lazy self-indulgence. (Conrad describes Verloc as 'burly in a fat-pig style' (p.13)). He is sexually unattractive and the glimpses given of his and Winnie's sex life (not dealt with openly in the novel) show Winnie reaffirming her love for Stevie and promoting Stevie to Verloc before their tepid love making, signifying both more habitual creature comfort for Verloc and Winnie's willing keeping of her 'bargain'—Verloc for Stevie's sake.

Visually—as a dark figure making sluggish progress in the dark, muddy, crowded streets of Soho, his small round hat emphasising his small head on a plump body; his dwarfed presence amid the imposing pillars and grandeur of the Embassy he spies for; his small feet almost unable to touch the ground when he sits on a huge sofa in the Ambassador's chambers—Verloc seems insignificant in the viewer's eyes, even pathetic. His self-justifying bragging to Winnie in the murder scene (he repeats the injustices done by the Ambassador to so valuable an agent as himself, as in the novel (pp.237–39), amply and ironically manifests his seething resentment, his unearned grandiosity and self-centred vanity as a secret agent, and explains unambiguously his callous use of Stevie and his inability to understand Winnie's grief. Physically he dominates only in his sleazy shop and the confined space of his living quarters—partly because he seldom removes his hat and coat and partly because Winnie is attentive to him. But he is an alien, dark figure amid the warm colours of their domestic set-up.

The close-ups of Verloc's eating in the murder scene stress his plump, sagging face and loose appetitive mouth, capable of violent biting; and the close-ups reinforce the manifestation of him as self-centred to the point of callousness. To face a meal of meat after he knows the manner of Stevie's fate is to be uncannily focused on self and in a position as ironic in the film as in the novel.

Altogether the film, with minor adjustments, gives the inner and the outer Verloc, as does Conrad. One might even say that the film's Verloc has an advantage: his appearance and his voice constitute a definitive and fully characterised Verloc, whereas the Verloc that the novel unfolds may change on the reader's mental screen and is not fully stable, for reading is so frequently reading and revising one's understanding, often right to the end of a novel. There is no novelistic reason for this instability as Verloc does not develop as Winnie does; and his inner life is not an unfolding mystery. Verloc's transposition to film demonstrates that there need not necessarily be a deficit in the transposition of a character and its character to film.

Conrad's treatment of Winnie, however, is quite different from that of Verloc. In the murder scene her gestures and speech are accompanied by copious analysis of her inner states. When she is first introduced in the novel, we know Winnie as dark haired, dark eyed, and with a touch of her reputed 'French descent' about her. She is full busted, tight bodiced and broad hipped. In her marriage she is of 'unfathomable reserve', and is willing to sell the shop's 'shady wares' with 'unfathomable indifference' (pp.5–6). We know that she is no shrinking violet. We know that in the past she has fiercely defended Stevie against her father's violence: 'She could not bear to see the boy hurt. It maddened her. As a little girl she had often faced with blazing eyes the irascible licensed victualler in defence of her brother'. The narrator adds, 'Nothing in Mrs Verloc's appearance could lead one to suppose she was capable of a passionate demonstration' (p.38). It is apparent that her marriage bargain is related to her 'maternal vigilance' (p.10).

Chapter IX prepares for the murder in Chapter XI: the narrator

describes Winnie's limited actions. Firstly she eavesdrops on Chief Inspector Heat and her husband, and hears Stevie's dreadful fate. The narrator describes her physical appearance at this moment thus: '... her lips were blue, her hands cold as ice, and her pale face, in which the two eyes seemed like two black holes, felt to her as if it were enveloped in flames' (pp.209–10). Her next action is sudden, followed by gestures aptly expressive of her turmoil, suitable for both novel and film:

> Mrs Verloc sprang up suddenly from her crouching position, and stopping her ears, reeled to and fro between the counter and the shelves on the wall towards the chair. Her crazed eyes noted the sporting sheet left by the Chief Inspector, and as she knocked herself against the counter, she snatched it up, fell into the chair, tore the optimistic rosy sheet right across in trying to open it, then flung it on the floor (p.210).

These expressive gestures are easily read as her shock and the beginnings of her disorienting and harrowing grief—and these gestures can be easily transposed to film. But the chapter ends with Winnie's face covered by her hands and the narrator describing her inner state, not necessarily accurately indicated by her gesture:

> She sat rigidly erect .... The palms of her hands were pressed convulsively to her face, with the tips of the fingers contracted against the forehead, as though the skin had been a mask which she was ready to tear off violently.

