

## The Lady in the Frame: Two Portraits by Henry James and Jane Campion

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What I am trying to argue here is that film, in its essence, represents a new *kind* of ‘literature’ — and one which, in its radical opposition to accepted notions about literature, requires us to revise our ideas of literature itself.<sup>1</sup>

### 1

Before looking at two portraits of the same lady by different hands, executed in different media and at different times, I would like to consider an historical coincidence which provided a point of intersection for those media, and take this as my point of departure. Just over thirty years ago, as American film writer Andrew Sarris was popularising his notion of the *Cahier du Cinema*’s ‘auteur’ theory, French literary theorist Roland Barthes was elaborating his polemical ‘theory’ of the death of the author — or, rather, ‘*le morte d’auteur*’. So just as Sarris was importing into the discourse on film a serviceable model of textual production and interpretation — and importing not simply from France but equally from an international tradition of literary discourse — Barthes was challenging literary discourse to jettison that model. The theoretical friction implicit in this coincidence bears some reflection, and might prompt some further reflections on the subject of the text as it is shaped in turn by literature and by film.

The central problem Barthes perceived in the notion of the ‘auteur’ was its delimitation of meaning in and around the intentionality of the writing subject, itself perceived as a profoundly originary, volitional consciousness. Against this Barthes maintained:

<sup>1</sup> Frank McConnell, *The Spoken Seen: Film and the Romantic Imagination* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 25.

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.<sup>2</sup>

This new conception of the text was directly to challenge the interpretative constraints that had arisen from the hieratic model of literary communication to which Barthes mockingly refers. Thus:

Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’ – victory to the critic. Hence there is no surprise in the fact that, historically, the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic, nor again in the fact that criticism (be it new) is today undermined along with the Author.<sup>3</sup>

The man who went on to write *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* — for which he offered the advice: ‘It must all be read as if spoken by a character in a novel’ — could not have been unaware of the ironic excesses of his argument, an irony already signalled in the title’s parodic allusion to the death of a king. The intention was not to erect a new theory of textual production but rather fatally to disturb the old ideologically and institutionally maintained one. A French audience, one imagines, would have been quick to recognize the rhetorical call to arms for what it was; the anglophonic audience of the 1970s and 1980s was rather more literal-minded in its response, to the despair, as I recall, of many of those who, to that time, had enjoyed the title of ‘author’.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> *Image/Music/Text*, p. 171.

It is useful to keep Barthes's provocative words in mind when turning to Sarris and his vision for film criticism:

Ultimately, the auteur theory is not so much a theory as an attitude, a table of values that converts film history into directorial biography. The auteur critic is obsessed with the wholeness of art and artist. He looks at a film as a whole, a director as a whole. The parts, however entertaining individually, must cohere meaningfully. This meaningful coherence is more likely when the director dominates the proceedings with skill and purpose.<sup>4</sup>

In calling for this 'auteur'-inspired critical reorientation, what is it that Sarris expects to gain but the assurance of the singular creating consciousness presiding over the work; some guarantee of legibility, some guarantee of significance, within the agreed terms of the textual contract that had long obtained between writer and reader. For, taken in the abstract, film — for decades an unwelcome art — is literally a baffling medium, a disconcerting polysemy which surely more readily approximates Barthes's 'tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' than anything literature has to offer. (I am aware that I am generalizing in terms of the dominant film form, so that to talk of 'film' in this context is to talk of the narrative feature film, a category which effectively precludes an array of expressive possibilities implicit in the category 'literature' but not beyond — and indeed not unknown to — film as medium.) Story, scripting, casting, performance, choice of shot, lens, *mis-en-scene*, lighting, editing, music, art direction — a profusion of writings which may or may not work in a concert of significance, but which above all fail to conform to the old Romantic myth of creation, of the idea communicated from the privacy of the mind to the intimacy of the page by a prolonged lapidary working within the medium by the solitary writer — the unique consciousness in possession of that idea. Against this cinema can offer only the image of the partial and

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Sarris, 'Towards a Theory of Film History, in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods* (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1976), p. 246.

variously constrained creative self driven as much by commercial and collaborative considerations as by any imagined afflatus.

What might be meant, then, by this historical coincidence, and what might be meant by the fact that in order for both Barthes and Sarris to arrive at their different conceptual positions they are obliged to read, so to speak, against the creative mythologies that tended to arise from the textual medium with which they are dealing — words on a page, sound and vision on celluloid? For the collaborative event, Sarris reads the singularity of an intention; for the authorial manuscript, Barthes reads the work of many hands in the intertextual event of culture itself. So, in a sense, each has borrowed from the creative stereotype of the other's medium in order to achieve fresh perspectives for critical inquiry in his own. And, to put a name to it, perhaps what is indicated by this coincidence — and by this friction, this wrenching of forms into new analytical perspectives — is some kind of threshold, some kind of blurred moment in the history of culture that marks a movement between modernity and postmodernity, a movement evidenced in the shift from a figuration of the individual as author of the self, to that of the individual as subject to a prior authority, the writing of another, a shift mirrored in the simultaneity of Barthes's rejection of and Sarris's embracing of the concept of the 'auteur'.

By this I do not wish to imply a simple dichotomy — that cinema is a postmodern medium, while literature is a modern one. But I do wish to admit to a temptation to propose such a view, because I think the nature of the literary text inclines one way, while the nature of the cinematic text inclines the other. So what I would propose is that the dominant form of the novel — the realist novel, and more particularly the naturalist novel — correlates with an historical experience at the threshold of cultural modernity, while narrative cinema as a medium and in its cultural ontology has played a crucial part in precipitating a postmodern imagination. The consequence of this is that certain collisions — certain formal and conceptual and ideological

collisions – are implicit in any cinematic adaptation of a naturalist literary text, and these will be registered in various aspects of the text such as genre, narrative form, and figurations of the narrative subject.

