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WRITERS ON THE SCREEN: THE LITERARY OSCARS

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This paper looks at the screen adaptations of literary classics which have been awarded an Oscar (or received a nomination) for the categories Best Director, Best Screenplay or Best Picture. The list of films is reviewed from a chronological point of view following the diverse literary periods in English literature, rather than the date when the films were released. What emerges from this look at the Oscar are the gaps in the relationship between the literary and the film classics: which authors and periods are overlooked, and, also, which particular works or literary genres. The contention is that, since the younger generations are film spectators rather than readers, cinema might be building an alternative literary canon.

One of the most frequently overlooked categories of the Oscars is that for best writing. This is a shifting category, as can be seen from the fact that the actual names of the awards for cinema screen writing have suffered sixteen changes in seventy years. These changes of denomination have been justified by the Academy's wish to distinguish between story and screenplay, and also between adapted and original material. Thus, between 1940 and 1956 (with an interval between 1947 and 1949) there were three Oscars awarded for achievement in writing every year, instead of the now habitual two. The titles of the awards' categories also reflect the widening range of sources used for adaptation; today the category "screenplay based on material previously produced or published" may include sources as varied as literary classics, best-selling novels, stage plays, television plays and series, comics, short length films, newspaper articles, Broadway musicals, autobiographies, biographies, essays, and even records or feature films, foreign or American.

It is my aim to delimit a narrower field here and to consider how Literature, with a capital L, and the Oscars have interacted since the beginning in 1927 until the 70th edition of 1997. The Oscars may not be a reliable indicator of the quality of films in general and of literary adaptations in particular, but they may be a convenient starting point to consider at large whose work is adapted, how and when. It is my intention to use the model of comparative research followed by Tom Costello (1994), listing the adaptations by literary author and not by film, and thus see what stories Hollywood picks out of the rich treasure of written fiction for its own ends. I have focused on the classics for practical reasons given the scope of this essay, but in all fairness the first conclusion to be drawn from looking at the sources of the awarded and nominated

screenplays is that the classics (dead or alive) are badly underrepresented. The figures show that out of 773 nominations and Oscars for writing, 450 approximately (58,2%) correspond to original screenplays and stories, whereas about 323 (41,7%) correspond to adaptations of all kinds. Yet, within this category, the 140 films I am considering (taking into account the categories of best writing, best director and best film) amount to just about 20% of the adaptations and less than 8% of the total number of screenplays.

The literary adaptations can be said to be roughly of two types: adaptations of copyright-free work by dead authors and adaptations of recently deceased or live authors bounded by copyright. As far as the Oscars are concerned, the adaptation of living classics means that a limited number of literary authors have been nominated or awarded for re-writing their own work and in some cases that by other literary authors. This type of re-writing which involves not only a transfer from a narrative medium to another but also the author's revision of his or her own text, something which is presumably also a literary activity, is in dire need of research. When we speak of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, Alan Bennett's *The Madness of King George*, Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* and *Equus*, Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*, Robert Bolt's *A Man for all Seasons*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Baby Doll*, Terence Rattigan's *Separate Tables* —all nominated screenplays by the author of the original work— we should specify whether we mean the original literary work or the screenplay and think twice before we reply that the screenplay is not a literary text.

If we consider the Oscars for writing from a literary chronological point of view —that is, following the history of Literature, rather than that of the awards— the first phenomenon that appears is that of the Shakespearean adaptation. Ten films based on Shakespeare have received nominations in the categories of writing, director or picture spanning almost the whole history of the Oscars. Yet, what is remarkable is the repetition of the titles and the insistence on singling out either canonical films or films remotely inspired by the Bard. Thus, Olivier and Branagh' *Hamlet* (1948 and 1996, respectively) drew the Academy's attention —but not Zeffirelli's with Mel Gibson; Zeffirelli's own *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) followed in the wake of the M-G-M 1936 film, but Baz Luhrman's innovative, teenage-oriented 1995 version with Leonardo di Caprio was bypassed, despite the commendable example of the highly regarded *West Side Story* (a popular Shakespeare adapting a musical based on *Romeo and Juliet*). Branagh and Olivier also replicated each other in their versions of *Henry V* (1946, 1989), whereas the 1953 film of *Julius Caesar* and the 1935 version of a *Midsummer Might's Dream* were also noted. Perhaps the most interesting of the Shakespearean nominations is that of Akira Kurosawa as best director for *Ran*, a samurai version of *King Lear* (1985) that got no nomination for best adaptation despite its original rewriting of Shakespeare.