The narrator analyses thus:

> The perfect immobility of her pose expressed the agitation of rage and despair, all the potential violence of tragic passions, better than any shallow display of shrieks, with the beating of a distracted head against the walls, could have done (p.212).

'Rage and despair' are Winnie's emotions, while her outward demeanour is that of immobility. Her feelings are so deep that they are a threat: they betoken the 'potential violence of tragic passions'. There is no exterior indication of this, unless it is her shuddering when Verloc comes near and says, 'I didn't mean any harm to come to the boy', or when he confesses, 'I didn't feel

particularly gay sitting there [in the Cheshire Cheese] and thinking of you' (p.231); or when he piles obtuseness on obtuseness with, 'Come. This won't bring him back' (p.234), referring to her immobility and her hands on her face. She shudders again when he tells her to pull herself together (p.240). When he says, 'Can't be helped', her breast heaves 'convulsively' (pp.232–3). However, when he insensitively says, 'You might look at a fellow', Winnie does finally speak: 'I don't want to look at you as long as I live' (p.233). This exteriorises some of the rage the narrator describes as her first reactions.

Her first violent action in the murder scene is after Verloc grabs her wrists to try to pull her hands from her face. She suddenly stiffens, tears herself away from him, and runs into the kitchen to sit where Stevie used to sit drawing circles 'suggesting chaos and eternity' (p.237), says the narrator in a Conradian hint of the novel's pessimism. Her arms are folded on the table and her head is lying on her arms. Her silence as she grieves and the length of time she sits at Stevie's place are eloquent. Her grief now is manifest, not her rage.

Winnie's next sudden movement is after Verloc justifies himself as being picked on by Mr Vladimir, a 'silly, jeering dangerous brute', although Verloc is so valuable an agent. He avows unconscionably: 'Look here! Some of the highest in the land got to thank me for walking on their two legs to this day. That's the man you've got married to, my girl!' (p.238). At the mention of marriage, Winnie sits up. When he asks if she understands his situation, she replies without looking at him, 'No.... What are you talking about?' (p.240).

Extensive narratorial analysis of what Winnie feels but does not show, by speech or gesture, follows:

> ... the lamentable circumstances of Stevie's end, which to Mr Verloc's mind had only an episodic character, as part of a greater disaster, dried her tears at their very source. It was the effect of a white-hot iron drawn across her eyes; at the same time her heart, hardened and chilled into a lump of ice, kept her body in an inward shudder, set her features into a frozen, contemplative immobility *addressed to a whitewashed wall with no writing on it* [my italics]. The exigencies

> of Mrs Verloc's temperament, which, when stripped of its philosophical reserve, was material and violent, forced her to roll a series of thoughts in her motionless head. These thoughts were rather imagined than expressed. Mrs Verloc was a woman of singularly few words, either for public or private use. With the rage and dismay of a betrayed woman, she reviewed the tenor of her life in visions concerned mostly with Stevie's difficult existence from its earliest days (p.241).

Significantly, and with none of the irony used towards Verloc, the omniscient narrator comments on Winnie's character: 'It was a life of single purpose and of a noble unity of inspiration, like those rare lives that have left their mark in the thoughts and feelings of mankind' (pp.241–42).

Winnie recalls all the little deeds done for Stevie and how she protected him from her father's violence; she recalls an admirer she preferred to Verloc—but Verloc was willing to give a home to Stevie. She then recalls her seven years of security for Stevie with Verloc, 'loyally paid for on her own part', and her trust and strict propriety. This was 'security growing into confidence, into a domestic feeling, stagnant and deep like a placid pool, whose guarded surface hardly shuddered on the occasional passage of Comrade Ossipon ...' (p.243).

Her eyes, however, remain 'extremely dilated' as she recalls her feelings watching Verloc and Stevie walk together up Brett Street. It gave her existence 'continuity of feeling and tenacity of purpose', comments the narrator, telling what Winnie hardly knows. But what Winnie feels in recollecting this scene evokes (however improbably) a murmur, 'Might have been father and son'. In spite of Verloc's interjection she keeps staring at the blank whitewashed wall. As in Melville's *Bartleby*, the blank wall—with no Biblical writing on it—gives no answer, nor comfort. It here suggests the 'perfidy of a trusted providence' (pp.243–44)—the narrator again suggesting a philosophic background to the tale that Winnie cannot know but can feel; and which is amplified by the references to Stevie's innocent circle drawings of 'chaos and eternity' (p.237)—a paradigm of Conradian pessimism invested in Winnie's and Stevie's situation.