I will be examining the effect of one such collision shortly, but a prior question has arisen. If a certain antagonism obtains between the medium of cinema and the medium of literature, then what is it *proper* to ask of a film that purports to be an adaptation, faithful or otherwise, of a novel? Fidelity, indeed, seems to have become a major issue among filmmakers recently — or rather the *appearance* of fidelity has, whence the fashion for including in the film's title the name of the original novelist, as if to discriminate between the faithful and the fanciful adaptation, yet viewers of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (Branagh, 1994) and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Coppola, 1992) might still beg to differ. But is it proper to insist upon an unswerving fidelity so precise that the adapted text merely does a kind of representative duty for the original? Such a view would inevitably render the filmic text a kind of second order language whose function it is to signify the first order language of the original text — an intolerable *a priori* impoverishment. Yet this is a fairly common demand, to which Dudley Andrew has provided the shrewdest reply – which is that it is boring:

Unquestionably the most frequent and most tiresome discussion of adaptation (and of film and literature relations as well) concerns fidelity and transformation. Here we have a clear cut case of film trying to measure up to a literary work, or of an audience expecting to make such a comparison. Fidelity of adaptation is conventionally treated in relation to the 'letter' and to the 'spirit' of the text, as though adaptation were the rendering of an interpretation of a legal precedent. The letter would appear to be within the reach of cinema for it can be emulated in mechanical fashion. More difficult is fidelity to the spirit, to the original's tone, values, imagery, and

rhythm, since finding stylistic equivalents in film for these intangible aspects is the opposite of a mechanical process.<sup>5</sup>

The question of fidelity is assuredly a question of propriety, and fidelity and propriety take their place within a mimetic order that supervised the project of naturalism in literary culture. Fidelity and propriety are also precisely the kinds of notions that have been problematised by the emergent perspectives of postmodernism, mistrustful as the contemporary mood is of categories such as the original and the copy, the true and the fabricated, and so on – a mood exemplified by, say, Derrida's view: 'I do not believe that translation is a secondary and derived event in relation to an original language or text.'<sup>6</sup> So even the requirement of 'fidelity to the spirit' of the original might today be found to be an excessive propriety.

'Is it proper?' asks little Flora (Anna Paquin) of her axe-wielding step-father, Stewart (Sam Neill), at the climax of *The Piano* (Campion, 1993): confused and concerned at her mother's liaison with another, she has come to him to determine the morality of the situation. And he is a man possessed with an exact and exacting sense of propriety: he takes possession of wife and child, he expropriates Ada's piano to trade for property, he puts up fences, he issues commands, he imprisons. He is the ironically sexless family Bluebeard who exacts a patriarchal vengeance for offences against propriety by chopping the right index finger from his piano-playing, speechless wife, thus dispossessing her of every form of self-expression in a single action which also, ironically again, acts as a transferred castration, a self-emasculatation (that index finger, which will be sent as a love token to another, indexes too much at this point in the film, imparting to it an overdetermined figurative play that relieves the text of the

<sup>5</sup> Dudley Andrew, 'Adaptation', in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism*, Fourth Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 423-4.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 8.

threat of banal psychoanalytic reduction). In the midst of this male hostility the silence of Ada (Holly Hunter), instantly belied by her voiceover narration, appears as hysterical symptom. In this regard she neither grows nor matures as a character through the film. Rather, her innate character is gradually liberated from its hysterized narrowness, signified negatively in such things as her tightly binding stays, her submission to the paternal commandment to marry, and her silence. Yet this very hysteria is also rendered positively as a kind of conventual escape from the masculine: her clothing is as protective as it is constricting and proves to be seductively negotiable in her reappropriation of the piano; her consent to marry liberates her from her father and initiates a movement across borders that will culminate in her illicit affair with the culturally hybridized Baines (Harvey Keitel), from whom she seeks to regain her possession and, ultimately, self-possession; and her silence both represents her refusal to enter into the dialogue of masculine entrapment and creates an exclusively feminine space to be occupied only by Ada and her daughter.

‘Is it proper?’ the film inquires, and by so doing interrogates the validity of an historical ‘propriety’. In *Ada*, Campion has resurrected the heroine of sensibility — that figure, invented by the eighteenth century, whose narrative detailed the adventure of the feminine victimised by an hysteria which was nothing more than the interiorised mirror of external masculine hostility (perhaps its most exquisite rendering was given by Ann Radcliffe in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and the story of Emily St Aubert). And, in the classic literary Gothic tradition (a specific sub-category of the romance), *The Piano* traces the fundamental impropriety – the offence to bourgeois, patriarchal order — implicit in female liberation from masculine subjugation.<sup>7</sup> But what this means, in moral and psychological

<sup>7</sup> Cf Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), especially chapter 5, ‘Female Gothic’, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

terms, is that Ada<sup>8</sup> negotiates an unfolding of her true personality — a literal discovering, metonymised in her seductive disrobing — rather than a development, her fatherless child being the ever-present sign of her cosseted fullness as woman. True to its origins in Gothic romance, the film implies a need for change in external circumstances only in order for the subject — an essentially symptomal creature whose destiny lies in the hands of others — to achieve her full human amplitude.