The Oscars pass through the eighteenth century on tiptoe, though two Oscars went to reputed playwrights Christopher Hampton and John Osborne for adapting respectively *Dangerous Liaisons* and the multi-awarded *Tom Jones* (best screenplay, director and film in 1963). The great novelty as far as the nineteenth century is concerned is that the Oscars regard American and foreign language classics, apart from the prestige British classics. Interestingly, the first half of the nineteenth century is very little explored (or exploited?) by Hollywood: Emma Thompson won an Oscar for rewriting Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* as a romantic novel, but only *Ivanhoe* (1952) and *Young Frankenstein* (1974) —believe it or not, the only version of Mary Shelley's novel that has interested the Academy— have left a rather feeble imprint. Later Victorian novels beautifully adapted for the screen include Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon* filmed by Stanley Kubrick, and Hardy's *Tess* filmed by Roman Polanski. The Gothic novel is almost practically untouched, except for the 1939 version of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* —with Olivier as Heathcliff— and the 1931 version of Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Charles Dickens follows Shakespeare's footsteps as most popular author ever adapted: the titles based on his novels that are awarded or nominated include *David Copperfield*, Lean's excellent *Great Expectations*, *Oliver!* (a joint adaptation based on

a stage musical), and the little known *Little Dorrit* (1988). The other big icons of British literature favoured by the members of the Academy are the popular Rudyard Kipling and H. Rider Haggard: *The Man who Would Be King*, *Captains Courageous* and *King Solomon's Mines* enchanted the academy, as did one of the strangest adventures ever written or filmed: Francis Ford Coppola and John Milius' version of Joseph Conrad's, *Heart of Darkness,* filmed as *Apocalypse Now* in 1979.

Among the Americans, it might well be that in the near future Henry James's name will loom as large as that of E.M. Forster among the adapted British writers. *The Heiress*, based on James' *Washington Square* and the play by Ruth and Augustus Goetz was a hit in 1949, but just this year the adaptation of *The Wings of the Dove* has been nominated as best adapted screenplay while Agniezscka Holland filmed a new version of *Washington Square* or *The Heiress*. The other award-winner classic film based on an American 19th century source *Little Women* (1932) was also remade recently but with less lustre. The phenomenon of the appropriation of foreign-language classics for Hollywood purposes deserves in itself a separate paper, but suffice to say that Hollywood has re-written Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*, Hugo's *Les Miserables* and Tolstoi's *War and Peace* and that future generations are more likely to know these stories through the Hollywood films in English than ever to read the original novels.

Plenty of twentieth-century authors have received the Academy's attentions, often as screen writers, but a great majority of these are little known. In other cases, some classics or living literary writers have become known worldwide thanks to interesting adaptations. In addition, some so-called minor authors are now well under way of being regarded as 'proper' literary authors partly because of the imaginative use film has made of their texts —such as those by Daphne du Maurier. If we look at the twentieth-century dead authors touched by the Oscar, the Americans and the Britons share the honours as equals. Among the British, the biggest, classiest name is E.M. Forster whose adaptations (*A Room with a View*, *Howard's End*, *A Passage to India*) are in themselves a remarkable phenomenon involving the team Merchant-Ivory and the writer Ruth Prawer Jabvhala, but also the talented David Lean. The work of other Modernists also graces the Oscar: there are remarkable versions of D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* and *Sons and Lovers*, and of James Joyce's "The Dead". Less known is the 1965 film of *Ulysses*, nominated as best adaptation —which it probably was not. The names of John Braine, Christopher Isherwood (the inspiration for *Cabaret*), Graham Greene, Joyce Cary and T.E. Lawrence have also lent their prestige to the Oscar, but, curiously enough, the name of George Orwell does not appear on the credits of the wonderful *Brazil* (1985). This film, a post-modern version of *1984* co-scripted by playwright Tom Stoppard did get, ironically, a nomination for best original screenplay. A similar situation is repeated in the case of Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, based on an uncredited short story by Julio Cortázar.