Winnie's thoughts progress to the view that Verloc murdered Stevie, at which she is still and silent, 'her cheeks blanched', 'her lips ashy', her eyes tearless, her teeth clenched. The thought of the murder of Stevie becomes 'maddening'; 'It was in her bones, in the roots of her hair' (p.246).

Winnie next mutters to the blank wall about Verloc: 'And I thought he had caught a cold'. When Verloc says, 'It was nothing', she turns to stare at him. Then, when he says 'You couldn't know', she responds 'as if a corpse had spoken: "I couldn't"'. After another bout of self-justification, he looks into Winnie's eyes; they are very enlarged and of 'unfathomable depths'. When he hints of their married affection, her 'ghastly and motionless face' is covered by an ominous faint flush (pp.247–48).

The narrator warns that Winnie's mind was 'not sound'; she could think only that Verloc had taken Stevie away to kill him. Sometimes, with 'black care and impenetrable attention', she watches Verloc as he makes his plans to escape gaol or retribution (p.249). When he plans to go abroad, she can only ask automatically, 'And what of Stevie?'—and suddenly realise both her total loss and her freedom: 'There was no need for her now to stay there ...'. One of her few quick acts in this scene is to rise as if 'by a spring' and start to move away, only to realise that nothing in existence holds her. She feels a sexual repulsion now from Verloc, an 'excessive fear of being approached and touched by that man' (pp.251–52). Winnie goes upstairs, descends in her street clothes and veil to go out, she does not know where. Her thoughts now, says the narrator, take on 'an insane logic'. She thinks Verloc will never let her go (p.256).

At his dragging the veil from her in anger, she is still 'unreadable'. But eventually she moves to leave just as Verloc is comfortably on the sofa; he 'wallowed on his back'. Winnie lingers for reasons the narrator states but which are still subliminal for her:

> There must have been something imperfect in Mrs. Verloc's sentiment of regained freedom.... This woman capable of a bargain the mere suspicion of which would have been infinitely shocking to Mr. Verloc's ideas of love, remained irresolute, as if scrupulously

aware of something wanting on her part for the formal closing of the transaction (p.259).

At Verloc's mention of Greenwich Park, she has her vision of Stevie's actual fate—so blown to bits that he had to be shovelled up (p.260). She closes her eyes during her 'vision', then opens them and with new found animation, is no longer irresolute. 'Mrs. Verloc's doubts as to the end of the bargain no longer existed; her wits, no longer disconnected, were working under the control of her will'. At this crucial moment, Verloc calls Winnie to the sofa. 'She commanded her wits now ... she felt herself to be in an almost preternaturally perfect control of every fibre of her body. It was all her own, because the bargain was at an end .... She had become cunning.... She did not wish that man to change his position on the sofa which was very suitable to the circumstances' (p.261). When Verloc says, 'Come here', and Winnie recognises his 'note of wooing' (p.262), she instantly moves to him, knife in hand. And in an uncanny resemblance to Stevie (in a novel that adverts to Cesare Lombroso's studies in physiognomy and criminality (p.285), and which has Conrad's own version of degenerate types in the anarchists), she stabs Verloc: 'She had become a free woman with a perfection of freedom which left her nothing to desire and absolutely nothing to do, since Stevie's urgent claim on her devotion no longer existed. Mrs. Verloc, who thought in images, was not troubled now by visions, because she did not think at all' (p.263). Nothing is what she is left with. Only when she sees and hears the trickling of blood does she show anxiety. She then shrieks and rushes to the door (p.265). End of chapter.

Conrad's narrator gives Winnie only a few lines of speech but many meaningful gestures that would be ambiguous without the description of Winnie's thoughts and feelings plus omniscient narratorial analysis. Even the murder itself is not totally comprehensible without the suggestion, firstly, that the very ground of Winnie's being has given way with Stevie's death—it 'left her nothing to desire and absolutely nothing to do' (p.263); and, secondly, that her bargain as Verloc's wife, a sexually repugnant bargain after all, is betrayed. Not only does she murder

Verloc after his attempt to woo her, she later explains the murder to Ossipon as provoked by his wooing (p.290).

How does the murder scene in the film recover the elements of the novel, dialogue, gesture and narratorial analysis of thought and feeling, that are crucial to the full understanding of Winnie's killing of Verloc? The casting of Patricia Arquette does not help. She is almost never totally 'in character' or 'in accent'; but this is hardly her fault. Conrad's Winnie is dark and full-bodied, a little exotic, and her 'maternal vigilance' (p.10) on Stevie's behalf is very intense, as it has been since she was the 'older sister' protecting Stevie fiercely from their father's violence, so fiercely at times her father thought 'she was a wicked she-devil' (p.242).