In choosing the Gothic mode as the means by which to present both Ada's reality as fundamentally authored by a masculine otherness and her character as hysterized amid the competing stress of her own unknowable 'will' and the hostile repressions of the social, *The Piano* provides a good example of a textual strategy that has become prevalent in recent times. For insofar as the postmodern text sets itself the task of interrogating the ideological and conceptual bases and biases of a bourgeois humanist order, it has tended to revive forms of narrative composition that provide alternatives to or actively contest the figurations of the real recurrently discovered in and elaborated by the high realist mode of the novel.<sup>9</sup> It is true that some modern critics of the realist novel have undervalued the degree of self-consciousness exhibited in many of these texts, and therefore have simply failed to comprehend the degree to which the real as textual effect is often caught up in the text's own ludic deconstruction of it.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it was the realist

<sup>8</sup> It is worth observing, incidentally, that the female 'ardour' of Dorothea Brooke — about whom more later — glows brightly in both the name and nature of this Ada.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most celebrated recent example of this is A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), which not only revives the romance form but does so in a particularly self-conscious way.

<sup>10</sup> Colin MacCabe's egregious misreading of *Middlemarch* is a case in point: see 'Realism and the Cinema; Notes on some Brechtian Theses', *Screen*, 15:2 (1974), 216-29, reprinted in Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), pp. 134-41.



mode that generated — to recall E. M. Forster's famous phrase from *Aspects of the Novel* — the 'fully rounded' novelistic character, and it was the naturalistic narrative that provided the setting for the historical development of this image of the subject as dynamic, centred, self-conscious, volitional, just as it was this subject that not only underwrote the ideology of individualism, but also the design and logic of modern secular democratic societies. Little wonder this same image came to dominate the self-reflections of modernity: 'How do we view ourselves,' asked novelist and filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet in the 1960s, 'but as characters in a novel?'

And yet, today, one might prefer to reply: 'as characters in a film.' The difference is intimately related to the nature of the medium. Dudley Andrew notes:

Generally film is found to work from perception toward signification, from exterior facts to interior motivations and consequences, from the givenness of a world to the meaning of a story cut out of that world. Literary fiction works oppositely. It begins with signs (graphemes and words) building to propositions which attempt to develop perception. As a product of human language it naturally treats human motivation and values, seeking to throw them out onto the external world, elaborating a world out of a story.<sup>11</sup>

Evolving from the narrative of biography, the novel developed a fundamental concern with the themes of growth, transformation, maturity; its interiority, noted by Andrew, most evidently manifested itself in the tendency towards first-person or stream-of-consciousness narration, narrative modes in which those fundamental themes could be most fully and subtly explored. Implicit in this evolution of the novel as a mimetic form was the development of this figure of the self-authored moral subjectivity, the self written in and out of the choices that literally characterise that individual in the deeply complex but ultimately legible texture of the moral life. At times this is formally metaphorised in the image of the writer who literally

<sup>11</sup>Andrew, p. 424.

writes the life on reflection — like Pip in *Great Expectations* (1861) — which provides the novelist with the opportunity of dramatizing the dynamics of character in the creation of an ironic distance between the mature self who writes and the immature self who is written. (There is, incidentally, no effective space for a similar kind of ironic play between Ada's voiceover narration and her narrative experience in *The Piano*.) In this context social reality may be read as an emanation of the personal, just as plot may be read as character in action. The high watermark of this development is arguably represented by the achievement of Henry James, about whom I will have more to say later, but for whom it might be well to recall plot was an essential aspect of character and character an essential aspect of plot: each emerged necessarily from the other.

Against this narrative cinema — working (in Dudley's words) 'from exterior facts to interior motivations and consequences' — depicts a phenomenal world in which exterior occurrences and situations provide whatever access we might get into the subjectivity of the individual. In this sense, cinema shares significantly more with the romance form than it does with the novel. For, evolving not from the narrative of the life but rather from the narrative of the incident, romance was less concerned with the interior exploration of the dynamic personality than with a momentary revelation of innate character under the stress of more or less extraordinary situations. Formally the romance had its origins in the medieval tales of the marvellous and the heroic, concerned with larger than life figures inhabiting a world remote from ordinary experience and touched by the improbable, the magical, the fantastic. In this context plot is perpetrated upon the character rather than arising from it, personality is conceived as essentially changeless, and character becomes a fixed quantity, requiring only the appropriate circumstance for a staging of the self. And it is this affinity between narrative cinema and romance — which, as I have suggested, may be understood as a dissident form in relation to the orthodox humanism of the naturalistic novel — that could be exploited by a filmmaker predisposed towards a postmodern re-reading of the subject.

Moreover there are certain institutional and constitutional aspects of cinema that reinforce this non-naturalistic emphasis. For example, as in the romance much of the most memorable narrative cinema has concerned itself with an exploration of the fixed quantity of the self under stress, an exploration nuanced by both the star and his or her performance — such as Holly Hunter's Ada. But whatever attenuations of the naturalistically conceived subject are implicit in the romance character, they are aggravated further by this essential cinematic phenomenon of the star. For cinema has effectively fashioned in its audience a capacity for a peculiarly duplex reading of character, not in terms of actor and performance but rather in terms of the star. The star not only provides the 'star turn' but brings to the role both a personal and a filmographic itinerary which is read into the performance. And because that personal itinerary is itself fabricated by the machinery of celebrity personae,<sup>12</sup> the narrative character is apprehended at a series of mimetic removes: as construct whose fashioning is witnessed in the specifics of performance (whereby that fashioning becomes itself an object of interest equal to that which is fashioned), but also as construct confected out of another construct — the star him/herself. It reminds one a little of that kind of oriental puppetry that requires for its effect the visible though darkened presence of the puppeteer, so that what is relished is both the drama of the narrative as well as the insistence of the aesthetic experience. But the point is that such an experience is scandalous to and subversive of the mimetic ethics of naturalism, and this suggests just how far the cinematic departs from the novelistic in terms of figurations of the subject. Little wonder 'method' acting arrived, and took hold, so soon after the stylizations of silent cinema gave way to the purported naturalism of the 'talkies': its task was to mask the scandalous evidence of artifice by insisting upon the star's 'inhabitation' of the character. As long as the star system prevails, however —

