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A COMPANION TO

LITERATURE, FILM, AND ADAPTATION

EDITED BY

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Adapting the Unadaptable – The Screenwriter's Perspective

Diane Lake

When I was asked to write on "unfilmable" books – books that simply were too complex to be adapted to film – I was reluctant. I mean, I'm sorry – unfilmable? There's actually no such word in the dictionary. And there's *really* no such word in the lexicon of Hollywood. And, I would claim, there's no such animal.

If a book is released that's popular, if there's enough name recognition for the book, Hollywood will find a way to film it. In fact, the techniques available to the filmmaker are so varied that telling stories visually may be quite an effective way to bring a complicated story to life and make it *more* accessible for the average person than it would be if they were to read the book.

One might say, "But what if the story is all internal – a series of internal monologues if you will – how can film do that justice?" But my response is a question: *Who said the job of film is to do justice to the book?* To even ask if the film can do justice to the book is to fail to understand that the book is its own entity and, even though the film may be based on the book, the film is its own entity as well. The book cannot be a film on its own. Even if I put someone on screen reading the book word for word, the very act of having someone read the book *to* the viewer would change the nature of the book.

Reading is internal. When one reads the words on the page, one reads his or her own book. When I read *War and Peace*, my experience and understanding of the book is different than yours. Just as when I look at the Mona Lisa, my interpretation of the painting is not the same as yours. A book is not a vase, a static object to be photographed, to be represented in such a manner that everyone sees the same thing. A book is fluid, it is open to interpretation and every reader interprets it just

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a bit differently. As Thomas Leitch says, "texts remain alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten and that to experience a text in all its power requires each reader to rewrite it" (2007: 12–13).

So it's important to understand that the most literal screen interpretation of a book that one could imagine still wouldn't be the book itself. The book tells a story, the film based on that book tells a story. Yes, it's the job of the screenwriter to bring the book to life on the screen, but the very act of telling the story of the book on film will change the book. If an adaptor were to worry about being absolutely faithful to the book, scene for scene, the resulting film would – I assure you – be a bomb. As George Bluestone says, "It is as fruitless to say that film A is better or worse than novel B as it is to pronounce Wright's Johnson's Wax Building better or worse than Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*" (1957: 5–6).

So if the job of a screenwriter isn't to do the book justice, what is the job of the screenwriter when adapting a book?

The fundamental job of the screenwriter is to reach inside the story to its essence and to find a *new* way to tell it filmicly. The writer knows going in that the book is a complex entity unto itself and the film may never represent it fully, may never "do it justice." But that assumes the job of an adaptor is to be faithful to the book, and I can assure, as an adaptor, I've never thought that to be my job. My job is one of a detective, to some extent. I delve into the story and try to uncover its center, its spine. I ask myself what story is being told and what part of it would make a good film. For let's be honest, if I'm adapting a 500-page novel into a 110-page screenplay I know going in that I can't tell the whole story. Give me a miniseries and I might be able to do that. But since filmgoers aren't going to sit still for a twelve-hour film, I have to make choices.

The first step to making those choices is a careful reading of the text in question. The adaptor reads with an eye not to represent what is already in the book, not to translate it scene for scene, but to uncover the soul, if you will, of the book and to think about how to bring that "soul" to life through visual storytelling.

My method of reading a book is simple. As I read the book, I mark moments/scenes that do two things: (1) make for good visual representation in a film and (2) are crucial to the spine of the story. For example, if there's a scene where a husband slaps his wife and she pushes him down the stairs – neither of them realizing that their four-year-old daughter was peeking out her door and witnessed the whole thing – well, that's an important moment in the story for all three characters and it's visually interesting. So I put one vertical line in the margin of the book to mark that scene. If there's a scene in the book later where the wife shoots her husband, I put two vertical lines in the margin of the book to mark that scene. Two vertical lines means I *must* include it in the screenplay – that it's such a strong story point, is so integral to the telling of the story in question, that to leave it out is simply not an option. For example, in writing *Frida*, I put those two vertical lines next to the point in Hayden Herrera's biography where Frida Kahlo has her bus accident. It's simply a fact – any adaptation of Frida's life needs to include that scene. That

moment was so integral to her life that to leave it out of a film about her life would be an unthinkable choice. How one might choose to include it, to dramatize it, is up to the screenwriter, of course – but dramatize it you must.

