

Altering Horizons: an aesthetic of reception and reproduction in *Oscar and Lucinda*

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A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration which strikes ever new resonances among its readers and frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence ... (Jauss *Aesthetic of Reception* 21)

In Gillian Armstrong's film *Oscar and Lucinda*, adapted from Peter Carey's novel, the spectacle of a glass church floating down the Gordon River in rural New South Wales is gazed upon from a number of contextual spaces. As the church travels into denser, unmapped territory, away from a Christian God's view but subject to the amused scrutiny of two indigenous children, the blindness of native insects, to the seductive eye of Miriam Chadwick in the town of Bellingen, the gaze's trajectory alters. The glass church becomes both wonder and spectacle, propelled by commercial cinema's marketing machine. In terms of narrative and auteurship in Armstrong's own work, it becomes a glass coffin for Oscar.

This altering gaze can be likened to the continuum of interpretation found in reading processes, and subsequently to the continually altering meanings of texts that are subject to the interplay of new and existing paradigms. The reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss establishes this trajectory by focusing on the study of meaning as ephemeral, subject to mutation with every change in history. Respectively, the reader-response theories of Wolfgang Iser chart the path for reader interpretation, which constantly shifts from one passage to another within the text.

This paper aims to explore the changing conditions under which texts such as *Oscar and Lucinda* are read, interpreted, translated and reproduced by using the theories of Jauss and Iser. I will explain them by dividing them into three major components that

point to an investigation of the sociology of art and culture and the function of a literary work in a society. The first component will focus on the historiography of a literary work, in what Jauss terms its 'aesthetic of reception', the evolution of meanings in different historical contexts. In the second, the reception theorists' attention to formal evolution will be discussed in regard to the way certain genres or literary forms replace previous ones. The final section will refer to hermeneutics: the practice and application of interpretation. In this study, one must question the idea of the 'official' public meanings that overshadow an individual reader's interaction with a literary text and the multiplicity of those individual readings.

Jauss's reception theory focuses on how the shift in paradigms from one time to another will change the interpretative investigations of that text. The idea of paradigms was appropriated from Thomas S Kuhn's theory on scientific revolutions. He asserted that the study of knowledge is not an accumulation of evidence and facts but rather a series of discontinuities and 'original points of departure' which provide a new guide for investigations (Holub 1). This can be likened to the different paradigms of prose and film framing the conditions that surround interpretation.

Jauss foregrounded his theories of cultural hermeneutics as it applied to literature, suggesting that the reader enter into a dialogue with the text. These theories stemmed from a reaction to literary scholarship, proposed in a series of lectures at the University of Constance in the late 1960s. In these lectures Jauss suggested a focus on literary historiography in terms of the changing reception of cultural texts, combining a Marxist focus on effect and reception, and a Formalist framework of aesthetic perception.

In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Jauss called for a consideration of 'literature' within an aesthetic of reception (*Rezeptionsästhetik*). The term 'reception' (*Rezeption*) determines the mode of receiving, the study of the meanings which are given when the text is received in the general public, and how it is reproduced and negotiated through these meanings. This constitutes a dialogical process in that the reception of a text generates an application of new modes and norms. Thus, old forms recede into the background as new forms emerge.

Jauss coined the term 'horizon of expectations', a notion that echoed Hans-Georg Gadamer's thesis in *Truth and Method* of the range of vision which is accessible from a particular vantage-point, situating understanding according to a temporal, finite and thus historical position. The horizon of expectations pertains to a 'system of references' or a way of filtering our perceptions through conventional structures or ideas, whether in an individual or a collective sense.

Peter Carey published *Oscar and Lucinda* in 1988, the year of Australia's Bicentenary, a time when the constructs of Australian history and mythology were under review. The novel was celebrated for its apparent political subversion of these constructs, parodying the official discourses and sanctimonious family stories which have empowered nationalist ideology and nurtured the original intentions of the British colonisers. The novel won the prestigious Booker Prize in that year, and now is lauded as a 'classic' of Australian literature in both the national and the English literary canon. It is no wonder then that it was chosen to be adapted into a major feature film,

although the genesis of director Gillian Armstrong's project rose out of her reading of the unpublished manuscript sent to her by her friend Peter Carey.