<sup>12</sup> Fanzines, talk shows, tabloids; even, of course, the personality's reticence to *be* a personality resulting in silence or invisibility, which merely inflects the celebrity persona another way.

and as a central commercial component of the industry it must prevail — audiences will continue to be simultaneously absorbed by both the realism and the artificiality of the cinematic experience, for, far from immersing the audience in the unquestioned reality of the character, the phenomenon of the star foregrounds an insistent artistry.

An equally troubling emphasis can be discovered in the categories of plot and genre. Tales of love and adventure – or, as we might say today, sex and violence – have come to determine the textual character (in every sense) of the cinematic medium, just as, in an earlier age, they determined the character of the prose romance. And while the business of novelistic realism seemingly lies in part in concealing the literariness of the text, thereby heightening the effect of the real, the romance has traditionally been willing to foreground its generic nature, highlighting both the psychologically attenuated and symbolically etched stereotypy of its characters, as well as the degree to which these characters are dissociated from the narrative events and thus tend to be victims of generic plotting rather than agents within it. One of the greatest of all romancers, Nathaniel Hawthorne – whose *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) some may care to read as the faithfully adapted source for *The Piano* — admitted as much as long ago as 1851, when he wrote in the Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*:

[The novel] is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. [The romance] ... has fairly a right to present [the truth of the human heart] under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. If he think fit, also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of his picture. He will be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and, especially, to mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavour, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the public. He can hardly be said, however, to commit a literary crime even if he disregard this caution.

As it happens cinema has tended, like the romance, to foreground its generic character. No doubt this is because no other art form has been quite as candid about its commercial basis: the mass production and mass consumption of film make it more likely to emphasise genre as its textual foundation since it is a crucial selling point — there are specific and voracious audiences for the thriller, the horror picture, the western; indeed there are specific audiences for the star-driven sub-genres, such as the Schwarzenegger film, the Meg Ryan film, and so on. But this institutional effect may be read as another aspect of cinema's postmodern inclination, partly because it has had its effect upon the figuration of cinematic character and the dissociated relationship between character and plot, and partly too because it layers the textual experience in such a way as to disturb the mimetic contract in another way. For to recognise the mark of genre is to dispel the first correlation between sign and referent and throw the text back onto its elemental figurality, foregrounding the opacity of the sign and its connectedness to other signs, and so short circuiting the mechanisms of realism. This is especially so when the genres are dense and imperative: the metaphoricity of the genre itself becomes the medium of expression, a second-order language which baffles the transparency of the first-order language, the cinematic image (the many anti-McCarthyist genre pictures — such as *High Noon* (Zinneman, 1952) or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel, 1956) — are good examples of this.)

2

It is against the background of these observations on novel and film that I wish now to return to my dangling query: if the inclinations of the novelistic and cinematic media diverge (and perhaps it is this that explains the old maxim that the worst novels make the best films), then what is it proper to ask of a film that purports to be an adaptation of a novel? Jane Campion's adaptation of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* has been read as offensively improper by some — Don Anderson simply referred to it as a 'travesty' and declared 'I'm mad as

hell, and I'm not taking it anymore!<sup>13</sup> – while others have been rapturous in praise of the film as film, such as William Shriver, who offered the view:

Jane Campion, in her films *An Angel at My Table* (1990), *The Piano* (1993), and now *The Portrait of a Lady*, has proved herself to be a filmmaker of the very highest order, belonging to a select tier of artists including directors such as Ford, Welles, Renoir, Mizoguchi and not very many others. *Portrait*, like her two previous films, shows an artist in full command, willing to take enormous risks and able to rouse an audience with startling visual poetry.<sup>14</sup>

This kind of difference of opinion, in fact, seems rooted in what might be perceived as Campion's expropriation of Isabel from Henry James and, further, from novelistic culture itself for her own cinematic ends. Perhaps it is that, indeed, that is proposed in the opening segment of the film (a prologue of sorts in which various contemporary young women discuss thrilling literary kisses, which in every other way might strike us as irrelevant): an announcement of expropriation, as the audience is alerted to the fact that what follows is a contemporary feminine reading of the James text. 'I am Isabel', Campion tells the camera in Peter Lang's and Kate Ellis's documentary *Jane Campion and the Portrait of a Lady* (1996), and she goes on to assert: 'I suppose every woman is'. Campion's 'portrait', it must be assumed, is in part, and no doubt ineluctably, a self-portrait; but by virtue of that it must also be a re-authorising of the original Jamesian narrative, or rather a momentary appropriation of that narrative which is now read as reiterative rather than singular ('every woman is'). But then, that narrative had always been reiterative, since James himself had appropriated it from other hands for his

<sup>13</sup> Anderson's recall of Peter Finch's outrage in *Network* is apt, as it too was provoked by the deleterious effect of the drift from word to image in our culture; Don Anderson, 'Portrait of a Boot Sniffer', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 1997.

<sup>14</sup> William Shriver, 'The Portrait of a Lady', Internet reference: <http://us.imdb.com/cache/urls/title+82358> link: Shriver – Global-Reach Internet Productions.

own purposes; and he did so precisely because he recognised that to author a text was not simply a self-satisfying expression of one's aesthetic sensibility — it was to enter the arena of textuality with one's own inclinations, inevitably with a view towards tilting, in one way or another.