After reading the book once and marking those scenes, I go back and reread only those scenes – to try and get the feel for whether or not I've got a movie using the scenes in question.

Does this mean I then weave together those scenes to write the screenplay? I wish it was that easy. Although I've just finished the most difficult part of the process of telling the story – deciding what to leave out – writing the screenplay is much more difficult than simply weaving the most film-worthy story moments together. The writing process is also going to require me to invent.

"Invent?" – you might ask. "Isn't there enough in the book already? After all, you've already admitted that you're leaving out the majority of the book itself, why in the world would you need to invent anything new to tell the story?"

The answer to that harkens back to something I said earlier – it's not my job to regurgitate the book. My job is to find its center and find visual ways of bringing the story I've uncovered to life.

So, while in the book, the husband who was pushed down the stairs may disappear for a couple of days before coming back home and begging his wife for her forgiveness, I may decide that for the screenplay I want to follow him out the door and see where he goes. For the film I want to write, it may be quite important to understand where he goes and what he does at this crucial point in the story. The novelist may have chosen to leave that a mystery, to let the reader imagine where he might have gone. But for the story I want to tell, I might think it important that the audience know what he did and why.

It's also interesting to think about how a screenwriter can sometimes *save* time in the telling of the story on film. A book might take three chapters to play out that scene of the wife pushing the husband down the stairs while their daughter watches – the novelist might want a chapter devoted to the scene from the point of view of each of the three characters. But on film, I can do it in a very short amount of time because one close-up of that little girl's face can show the audience what is going on inside her. In film, we don't tell, we show. And showing saves time.

So how do some of these thoughts manifest themselves in the films we see? Let's take a look at a film like *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007). The film is the story of Jean Dominique Bauby, a Frenchman in the prime of life who was struck down by locked-in syndrome – which paralyzed him completely. The only part of his body he could move was his eyelid. The film was based on a book but there was also a documentary made of Bauby's struggles with his affliction. I was up to write this book as a screenplay and was given the book and the documentary by the production company. I was beat out by the English writer Ronald Harwood – seems to me that Ron gets to write all the good stuff. Anyway, putting my envy aside, it's very interesting to read the book and watch the documentary and then see the

film. The film is fantastic, it's artistically stunning and it gets to the heart of the story that was told in the book and the documentary. But it's dramatically different. Harwood reached into that story and invented a visual way to tell the story that absolutely blows my mind. If Harwood had tried to be faithful to the book or the documentary, we would not be talking about this film because it either would never have been made or it would have been made and disappeared because people wouldn't have gone to see it. Harwood's invention made the film live and breathe and made Bauby's true story come to dramatic life. I mean think about it: was there ever a more "unfilmable" book than one about a man lying in a bed who can't move?

And let me tell you a couple of stories from the Lake chronicles about the process of adaptation in the real world and you'll see what I'm talking about when it comes to what the job of the screenwriter is in the process of adaptation for film. I'll tell you about two biopics I wrote – one of which was made and one of which is still in development hell.