The reader of the novel is aware of depths in Winnie, her disappointment in love, her potential for tough decisions, her loyalty to Verloc in spite of Ossipon's attempts at flirtation, her potential for violence, her emptiness at the destruction of the very purpose of her life—however unfathomable her demeanour with Verloc or as she sits selling Verloc's shady wares.

Arquette's Winnie is a beautiful, refined, cool, albeit sallow, blonde. Her voice is nearly always a whining or vacant monotone. She gives the impression of languor rather than of any pent up resentment, conflict or disappointment, even though Philip Glass's sensitive score augments her feelings at times. It is somewhat of a surprise that she is capable of coarse toughness with her mother in the scene in the carriage when the mother departs from the Verloc household. Winnie's dialogue, close to that of the novel, consists of scolding her mother with, 'This is all your idea, Mother, so I don't know why you're carrying on'. She defends her selling shady wares with 'Steady business'. She knows the power of her sexual charms with Verloc, and when her mother worries that Verloc might lose patience with Stevie, Winnie indelicately says, 'He'd have to get tired of me first'. She refers to her father's treatment of Stevie with 'Dad was a brute', and 'Well, takin' his belt off to him was not gonna make him any cleverer, was it?'. When Stevie leaps off the carriage, she is quite strict with him and threatens to tell Verloc in order to cow him into submission.

It is also somewhat of a surprise when Arquette's Winnie

shows such excessive tenderness to Stevie—as when they walk to a cab in the rain; or when she sees Stevie walk off with Verloc and mutters in utter serenity, 'Like father and son'. Arquette's casting and Hampton's directing do not allow her to draw out a continuity of character in Winnie that comes from deep within—from what the novel's narrator calls her 'life of single purpose and of a noble unity' (p.242), which ties together her toughness and tenderness and future violence. A flashback to a scene of violence with the father and Winnie's 'she-devil' protectiveness would have helped signal Winnie's depth of feeling and explain her future violence.

It is not a surprise, however, that Arquette's Winnie comes alive with shock and disorienting grief once she comprehends what Heat and Verloc are talking about. As a visible signal that her marriage bargain is over, Winnie tries to take off her wedding ring, a metonymical gesture not in the novel. (Conrad does employ the ring in this scene in the novel, but to emphasise Winnie's loyalty to her marriage bargain and the contrast of her goodness with the sordidness of Verloc: 'In that shop of shady wares fitted with deal shelves painted a dull brown, which seemed to devour the sheen of the light, Mrs Verloc's left hand glittered exceedingly with the untarnished glory of a piece from some splendid treasure of jewels, dropped in a dustbin' (p.213).) She cannot remove it—thus leaving the finality of the breaking of her bargain, as in the novel, as the killing of Verloc. She manages to remove the ring only when she drowns herself from the Channel boat, leaving the ring behind on a bench, as in the novel, as the unambiguous token of her repudiation of her marriage and thus her despair of life (made the worse by the betrayal of her by Ossipon).

After listening to Verloc's obtuse self-justification and even his shifting of the blame to her, she says very little and seems inscrutable. Eventually, when she can speak at length, she says scornfully, 'I thought you were like father and son, but you were just taking him away from me to murder him. And there was I sure you'd come home with a cold'. She then closes her eyes in contempt. This is a minute but significant gesture, the microdramatics of the face carrying deep meaning and making

it visible and unambiguous.

When Verloc contemplates escaping abroad, as in the novel, Winnie asks, 'What about Stevie?'. This suggests, in both novel and film, a deep inner state—her indissoluble link to Stevie as irrevocably part of her being. It is a crisis: she realises he is gone forever. Her rushing upstairs and beginning to pack (while Verloc downstairs helps himself to another slice of beef) signifies a further stage in the breaking of her bargain. In a poignant scene not in the novel that recalls Stevie when he touches the toys and papers in his drawer, a detail shot shows Winnie's hand on the same drawer knob and then her hands tenderly touching Stevie's toys and circle drawings, as his once did. Her loss is the more visual and evident here. She then packs these items. Her bargain is visibly over. She dresses for outdoors, and descends the stairs in a strange state of resolution, seemingly without anger or awareness of what is about her. Although Arquette's Winnie does not yield the profound unified purpose and inner fire of Conrad's Winnie, there are some scenes where Hampton successfully renders exterior some of her feelings and implies stages in her inner crisis.