James got it, in my view, from George Eliot, who in *Middlemarch* had taken the Gothic heroine out of the dark pages of the romance and re-positioned her in rural, novelistic England, not forgetting nevertheless to provide her with a vampiric ghoul in Casaubon, a romantic hero in Ladislaw, and an emotionally tumultuous journey from a landscape of Protestant innocence to the very centre of Gothic wickedness, Catholic Rome, at which point the full horror of her predicament begins to appear to her.<sup>15</sup> Traumatized and trapped (even by the dead hand of the ghoul by his 'will'), Dorothea is thus positioned in the narrative precisely as Emily St Aubert and others before her, and like them she is not left to negotiate her own way out of this predicament; rather, the plot takes her in hand in another way. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) Eliot had offered the view that 'the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. "Character," says Novalis, "is destiny." But not the whole of our destiny.'<sup>16</sup> Demurring thus at Novalis's observation on the consequences of personality, Eliot permitted herself the liberty of plotting Dorothea's destiny from above. Thus it was that Mr Casaubon came to meet his mortal destiny, a plot device that liberated Dorothea from the Gothic narrative in which she was enmeshed and freed her for the machinations of the romantic

<sup>15</sup> See my 'The Gothic Game', *Sydney Studies in English* 15 (1989-90), 106-24, for a more extended discussion of the geography and religious politics of the Gothic genre; and see Gilbert and Gubar, for an extended discussion of the Gothic element in *Middlemarch*.

<sup>16</sup> *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 401-2.

The consequence of this is that Eliot's is clearly a more deterministic outlook than James's — and, indeed, James's explorations of character are necessarily predicated upon a free-willed protagonist.

narrative that would culminate in her marriage to Ladislaw. It was a common enough ruse, but it was one even Eliot had scoffed at almost twenty years before the publication of *Middlemarch*, when she lampooned ‘silly novels by lady novelists’ who take as their heroines

the ideal woman in feelings, faculties, and flounces. For all this, she as often as not marries the wrong person to begin with, and she suffers terribly from the plots and intrigues of the vicious baronet; but even death has a soft place in his heart for such a paragon, and remedies all mistakes for her just at the right moment. The vicious baronet is sure to be killed in a duel, and the tedious husband dies in his bed, requesting his wife, as a particular favour to him, to marry the man she loves best, and having already dispatched a note to the lover informing him of the comfortable arrangement.<sup>17</sup>

George Eliot altered only the husband’s request, not the contrivance.

James was known to admire *Middlemarch*, but he shared none of Eliot’s reservations regarding the consequences of human personality – for him, in a very meaningful sense, character *was* destiny: ‘What,’ he inquired, ‘is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?’<sup>18</sup> That is why the earliest (not the first, but

<sup>17</sup> George Eliot, ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,’ originally published *Westminster Review*, October 1856; reprinted in *George Eliot: Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A.S.Byatt and Nicholas Warren (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 141.

<sup>18</sup> Henry James, ‘The Art of Fiction’ (1884), in *The House of Fiction: Essays on the Novel by Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1957), p. 34. In the ‘Preface’ to *The Portrait of a Lady* James goes into this issue in some depth, noting, for example:

‘I was myself so much more antecedently conscious of my figures than of their setting – a too preliminary, a preferential interest in which struck me as in general such a putting of the cart before the horse. I might envy, though I couldn’t emulate, the imaginative writer so constituted as to see his fable first and to make out its agents afterwards: I could think so little of any fable that didn’t need its agents positively to launch it; I could think so little of any situation that didn’t depend for its interest on



historically the earliest, in America) portrait of Isabel highlights her affinity with the Gothic – her unworldly innocence, her self-cloistering, her predilection for darkness, enclosure, melancholy surroundings, as in the mysterious room known as the ‘office’:

The place owed much of its mysterious melancholy to the fact that it was properly entered from the second door of the house, the door that had been condemned, and that it was secured by bolts which a particularly slender little girl found it impossible to slide. She knew that this silent, motionless portal opened into the street; if the sidelights had not been filled with green paper she might have looked out upon the little brown stoop and the well-worn brick pavement. But she had no wish to look out, for this would have interfered with her theory that there was a strange, unseen place on the other side – a place which became to the child’s imagination, according to its different moods, a region of delight or of terror.

It was in the ‘office’ still that Isabel was sitting on that melancholy afternoon of early spring which I have just mentioned. At this time she might have had the whole house to choose from, and the room she had selected was the most depressed of its scenes. She had never opened the bolted door, nor removed the green paper (renewed by other hands) from its sidelights; she had never assured herself that the vulgar street lay beyond. (p. 25)

In highlighting this affinity James is making the point that his narrative will remove Isabel from these Gothic entrapments, even if it delivers her over to Gilbert Osmond, a figure every bit as ghoulishly wicked as Montoni or Casaubon. The fundamental difference, however, is that Isabel chooses union with this monster, and then is obliged to live with the consequences of her choice, as Dorothea is not.

In portraying Isabel, then, James may be seen to be evolving the novelistic character in accordance with the inclinations of

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the nature of the persons situated, and thereby on their way of taking it.’ (*The Portrait of a Lady*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p.viii. Subsequent quotations refer to this edition and are incorporated in the text.

the medium itself.<sup>19</sup> And so too may *Campion* in her portrayal, which effectively returns Isabel to the realm of Gothic romance. It is time, then, to observe more closely these two portraits.