Let's talk first about the one that has not yet been made: *Nancy*, a film I wrote for Paramount. *Nancy* is a biopic of Nancy Cunard. Cunard's father ran the famous shipping line and she was basically English aristocracy. But she rebelled against her family, went to Paris, and proceeded to live a bit of a wild and crazy life in the 1920s and 30s – the jazz age – including having a twenty-five-year-long love affair with a black jazz musician from Alabama named Henry Crowder. She was high-toned, sophisticated, fashionable, and connected while he had never gone to school and was a very simple man who loved jazz. A very famous director, whom we'll call "Charlie," was attached to this project – attached in the world of Hollywood means he promises to direct it if the studio puts up the money to make it. And the first step in that process is getting a screenwriter to write the script. So I pitched for the project and was hired by Paramount to write it for Charlie and a producer whom we'll call "Sam," who was also attached to the project. The studio sent me every book and magazine article that had ever been written about Cunard and sent me to Europe to do my research. I visited her ancestral home in rural England, the family home on Cavendish Square in London, tracked down her apartment in Paris, went to Venice and Barcelona to trace her steps, and even tracked down a farm in rural France where she had set up a printing press to publish new writers. I began actually writing the screenplay on the roof of the Hotel du Lac in Bellagio – where, across Lake Como, I could see the very expensive Villa d'Este where Cunard had stayed. I had planned to stay in Bellagio for a couple of days. I ended up staying for three weeks. I mapped out a great deal of the screenplay right there.

And the screenplay told the story of a Cunard who was pushed and pulled by the passions in her life: a Cunard who was troubled and unsure and, despite all her gay partying, often deeply unhappy, an alcoholic Cunard who died destitute and alone in Venice.

I turned the screenplay into the producer and the director and was confident I had written the best screenplay of my career. I still remember going to the first "notes" meeting. The notes meeting for a screenwriter is when you get the notes

from the producer, director, and/or studio on what they would like you to change in the next draft.

I remember vividly walking into the room where the director, producer, and several assistants were waiting for me – expecting to be told I was brilliant and had written the next Academy Award winning screenplay. Everyone was pleasant, we exchanged greetings, and then something odd happened. Neither the director nor the producer spoke. Neither of them wanted, I would later realize, to be the bearer of bad tidings. No, it was the producer's head of development who said it – softly, almost apologetically – I can still hear her voice: "Well, I have to say, this just isn't what we were looking for."

Huh? What? What could they possibly mean? I remember listening, truly shocked, to what they had to say. And what did they have to say?

Well, bottom line, "Cunard's story is just too depressing. Who wants to watch a tragedy? It's such a downer."

But . . . but . . . I wanted to protest, I wanted to talk about how not every story has a happy ending. And then it hit me – wait a minute. An even more relevant question is why were they surprised? After all, they're the ones who had decided to make a film of her life, they're the ones who sent me all the books and articles about her. What were they expecting?

And – you're not going to believe this – but guess what? *No one* on the production team – not the studio, the producer, or the director – had read any of those books or articles they had sent me about her life. Not one of them knew what her life story *was*.

Well how, then, you might ask, did this project even come to be? Why was Paramount interested?

I'll tell you why. Head of the studio at the time, whom we'll call "Ashley," had had a party. At the party was the director, Charlie, who was then directing a big Bruce Willis blockbuster for Paramount. With Charlie was his wife, whom we'll call "Margo," who was in the fashion world. Margo was a big fan of Cunard's because Cunard had been a very fashionable young woman – appearing as a model on the cover of *Vogue*, starting fashion trends because of her uniqueness, etc. Studio head Ashley mentioned, at a party, always wanting to do an interracial love story but in these times of political correctness not being able to do so – you just had to be very careful. Then Margo chimed in that they should do Nancy Cunard's story – the jazz age in Paris and Venice, the fashion world, *plus* she had this long love affair with a black jazz musician from Alabama. Ashley liked that – it was easier to tell an interracial love story that happened seventy-five years ago, after all. So Ashley told Margo, "Get Charlie to sign on to direct and I'll put it in development."

And that's how it happened. Everyone thought they were going to get a story about the kicky jazz age in Europe and the black and white love story of Nancy and her lover.

Oy.

But what they got was her whole story – and it was, indeed, sad. So I had two choices. I could walk away from the project and let them hire another writer to write another version of Nancy Cunard's story, or I could find a way to do it myself.