It took ten years for the film, written by Laura Jones, to achieve cinematic release. The film text of *Oscar and Lucinda* stood in a very different position on the horizon of Australian political history and also on the axis of film expectations. In 1998, through the republican movement, issues of national ideology were still being addressed and it could be argued that there was an equal measure of affirmation (through the campaigns of Pauline Hanson and others) and subversion (indigenous rights, the sorry campaign, feminist re-readings). In this ten-year period, Armstrong and producer Robin Dalton struggled to receive funding and grappled with changes in screenwriters. The investors' subsequent interest occurred primarily through the success of independent, non-Hollywood films at the cinemas and at the Academy Awards. Films such as *The English Patient* and the spate of Jane Austen adaptations generated the public's acceptance of English actors and lengthy period films, previously doomed as 'boring' amongst a commercial audience, an example of how new experiences and expectations mediate our interpretation and enjoyment of texts.

Hence, the narrative object *Oscar and Lucinda* entered into a very different site for reception and production. The film's marketing machine drew an analogy between the period genre narrating the tale of a 'courageous Aussie woman' seen in Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* made in the 1970s, Lucinda as the progenitor of the women's movement in Australia, and Armstrong herself, one of the major female directors in a film industry still largely governed by men. Although inherited from the prestige and credibility of a Booker Prize-winning novel by our Peter Carey, *Oscar and Lucinda* became 'A Gillian Armstrong Film'. As academics such as Felicity Collins documented and dissected this new work in terms of auteurship, journalists framed the meaning of the film in terms of Armstrong's eclectic resumé as Hollywood director, Australian director, maker of women's stories (a label Armstrong denied), adapter of literary classics and social realist.

Just as the film adaptation of *Oscar and Lucinda* offered a new site of expectations that governed reception, so its movement across artistic mediums conditioned the narrative's expressive form. Jauss developed the notion of 'defamiliarisation' taken from the Russian Formalists. Viktor Shklovskii claimed that the function of art was to 'defamiliarise' perception of the object (Holub 18-21). Narrative objects that used traditional devices such as genre can be so familiar to us that we stop perceiving them and are rendered passive. Shklovskii's notion, like many of the reception theorist's predecessors, was grounded in the idealist conception of literature (or high art) as something that changes our perceptions.

Jauss suggested that certain 'literary' texts act to engender these changes in our perceptions and expectations. He used the examples of texts in the parody genre which reflect upon the narrative tradition only to destroy them, hence making us aware of our passive acceptance of them. The parody in Carey's novel *Oscar and Lucinda* should evoke the reader's 'horizon of expectation' through the use of conventions of nineteenth-century realism, and then proceed to destroy it by drawing our attention to this convention, by objectifying it. For readers used to postmodern

works, however, this is already in their horizon of expectations. Indeed, it is difficult to map the variety of readership at a given moment in history and place this in Jauss's concept.

In *The Implied Reader*, Wolfgang Iser also discussed the nineteenth-century narrative form in terms of the multiple perspectives that are offered by the characters through the narrator, so that readers discover the part that society has imposed on them, unguided by the invisible implied author (xiii). Carey's novel is a frame-narrative, which inwardly uses the form of nineteenth-century realism: the narrator is omniscient, detailing the backgrounds, settings, thoughts and feelings of Oscar and Lucinda and other characters. Like a baton, this story has been passed back and forth among the sanctimonious possession of his mother, his father's aversion to it, the oral narratives of the indigenous people, to its subsequent reshaping by the present inheritor of the story: the great grandson of Oscar, the novel's narrator. As a result, there are points in the text that draw our attention to the narrator's skepticism and the ambiguity of whose story it really is. Hence we can read this novel as a parody of the 'official' stories which are celebrated in our history and which dominate smaller, never recorded events. Yet the reader can choose to ignore this outer frame and enjoy the 'period romance' which details Oscar and Lucinda's joys and misfortunes.

Through its very use of conventions and formulae one could argue that commercial cinema, especially those films in Australia which are influenced by Hollywood, falls prey to this familiarity, thus encouraging passivity of interpretation in a film audience. The film of *Oscar and Lucinda* emphasises the romance and adventure conventions that are found in the original but are overtaken by Carey's political comment. Although speaking of the adaptation of Carey's *Bliss*, Theodore Scheckels argues that film, in its visual nature, dilutes Carey's satirical style, that peculiar standpoint on the border between reality and fantasy of many postmodern writers (91-4).