In the film *Isabel* (Nicole Kidman) is discovered beneath the trees of Gardencourt resisting the unwanted attentions of Lord Warburton (Richard E. Grant); she is thereby immediately figured as the unwilling begetter of male attention and thus ever in peril of losing herself — that is, of losing both her self-possession and herself as possession — to the proprietorial order of the male. As other suitors appear her predicament appears dizzyingly recurrent, a sense imaged in the swirling camera movements that characterise her point of view, particularly during Osmond's (John Malkovich) courting of her. *Campion*, in fact, makes insistent use of the movement in and out of Isabel's point of view — a narrational feature which is part of the stock in trade of cinema, but which is stylistic in James — and she highlights this impressionistic swirl by tightly framing the object of Isabel's attention, cropping from forehead to chin, suggesting her inability to comprehend the totality of the character and the situation with which she is confronted. These effects reach their highest pitch in the proposal scene, where Osmond mesmerically circles Isabel while declaring his love for her: a reeling Isabel perceives only his lips, which massively occupy the screen. At the end of the film the initial scene in the arbour with Warburton recurs with Isabel this time subjected to the more urgent and more clearly erotic demands of Caspar

<sup>19</sup> To underscore his debt to Dorothea in the creation of Isabel, James has her muse on the predicament in which she was placed on receipt of her inheritance in such a way as to make the connection between her own and Dorothea's situation and inclinations unmistakable: 'At bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience, to some more prepared receptacle. What would lighten her own conscience more effectually than to make it over to the man with the best taste in the world? Unless she should have given it to a hospital there would have been nothing better she could do with it' (p. 427). Lydgate's hospital provides, of course, the opportunity for Dorothea to relieve herself of some of her 'burden'.

Goodwood (Viggo Mortensen) from whom she flees, stopping at the door and turning in freeze frame in an image of wretched indecision, frozen in the crisp winter of Gardencourt amid the competing stresses of a situation beyond her control.

In the novel, on the other hand, things are somewhat different.<sup>20</sup> In James's text Isabel appears in an image set in tense equipoise against the competing impulses and constraints of the social order of mannered society to which she will now be exposed:

While this exchange of pleasantries took place between the two Ralph Touchett wandered away a little, with his usual slouching gait, his hands in his pockets, and his little rowdyish terrier at his heels. His face was turned towards the house, but his eyes were bent musingly on the lawn; so that he had been an object of observation to a person who had just made her appearance in the ample doorway for some moments before he perceived her. (p. 15)

The play of ambiguity across this image is as delicate as that of the light and shade in the arbours of Gardencourt. Framed by the doorway Isabel appears as object, a true portrait of a lady, and so perhaps she will become for Gilbert Osmond; but then it is Isabel who offers herself in this attitude, by which she is seen to advantage, and moreover it is Isabel who is the spectator, her view taking in both the picturesque ceremony of tea that is taking place as well as the shambling figure of Ralph, the male here becoming the unknowing object of the female gaze. And her hesitation at the doorway which occasions these possibilities is similarly ambiguous: while it gives her command of the scene and provides her with an advantageous situation in which to be discovered, it also might denote a reticence, bordering on trepidation, before the intricacies and indeed the hostilities of the world at large, a feeling which, in the event, will prove valid — and these are precisely the

<sup>20</sup> The novel, incidentally, eschews the pathetic fallacy indulged by the film at its conclusion: Ralph is buried in high summer.

ambiguities that play about her situation in the ‘office’, quoted above.

If, in the film, Isabel’s character loses this ambiguity, so too do those around her. Malkovich’s scenery-chewing, over-sexed Osmond makes no secret of his Gothic lineage, and the implication is that his masculine presence awakens Isabel’s sexuality, whereas the implication in the book is that Osmond’s effete refinement might offer her the chance of it remaining dormant. The novel is once again ambiguous, but Isabel’s succumbing to Osmond’s proclamation of love – ‘I’m absolutely in love with you’ – must be read in the light of her flight from the confronting manhood of Caspar Goodwood, and also in the light of our awareness that she drew comfort from her unworldly seclusion behind the bolted door of the ‘office’:

The tears came into her eyes: this time they obeyed the sharpness of the pang that suggested to her somehow the slipping of a fine bolt – backward, forward, she couldn’t have said which. The words he had uttered made him, as he stood there, beautiful and generous, invested him as with the golden air of early autumn; but, morally speaking, she retreated before them — facing him still — as she had retreated in the other cases before a like encounter. ‘Oh don’t say that, please,’ she answered with an intensity that expressed the dread of having, in this case too, to choose and decide. (p. 310)

While the image of the bolt suggests both phallic menace and entrapment, it suggests also the desire for seclusion, just as it must also suggest release — a complex of ambiguities that still play about this image in its final form, as lightning bolt in Caspar Goodwood’s kiss, about which the prologue to the film makes so much, but of which the novel makes so much more:

She clasped her hands; her eyes were streaming with tears. ‘As you love me, as you pity me, leave me alone!’

He glared at her a moment through the dusk, and the next instant she felt his arms about her and his lips on her own lips. His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had

least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession. (p. 591)

As a central symbolic motif, the ‘bolt’ functions in *The Portrait of a Lady* in the same way as the ‘key’ did in *Middlemarch*,<sup>21</sup> and thus seems to be another of James’s specific references to the relationship obtaining between his and the earlier text. Yet, if the image of the bolt signals the possibility of release, it is a problematic liberation, implicated as it is here in another ‘act of possession’, and so cannot be equated with a release from those constraints that circumscribe and repress the finished self; rather what might be released is the possibility of change, growth, and new understandings of the self.