And it is not a surprise (Arquette and Hoskins must be given credit for their subtle acting) that Winnie's bargain with Verloc is domestic usefulness and sex, and that their sex life is at the level of mere creature comfort for Verloc. Conrad only hints at this. But in the film Hampton adds sex scenes, expressive of Verloc's tedium as a lover and Winnie's steadfast willingness to keep her bargain. Their sex scenes in the their small bare bedroom show how much Winnie must pay for her marriage and how little she relishes it. When, after Winnie knows all and Verloc has made many attempts at self-justification, he tries to woo her to the couch, still so insensitive to the fact she is in grief for Stevie, she slowly approaches him; kisses him, then kills him. The film shows this in 'real' time; the stabbing is slow and deliberate as in the novel. Winnie is cold and emotionless and when Verloc does not die right away, and staggers to her, she does not touch him. She lets him fall. The last thing he hears is her sexual scorning: 'I never wanted you. All I ever wanted was somewhere safe for Stevie'.

The film's sex scenes compensate in part for the lack of narratorial analysis of Winnie's inner states. They *show* her motive for killing Verloc.

However, although the murder scenes in the novel and the film are fairly similar and although the film does try to compensate for the lack of narrator and makes visible so much that goes on inside Winnie beyond language and gesture, it eventually fails to find a way of showing Winnie's very being falling apart. The Conradian narrator tells us of her sense of 'perfidy of a trusted providence' (p.244) as she stares at the blank wall of her kitchen, and of her realisation that there was no need to stay 'in that kitchen, in that house, with that man—since the boy was gone forever.... But neither would she see what there was *to keep her in the world at all*' [my italics]. The very ground of her being has given way; her 'liberty' is purposelessness. The narrator repeats this: 'She had her freedom. Her contract *with existence* [my italics], as represented by that man standing over there, was at an end. She was a free woman' (p.251). But she does not know 'what use to make of her freedom'. Her sense of freedom, not her grief for Stevie, prompts her in the novel to dress in street clothes, don a black veil, and to start to leave (p.254). Later, the narrator describes Winnie's 'reasoning' as 'having all the force of insane logic'. She can think only this: 'now he had murdered Stevie he would never let her go. He would want to keep her for nothing'. Although she sits immobile, which the film does duplicate, crucial thoughts are going through her mind that the film audience apparently, in Hampton's version, is unable to discern: 'Mrs. Verloc's disconnected wits went to work practically. She could slip by him, open the door, run out. But he would dash out after her, seize her round the body, drag her back into the shop. She could scratch, kick, and bite—and stab; too: but for stabbing she wanted a knife. Mrs. Verloc sat still under her black veil, in her own house, like a masked and mysterious visitor of impenetrable intentions' (p.256).

Arquette's Winnie is able to convey in her stillness, sallow inexpressive veiled face, and her unfocused eye, some of the mystery of her 'impenetrable intentions', and she does that in

spite of being miscast. She does not have Conrad's Winnie's frightening dark eyes—her 'black gaze where the light of the room was absorbed and lost without the trace of a single gleam' (p.259). Arquette's Winnie is mysterious with her lack of overt grief and her immobility, but she is not very ominous or intense and seems not to have had any wrenching deep thoughts, until we see what must have been going on within motivates her to make her deliberate, slow approach to Verloc with the knife behind her back.

However, in the novel, Winnie, as she approaches to kill Verloc, that 'slow beast' (p.257) who is uncomprehending, resembles Stevie—'[as] if the homeless soul of Stevie had flown for shelter straight to the breast of his sister, his guardian and protector ...' (p.262). Hampton makes no attempt to attain the complexity of this uncanny moment of both interior and exterior crisis. In the film's murder scene, there is no 'metaphysical' or existential dimension to Winnie's loss of Stevie, loss of trust in Verloc, loss of trust in providence itself, to her sudden purposeless freedom and disorientation and the atavism that compels the murder. For instance, in this scene there is no use of the blank wall (with no Biblical justice written on it) or substitute for it; there is no recuperation of Stevie's circles of 'chaos and eternity' that Winnie's situation fits. Although the film begins with an explanatory text about the treacherous 1880s in London, where there were all sorts of conspiracies and betrayals, and although the theme of betrayal is strong, not just among the anarchists but in the film's murder scene; and although this sense of betrayal, first signalled by her trying to take off her wedding ring, then by her killing of Verloc when he tries grotesquely to woo her, the film's murder scene remains not of full psychological depth, and has none of Conrad's philosophic intentions invested in Winnie's fate.

So—there is a semantic loss evident from comparing the murder scene in the novel and film.