Perhaps, then, commercial cinema is essentially a narrative medium rooted in a representation of reality, a condition that makes it a modern rather than a postmodern one. The most fundamental change from book to film is the ending, a change that is governed by expectations brought about by the particular genres and conventions of each artistic space. In Carey's narrative Lucinda loses her fortune on the delivery of the glass church, is left destitute and goes on to be a heroine of the women's labour movement. In Armstrong's film, the Reverend Hassett burns the wager, Miriam dies in childbirth and Lucinda takes the place of substitute mother. The effects of this are obvious – the original unreliability that epitomises Carey's narrator is replaced by the notion of rightful inheritance, a gift of story passed down from Lucinda herself. The film ends with an image of the narrator, the great-grandson of Oscar who looks exactly like Oscar, boating 'home' with his red-haired daughter, the listener of the story. This change places the film text into a space that uses the convention of 'closure' through the circularity of storytelling – 'you can wake up from your dream now'; 'there's no place like home'. As Theodore Scheckels suggests, it lets the audience leave the cinema on an 'up' note (91). Scheckels argues that the reader of a novel would be more accustomed to a bleak ending than that of a film audience. Brian McFarlane and Geoff Mayer attribute this to the dominance of Hollywood-style melodrama at the core

of Australian cinema that shapes the expectations of audiences throughout the English-speaking world.

The other major component to Jauss's theories corresponded to the function of the work in the historical or diachronic series:

... to recognize the problem left behind to which the new work in the historical series is the answer, the interpreter must bring his own experience into play, since the past horizon of old and new forms, problems and solutions, is only recognizable in its further mediation within the present horizon of the received work. (*Aesthetic of Reception* 34)

Instead Jauss's emphasis on the 'play' of the interpreter's 'own experience' introduced a focus on the synchronic condition of the text, the site at which one could examine 'reception' vertically rather than horizontally. In *The Implied Reader*, Wolfgang Iser applied this vertical focus in his notion of *Wirkung*, a study that refers to reader response, to the effect of textual aspects on an individual interpreter. Iser explored the reader inside the text: the production of meaning by that reader and the conditions implicit in that process. Traditional hermeneutic practices worked on unlocking the hidden meaning in the text, but for Iser the reader produced semantic results from his/her interaction with the narrative.

These theories are useful to the context of translation from novel to film as they demonstrate the variability of reader interpretation. The key artists in the collaborative enterprise of filmmaking construct a series of interpretations that are then applied to a re-presentation, whether the filmmakers aim to use this translation to represent the original fiction or to use it as a starting point for their own narrative that expresses their own concerns.

Jauss described the evolutionary continuum of literature by the spatial metaphor of horizon. Iser borrowed the spatial distinction of foreground and background from Gestalt psychology to describe one governing structure in this process, where certain components stand out, while others recede into the background:

the strategies of the text produce a tension that sets off a series of different actions and interactions, and this is ultimately resolved by the emergence of the aesthetic object. (Iser cited in Holub, 88)

It is Iser's interest in the cognitive activity of the reader, especially in the formation of mental images, that is helpful to this study of film adaptation. He suggested that when we read, details of a visual nature may be described but we are never told the complete picture. For example, we are told Oscar as a child

was long-necked and delicate ... light, airy, made from the quills of a bird. He was white and frail. He had a triangular face, a thin nose, archer's-bow lips, a fine pointed chin. The eyes were so clean and unprotected, like freshly peeled fruit. (Carey 13)

Although these descriptions are evocative and signal Oscar's pure nature, we are not told how tall he is or the way he stands. These details are to be assumed by the associative references of readers to their own experiences. Readers construct images from the correlation of available mental data. Thus, it can be argued that film adaptations *disappoint* that virtual image which is projected in every reader's mind.

In a film each reader's image of the characters is destroyed by the powerful presence of the actor, which usually contains its own pattern of associations, especially if that actor is famous. Cate Blanchett resembles the young Judy Davis, and the film's reception in the commercial media drew special attention to this fact. Yet with the onslaught of film adaptations from literary classics such as novels by Jane Austen in the late 1990s, audiences were divided on the merits of these film versions. Purist book lovers were outraged by everything from the physical appearance of the main character to the rearrangement and omission of scenes and details that they saw as crucial to the particular *literary* quality of the original. Others praised the film version for re-playing the 'spirit' of the novel; the film seemed to satisfy these readers' memory of its overall meaning.

Hence, in the context of reception, film adaptations not only offer a translation of the original novel but also fulfil the continuation of a dialogue, as Jauss would suggest, in the form of question and answer. If Gillian Armstrong's film *Oscar and Lucinda* did not replicate the subversive ending of Peter Carey's novel, it does suggest the ever-changing function of that narrative in Australian culture. In any case, whatever the filmmakers' reasons for producing the film, its role in drawing the public's attention back to the novel, illustrates the social and cultural nature of film adaptations in a world where the generation of narratives is chiefly market-driven.

The film *Oscar and Lucinda* certainly brings us back to a nationalistic ideology – the 'Aussie battler', the supposed serenity of the Australian landscape, the eccentricities of national character types, the popular family stories with all their omissions and embellishments. Yet perhaps also it subtly brings us forward to a sort of self-referentiality that will create another set of questions to be answered.

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