A number of popular classics such as Daphne du Maurier, Arnold Bennett, Terence Rattigan, Noël Coward, C.S. Forester and W. Somerset Maugham also link their names to those of popular films getting Oscar awards and nominations. Yet, if there is a writer who personifies this fusion of the literary, the popular and film, that is Tennessee Williams whose plays *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Baby Doll*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *The Rose Tattoo* form almost their own Oscar category for writing. The work of John Steinbeck is also loved by the academy: *East of Eden*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* were titles once heard in the awards ceremony. And so was the name of Truman Capote, whose *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *In Cold Blood* are known as favourite titles by many filmgoers. Ernest Hemingway also made his mark in film with his *A Farewell to Arms* and *For whom the Bell Tolls*, though many other American classics have interested Hollywood: Theodore Dreiser (*A Place in the Sun* is based on *An American Tragedy*), Sinclair Lewis, Robert Penn Warren, Katherine Anne Porter, Vladimir Nabokov, Edith Wharton, Eugene O'Neill, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Frank L. Baum, Thornton Wilder, Margaret Mitchell, Lillian Hellman, William Saroyan, and even the forgotten Nobel-prize winner Pearl S. Buck.

Among the writers other than British or American whose voices are heard through the nominated films - and not precisely to the foreign language film

category —are Julio Cortázar, Eric Maria Remarque, Karen Blixen, Colette, Alberto Moravia, Boris Pasternak, Manuel Puig, Nikos Kazantzakis, Milan Kundera and Antonio Skarmetta. Only the names of two living post-colonial writers have been associated to the Oscars for writing: Australian Thomas Keneally, author of *Schindler's List*, and Indian-Canadian Michael Ondatjee, author of *The English Patient*; as for African-american writers, only Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* has come close to inspiring an award-winning film. Spielberg's version of her book, however, became notorious because of the patronising way in which the Academy finally ignored it.

A remarkable circumstance if we look especially at the Oscars based on fiction written from the 1950s onwards is the important presence of drama, which faces up to the novel in a way it does not outside film. Anthony Burgess, John Fowles, Kazuo Ishiguro and even Irvine Welsh among the British share the honour of having inspired the nominated films with Robert Bolt, Peter Shaffer, Anthony Shaffer, Harold Pinter and Alan Bennett; Harold Pinter, in fact, was also nominated for adapting John Fowles' work. Among the Americans, the novel seems more popular: Philip Roth, E.L. Doctorow, William Styron, Anne Tyler and Alice Walker almost touch the Oscar, but only Arthur Miller and Edward Albee are named (together with Williams, of course). However, if we consider the phenomenal success of Neil Simon (regarded as a commercial rather than literary playwright) as screen writer and source playwright, the panorama changes. The literary short story leaves very few traces despite *Apocalypse Now* and *The Dead*, with the exception of *Shortcuts*, a remarkable adaptation of Raymond Carver's work. In fact, it should be noted that even though the novel is the most frequently adapted genre, the best adapters and the literary writers who tend to be awarded are playwrights, for the screenplay has a clear kinship with the stage play.

This very short overview will have presumably opened up a vast territory for research. Usually, adaptations are studied one by one, but the work of putting them in perspective and analysing the variable fashions and how their presence is felt in the film canon, festivals and awards has not been done. The Oscars offer a very convenient starting point for a project of this kind. If the proverbial aliens ever come and find a planet with no books but a good film library, they will see that in films the stories by literary writers face tough competition from other (minor?) writers and do not appear to be the world's favourites. In fact, ironically, the list of adapted authors I have presented to you may be the basis of an alternative literary canon if, as it seems, the younger generations grow up to be film viewers rather than book readers.