But this is not necessarily the fault of film as a medium in spite of its reputation as 'exterior'. As Michael Klein, only one of many scholars of the novel/film comparison, says:

> Indeed film is capable of drawing upon most aspects of its artistic heritage to document, render and interpret experience. It does so, however, through its own particular formal and signifying properties. Camera position, camera movement, framing., lighting, sound, and editing are, perhaps, the primary means by which a director may reproduce, shape, and thus express and evaluate the significance of a narrative. André Bazin has called attention to the ways in which the camera situates and frames action, Belas Balàzs to the iconic function of close-ups, George Bluestone to the complexity of cinematic tropes, and Sergei Eisenstein to the analytic and expressive possibilities of spatial, tonal, and cognitive montage. A film of a novel, far from being a mechanical copy of the source, is a transposition or translation from one set of conventions for representing the world to another.[8]

Film can achieve great interiority, and without the uncinematic technique of voice-over. Arquette's Winnie would have been more successful had Hampton used a fuller cinematic repertoire of techniques. Hampton might have benefited from, say, Jane Campion's surrealistic strategies in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), its source novel by Henry James being of even greater innerness and narratorial analysis than Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. Campion daringly eschews the strategy of voice-over to work towards a *visible* innerness in her heroine. She accomplishes this in two sequences that were much criticised at the time, but which indicate Isabel Archer's bewitchment by Gilbert Osmond, as James details and as Isabel eventually understands. She realises in the novel that she was under a spell; she had had a 'wondrous vision of him, fed through charmed senses and such a stirred fancy'.[9]

Campion dared to exteriorise this bewitchment in the 'declaration of love' scene and in the black and white sequence of Isabel on her travels. In the former, Osmond appropriates Isabel's parasol and twirls it hypnotically, then whispers to her, 'I'm absolutely in love with you'. The twirling parasol comes nearly to fill the screen. It is mesmeric. Certainly Isabel is destabilised. This trope is repeated in a more daring sequence, the black and white 'travelogue' of Isabel doing what she has wanted to do, see the world. The sequence seems inside Isabel's mind and out of the world of colour and quotidian interaction

with others. Campion uses surrealistic strategies—the twirling parasol reappears superimposed, and the whispered declaration repeats and follows her everywhere. Both affect what she sees on her very dinner plate as well as what she is trying to experience as she moves from country to country. Osmond's mesmeric presence never leaves her and comes between Isabel, the conscious traveller, and the subconscious Isabel so bewitched by Osmond that she helplessly returns to him in her mind, barely experiencing what is around her. Campion renders visible Isabel's innermost desires and her thraldom to Osmond.

Hampton attempts no such daring strategies during the murder scene, although Winnie's suicide scene does show an 'unanswering' endless empty sky, a compensation for the kitchen's blank wall, as it were; and he does focus on her wedding ring, as does the novel, a metonymy of her despairing acknowledgment of the betrayal of her marriage bargain. ('He cheated me out of seven years of life,' she tells Ossipon bitterly (p.274)). But this is far from her total tragedy. Winnie's goodness and profoundly unified purpose in life are ironically baffled by the treachery of other human beings, in a universe—that Stevie draws—of chaos and eternity, a universe without the Biblical writing on the wall. Human society, for her and for Stevie, is of no avail against such a world.

Where Hampton's film is inventive and where it does attempt to recover some of Conrad's philosophical notions, social critique, and the placing of Winnie's tragedy, is in the framing of the tale by the Professor, well cast with Robin Williams in the (uncredited) role. In his Author's Note of 1920, Conrad recalls his reactions to Ford Madox Ford's remarks on anarchism, and to hearing of the actual episode of the Greenwich Park bombing:

> I remember ... remarking on the criminal futility of the whole thing, doctrine, action, mentality [of anarchism]; and on the contemptible aspect of the half-crazy pose as of a brazen cheat exploiting the poignant miseries and passionate credulities of a mankind always so tragically eager for self destruction. That's what made for me its philosophic pretences so unpardonable.... We recalled the already old story of the attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory; a blood-stained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was

> impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought (pp.xxxiii–iv).

In the novel itself the sardonic Conradian narrator says lazy Verloc sees his anarchist colleagues as lazy, and then takes over from Verloc to expand this notion:

> For obviously one does not revolt against the advantages and opportunities of that state, but against the price which must be paid for the same in the coin of accepted morality, self-restraint, and toil [Conradian virtues]. The majority of revolutionists are the enemies of discipline and fatigue mostly. There are natures, too, to whose sense of justice the price exacted looms up monstrously enormous, odious, oppressive, worrying, humiliating, extortionate, intolerable. Those are the fanatics. The remaining portion of social rebels is accounted for by vanity, the mother of all noble and vile illusions, the companion of poets, reformers, charlatans, prophets, and incendiaries (p.53).