It is precisely the effect of this kind of release that occupies Isabel in James’s own favourite episode for which, in every sense I think, there is no filmic equivalent – Isabel’s long meditation in chapter 42. It is worth quoting James’s Preface at length on this, for everything that he has to say about it underscores the manner in which the novel as medium – that is, in its essential figurative mechanisms — determines a sense of the human subject fundamentally at variance with that subject as figured by cinema, so reliant upon the semiotics of incident and image:

The interest was to be raised to its pitch and yet the elements to be kept in their key; so that, should the whole thing duly impress, I may show what an ‘exciting’ inward life may do for the person leading it even while it remains perfectly normal. And I cannot think of a more consistent application of that ideal unless it be in the long statement, just beyond the middle of the book, of my young woman’s extraordinary meditative vigil on the occasion that was to become for her such a landmark. Reduced to its essence, it is but the vigil of searching criticism; but it throws the action further forward than twenty ‘incidents’ might have done. It was designed to have all the vivacity of incident and all the economy of picture. She sits up, by her dying fire, far into the night, under the spell

<sup>21</sup> See Gilbert and Gubar for a full discussion of this motif in *Middlemarch*.

of recognitions on which she finds the last sharpness suddenly wait. It is a representation of her suddenly *seeing*, and an attempt withal to make the mere still lucidity of her act as ‘interesting’ as the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate. It represents, for that matter, one of the identifications dear to the novelist, and even indispensable to him; but it all goes on without her being approached by another person and without her leaving her chair. (p. xvii)

Working from the interior of the psyche outward towards an elaborated reality, James presents a portrait of a lady of almost unexampled moral depth. Not the least of the fascinations of this episode is James’s choice of the imagery of the Gothic, refined and metaphorised into an idiom of consciousness, for Isabel’s reflections upon her married life. Thus she recognises herself as property within a sophisticated order of masculine propriety that aligns her with, but does not identify her with, her forebears in the romance tradition:

Her mind was to be his – attached to his own like a small garden plot to a deer park. He would rake the soil gently and water the flowers; he would weed the beds and gather the occasional nose-gay. It would be a pretty piece of property for a proprietor already far-reaching. (p. 432)

Similarly the image of domestic entrapment occurs to Isabel — an imagery literalised in the Gothic narrative, as in Montoni’s castle for Emily St Aubert, or the nailed up house for Ada — but here it functions as a metaphor for her emotional and psychological state. It is, again, not the exteriority of circumstance that concerns James, but Isabel’s apprehension of the interiority of her moral being:

He had told her he loved the conventional; but there was a sense in which this seemed a noble declaration. In that sense, that of the love of harmony and order and decency and of all the stately offices of life, she went with him freely, and his warning had contained nothing ominous. But when, as the months elapsed, she had followed him farther and he had led her into the mansion of his own habitation, then, *then* she had seen where she really was.

She could live it over again: the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling. Between those four walls she had lived ever since; they were to surround her for the rest of her life. It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air; Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her. Of course it had not been physical suffering; for physical suffering there might have been a remedy. She could come and go; she had her liberty; her husband was perfectly polite. He took himself so seriously; it was something appalling. Under all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under his good nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers. (pp. 429-30)

The point of this imagery is not that Isabel has relapsed into the figure of the Gothic heroine, but that that figure in part informs her sense of self. However, if a Gothic-inspired terror of her predicament seizes Isabel, it does not blind her to the extent that she is unable to recognise herself as implicated in bringing about this terrible destiny. As I mentioned before, the novel as medium conceives of the self as written in and out of the choices that characterise that self in the complex texture of the moral life, and amid the ambiguities of the Jamesian narrative one acquires this kind of literacy slowly.

The amplitude of Isabel's maturity in the novel is measured by the degree to which she perceives the Gothic character of her plight, while simultaneously recognising that she has promoted a misreading of herself even as she has misread others:

There were times when she almost pitied him, for if she had not deceived him in intention she understood how she must have done so in fact. She had effaced herself when he first knew her; she had made herself small, pretending there was less of her than there really was. It was because she had been under the extraordinary charm that he, on his side, had taken pains to put forth. He was not changed; he had not disguised himself, during the year of his courtship, any more than she... He admired her — he had told her why: because she was the most imaginative woman he had known. It might very well

have been true; for during those months she had imagined a world of things that had no substance. She had had a more wondrous vision of him, fed through charmed visions and oh such a stirred fancy! — she had not read him right. (p. 426)

This is precisely the point at which Campion's feminist Gothic portrayal departs most dramatically from James's portrait, and one must assume that this is as conscious and intertextually polemical a decision as James's determination to require his heroine to deal with the consequences of her 'misreading', precisely at the point where Eliot had relieved Dorothea of the responsibility of dealing with the consequences of hers. For responsibility only makes sense when one is an agent in the affair, as the novel's Isabel sees herself at least in part as being; responsibility is an absurdity, however, when one is the passivated victim, and that certainly is the role played by Nicole Kidman here:

For the role Kidman had to get inside the mind of a woman who was trapped in a manipulative and tyrannical relationship and whose girlish feistiness and independence had been replaced by listless passivity.... 'I have been in relationships which have been emotionally abusive in a way,' says Kidman, 'and this is emotional abuse, not so much physical abuse, although some of it is, but you understand the deep, deep shame and the inability to get out.'<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the film plot mechanics deeply underscore this passivated conception of character. Much of the second half of the film is given over to a series of blunt revelations for Isabel of a kind which, in the novel, she arrives at through the agency of her own introspective and reflective intelligence. Thus, in the film, the Countess Gemini is obliged to tell a horrified Isabel the truth of Pansy's parentage, yet it would have been a simple matter to render cinematically the following scene:

'I said nothing, right or left — never a word to a creature, if you can believe that of me: on my honour, my dear, I speak of

<sup>22</sup>Anne Summers, 'Portrait of an Actress', *The Good Weekend, The Sydney Morning Herald* supplement, 1 February 1997, p. 26.



the thing to you now, after all this time, as I've never, never spoken. It was to be enough for me, from the first, that the child was my niece — from the moment she was my brother's daughter. As for her veritable mother — !' But with this Pansy's wonderful aunt dropped — as, involuntarily, from the impression of her sister-in-law's face, out of which more eyes might have seemed to look at her than she had ever had to meet.