Conrad's description of the novel's anarchists is full of irony, and Hampton's film does try to reproduce the anarchists as grotesque, although not as accurately as some critics have wanted.[10] Double agent Verloc is described as of 'inert fanaticism', or 'fanatical inertness' (p.12); Michaelis, the 'ticket-of-leave apostle' (p.41), is fat like Verloc and, though an anarchist, cadges from a woman of society; Karl Yundt is toothless, giggling, old and gouty, yet thinks of himself as a terrorist (p.42)—the Conradian narrator calls him a 'moribund murderer' and a 'senile sensualist (pp.42, 43). Comrade Ossipon is an ex-medical student, self-appointed purveyor of science and current scientific trends on degeneracy, writer of the very slow-selling, inept *The Future of the Proletariat* paper, and devotee of women and their money. And Conrad's Professor is the craziest, most dangerous and maladjusted of all the anarchists. Hampton stays close to Conrad's description of the Professor's person, expression and dialogue. The Professor in both novel and film is a 'dingy little man' (p.61); he is 'supremely self-confident (p.62); he wears spectacles (p.64); and he is wired up to explode in the crowds of the poor (ironically not the rich) which he obsessively stalks. The megalomaniacal, contempt-driven, illogical philosophy expounded to Ossipon is

as available in the film as in the novel:

> To break up the superstition and worship of legality should be our aim. Nothing would please me more than to see Inspector Heat and his likes take to shooting us down in broad daylight with the approval of the public. Half our battle would be won then; the disintegration of the old morality would have set in in its very temple ... what's wanted is a clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life.... Therefore I would shovel my stuff [explosives] in heaps at the corners of streets ... (p.73).

The Professor brags that he will never be arrested, and sees himself conquering the mere police by his 'Force of personality' that scares them away as they know, he thinks, that he will blow himself and others up (pp.65, 68). He outdoes his illogic with, 'They depend on life, which, in this connection, is a historical fact surrounded by all sorts of restraints ... whereas I depend on death, which knows no restraint ...' (p.68).

The relentless little Professor, ironically planning for future life by effecting mass death, is the embodiment of the egomaniacal madness and futility that in varying degrees is in all the anarchists, and which cruelly snares the novel's Dostoevskyan Holy Fool, Stevie, and destroys his caring sister's very grounds for being.

Conrad does not introduce the Professor until Chapter IV. But right at the beginning, accompanied by menacing music, Hampton introduces him into an urban nether world the colour of bruising, blues, browns, blacks, and of slimy mud. He threads his puzzling way through the opening credits and unknowing crowds to Verloc's shop, which he scorns. Like the crowd, the viewer of the film does not yet know what insane rage lurks behind his spare, taut face. But his hubristic rage is to permeate the film in one degree or another in all the anarchists, and take down innocent people.

If Stevie's 'circles, circles, circles' suggest a 'rendering of cosmic chaos' (p.45), mankind's only hopes are that the goodness and strength of Winnie and of society can prevail. But neither does. At the end of the film we know the Professor's hatreds, absurdity, insanity. Just as Winnie and Stevie are sacrificed, the shabby innocent people around him are sacrificed in his pledge

to exterminate the weak. The film ends just as in a rage he presses his rubber ball and before he blows himself up and London's poor folk with him. In the novel he passes on at the end ironically unnoticed; but Hampton lets him provoke an absurd cataclysm, even more devastating than that which befell Stevie but analogous to it in absurdity, futility and madness.

How does framing the film with the Professor help to recover the Conradian ideas invested in Winnie in the murder scene? Certainly Hampton does not give a visible analogue to her sense of freedom. But the 'perfidy of a trusted providence' (p.244) that she perceives as she stares at the blank wall and that makes her feel there was 'nothing to keep her in the world at all' (p.251) does link up with the Professor and his framing the tale. The Professor's justice is a parody of providentiality. God-like, he presumes to bring it about. But ironically he brings destruction. In the end his hubris, only an exaggeration of the obsessive, angry hubris of the anarchists in general, destroys any providentiality brought about by society or the Winnies of the world through their own actions of love or loyalty or duty, Conradian virtues. Hampton's 'framing' the tale with the Professor underscores the gross irony of Conrad's theme and the tragedy he invests in Winnie's and Stevie's fate.

Conrad said that he wrote his tale in the 'earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn'—but he adds, 'as well as pity' (p.xxxvii). Hampton's treatment does give us Conradian irony in the framing of the tale with the mad Professor and he does give us Conradian pity in the depiction of Winnie, Stevie and the poor of London.

Where Hampton has but partial success is with Winnie's 'interior world' as Malouf calls it, the very source of her unity in life and thus the depth and cause of her despair. He is successful with Verloc, largely through fine casting and because Verloc is less complex; but he misses the full Winnie. However, Hampton's partial success with Winnie cannot mean the cinema as an artform is necessarily incapable of expressing deep innerness, as novelist Malouf and scriptwriter Seger feel. Malouf himself allows for an excellent actor to express a great deal: 'I think that very often

great performers on film can suggest to you that there's an interior world there which is being expressed in their body gestures or their facial expressions, but which are not going to be expressed—but they are being expressed, visually'.[11] Certainly miscasting Arquette undermined the characterisation of Winnie's depths. But so too did Hampton's own lack of originality with radical montage or the dissolve or superimposition or the fade.

Who knows but that *The Secret Agent* in the hands of a more daring director, availing himself of more cinematic strategies, would have achieved even greater interiority?

Malouf's and Seger's views on the limitations of cinema are not final. The debate goes on.

Notes

1 Michael Oondaatje, 'A Conversation with David Malouf', *Brick* 47 (1993): 51.

2 Linda Seger, *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film*, New York, 1992, p.20.

3 Novelist Helen Garner, for instance, complains that 'Special effects a novelist might pull off on the page by bluff or flashy language simply will not transpose to film. Everything has to be reinvented through the eyes. It was very squashing to have to leave my precious prose at the door and be pushed back again and again to the bare bones of structure and dialogue'. Quoted in ' Stripped Bare. Pruning for Film', Ann-Maree Moodie, *Australian Author* 30.ii (Aug.-Nov. 1998): 12.

4 See Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film, An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, Oxford, 1996, p.8: 'At every level from newspaper reviews to longer essays in critical anthologies and journals, the adducing of fidelity to the original novel as a major criterion for judging the film adaptation is pervasive. No critical line is in greater need of re-examination—and devaluation'. Certainly a director or scriptwriter is not obliged to be 'faithful' to a source novel, which may merely form the basis of an inspiration. If one 'purloins' from a source, one is in good company—Shakespeare's at least. Besides, transposing from one art form to another—whether story to ballet, ballet or story to opera, drama to opera, novel to film, and so on, renders utter fidelity impossible.

5 Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, Oxford, 1983 edn, hereinafter referred to by page number. *The Secret Agent* was first serialised in 1906 and revised and published as a novel in 1907.

6 *The Secret Agent*, dir. Christopher Hampton, Twentieth Century Fox,

USA/UK, 1996, with Bob Hoskins (Adolph Verloc), Patricia Arquette (Winnie Verloc), Gerard Depardieu (Tom 'Alexander' Ossipon). (The video jacket advertises an 'evocative and gripping adaptation'.) An earlier film attempt, Alfred Hitchcock's *Sabotage*, Gaumont British, 1936, was updated to the 1930s and loses Conrad's irony by turning his grim satire into a romance (see, though, Graham Greene's favourable review, repr. in *The Pleasure Dome: the Collected Film Criticism 1935–1940*, ed. J. R. Taylor, Oxford, 1950, pp.122–23). *Sabotage* should not be confused with Hitchcock's *Secret Agent*, Gaumont British, 1936, which was based on Somerset Maugham's *Ashenden*.

7 Leon Edel, 'Novel and Camera', in *The Theory of the Novel: New Essays*, ed. John Halperin, Oxford and New York, 1974, p.188.

8 Michael Klein, 'Introduction: Film and Literature', in *The English Novel and the Movies*, ed. Michael Klein and Gillian Parker, New York, 1981, p.3.

9 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. R. Bamberg, New York, 1995 edn, p.351. Isabel surveys her past perceptions of Osmond that had helped to trap her into marriage; she recognises that 'she had seen only half his nature then, as one saw the disk of the moon when it was partly masked by the shadow of the earth.... She saw the full moon now—she saw the whole man.... Ah, she had been immensely under the charm!' (p.357).

10 Peter Matthews's review criticises the casting as well as the film's dullness and torpor (missing Conrad's point). Matthews writes, '... the powerhouse cast has been stripped of its last jot of charisma. Ordinarily extroverted performers like Gerard Depardieu, Eddie Izzard and Robin Williams ... receive such lacklustre treatment that they dry up on-screen for perhaps the first time in their careers'. '*The Secret Agent*', *Sight and Sound* 8.4 (April 1998): 53.

11 'A Conversation with David Malouf', p.51.