She had spoken no name, yet Isabel could but check, on her own lips, an echo of the unspoken. (pp. 542-3)

The point here is that, although prompted, Isabel arrives at the truth herself, a truth at least in part evident to her since her long vigil in chapter 42, which concludes with her 'gazing at a remembered vision — that of her husband and Madame Merle unconsciously and familiarly associated' (p. 435), where clearly Isabel is already unconsciously associating her husband and Madame Merle 'familiarly', that is, as family. Such suspicions, and ultimately such insights, are available to the novel's Isabel not least because she receives explicit forewarnings concerning the character of Osmond and the intentions of Madame Merle.<sup>23</sup> Unwarned, unguarded, and consequently innocent beyond suspicion, Kidman's Isabel is simply uncomprehending, and that is why revelations continue to buffet her as her world dissolves into tears against a background of autumnal melancholy, culminating in her rainswept meeting with Madame Merle (Barbara Hershey) at which the latter declares she has been 'everything' to her. It is a climactic moment in the film, confirming Isabel as the creature of the plots of others, the decentred subject of another's writing, but it does not function in the same way in the novel, where Madame Merle's claim may be read as an aspect of her own egocentricity, and where Isabel's introspections have revealed to her the ways in which she herself has taken a hand in the fashioning of her own destiny.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, her conversation with Mrs Touchett on p. 333.

For this reason it is a deeply ironic moment when Osmond utters the line, taken directly from the novel: 'I believe we should take responsibility for the consequences of our actions'; for Isabel has every right to read this predatory, malicious Osmond's moral stance as merely self-interested, and to view herself as victim to the actions of others and thus effectively responsible for none of her own. But it is the film's Gothic appropriation of the narrative which creates the ironic context that interrogates Osmond's moral position in this way, revealing it to be merely strategic as it simultaneously conjures and exploits the image of the individual as centred, independent moral agency. In the novel, however, although not without its own ironic qualification, this same line has sufficient validity to precipitate a moral dilemma for Isabel:

'Because I think we should accept the consequences of our actions, and what I value most in life is the honour of a thing.'

He spoke gravely and almost gently; the accent of sarcasm had dropped out of his tone. It had a gravity which checked his wife's quick emotion; the resolution with which she had entered the room found itself caught in a mesh of fine threads. (p. 537)

Bound up as it is with Osmond's superficiality and egocentricity, and compromised as it is by specious traditions of 'honor' which function only to constrain and preserve privileges and proprieties, the meaning of Osmond's statement nevertheless still exerts a pull on Isabel's moral consciousness. For the image of the 'mesh of fine threads' recognises not just the way in which Isabel is ensnared by circumstance but recognises also the intricately woven texture of the moral life in which she understands herself as implicated. In a sense, acceptance of the consequences of one's actions is the ethic implicit in Isabel's novelistic growth; indeed, it is the ethic implicit in the shift from the romance narrative to the novelistic narrative. And that is why the novel's Isabel will ultimately return to Italy — motivated, it's true, by ambiguous impulses — and it is why the film's Isabel will not.

No doubt the temptation for the literary scholar is to judge Campion's film as either unfaithful or misconceived. It appears that in this movement from literary word to cinematic image what is sacrificed is one of the most complex pictures of a woman's moral maturity that our literature has to offer. But, as I have tried to sketch here, the business of the contemporary politicised romance narrative is to confront the concept of the individual that underwrites that complexity and to cast suspicion on it as the factitious effect of its cultural moment. Campion's portrait, then, is peculiarly exemplary: an acknowledged *hommage* which nevertheless pursues its own inclinations and those of its medium, just as, in some respects, James had done with his portrait over one hundred years before. So Campion's is a text that takes its place within the historical evolution of narrative and meaning, and, like James's text before it, it is a dialogue with, perhaps an argument with, that history. And if I find myself falling back on terms such as 'moral simplicity' with which to frame my sense of its shortcomings before the novel that occasioned it, it has the strength to question in turn the validity of this category and my use of it, even when — and this is the crucial point — that sense and that use have been significantly fashioned by a reading of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, and by the conceptions of and figurations of subjectivity produced by that novelistic culture of which it is a glittering example.

Where James wrote a contemporary drama, Campion has filmed a period picture: the first invites a naturalistic approach, the second is inevitably a stylised work. James told a tale of the moral life in which an ensnared and yet effectively volitional individual 'affronts her destiny' — which is the very opposite of falling victim to it — and proceeds painfully through a narrative of mutation and maturation, in the fashioning of which she is implicated as much as anybody else. Campion has crafted a Gothic romance in which narrative progress is measured in disillusion and disenchantment, and by which the essential and essentially static nature of her Isabel is revealed, a stasis wrought by various forms of masculine constraint of the feminine, a stasis dramatically imaged in the final shot of the

film. These portraits of Isabel Archer by different hands gaze at one another across a cultural and historical divide, each reading the other critically from their point of view, and each, in a way, affronting the destiny of the aesthetic medium in which they discover themselves.