This is always a difficult choice for the screenwriter. On the one hand, you have principles that you want to stick to – especially in the story of a real person, you feel compelled to do that person justice, to really tell their story as it actually unfolded. But on the other hand, if another writer comes onboard, who's to say that he/she will *see* the story, will *understand* this person as you do? Maybe someone will come onboard who will exploit the story and make up bizarre happenings just to increase the audience appeal or something. If you truly love the story you're writing, there's this tremendous desire to protect it. So, in general, you want to stay with the project – you want to guard it from someone who might do it harm.

I liked Cunard. I felt for her. I understood her struggle. And even if they wanted to cut out some of the sadness of her life, I still wanted to write about her.

So my second draft wasn't a rewrite at all. I simply threw out the first draft and wrote a completely new script that focused on the more positive aspects of her life. I didn't play the story out to her later years when she became more depressed and the alcoholism overtook her – I stopped at a bittersweet moment in her love story with Henry rather than a devastating one. Even in Hollywood, bittersweet love stories are still OK from time to time. Thank heaven.

Thus, I wrote a script I'm quite happy with. Everyone was quite happy with it. But at the end of the day, Paramount just didn't think audiences would care enough about Cunard for her to bring people into the theaters. So unless an actress comes along who's important and bankable and insists on playing the part, I would be surprised if Paramount ever made it.

My film that did get made was *Frida*, released in 2002, directed by Julie Taymor and starring Salma Hyack. *Frida* was nominated for six Academy Awards in 2003 and was on many top 10 lists for the year. It was based on the wonderful biography by Hayden Herrera.

How did *Frida* come to be? In the early 1990s there were three competing Frida projects – one driven by Madonna, who collected Frida's art and wanted to play her in a film; a second driven by Jennifer Lopez, who also coveted the role; and then there was the project I would become involved in that was eventually produced by Miramax.

What would become the Miramax film began in 1991. And for the next five years they kept throwing writers at the project. I came on board in 1996 and worked on it through 1997. I got the project because I had just written a script on Berthe Morisot, the French Impressionist, that Columbia studios had optioned. And Hollywood being what it is, the *Frida* producers said "Oh, she writes films about women painters. We've got a woman painter." As if, of course, all women painters were alike. I mean, these two women lived in different times, on different continents and painted radically different kinds of art . . . not to mention the obvious, that they were in absolutely no way alike.

But, in any case, I got the job.

Upon being hired, I asked to see the previous drafts that the other seven or eight writers had done. I wanted to see why they had all been fired – what had those writers done that didn't please the studio/producers? I didn't want to make the same mistakes.

But the studio refused. They didn't want my vision skewed by what others had written. They wanted me to start fresh. So they gave me Herrera's book and sent me to Mexico to do my research and be inspired.

They did, however, after I pressed them, give me one note, one word of caution: "Don't make her a whiney victim."

Aha, I thought! That's it. That's why all the other writers failed – they made Frida a whiney victim.

But guess what, as I did my research I discovered that she was – shock – a bit of a whiney victim. Certainly being in the bus accident that crippled her shaped her life, she had back surgeries, she was in casts . . . it changed her. But there was more to the story. Frida actually had unnecessary surgeries to get Diego to stay with her. They were often separating – they ended up marrying twice – but he wouldn't leave her when she was going through surgery . . . hence her playing the victim to keep him closer to her.

So when I wrote my screenplay, I simply left that out. I focused on their relationship, on the infidelities, etc., but I tried very hard not to have her come across as a victim.

Salma Hyack, who didn't sign on to the project after reading the first five years of drafts, signed on after reading my draft. But after a second draft, I left the project because I was contractually obligated to write *Picasso* for Dustin Hoffman and John Davis Productions, so Miramax subsequently got several writers to fine-tune my *Frida* screenplay. But it remained pretty much intact, save for the third act. Being afraid of how Americans might react to the fact that Frida and Diego were communists, the studio took all the politics out of the third act. So when Frida climbs a pyramid with Trotsky and all of a sudden they're in love, you're going, "I'm sorry – how did that happen?" Well, in real life it happened as much because of the political and intellectual connection between them as it did the physical . . . but that's missing from the story, so there's a kind of hole there.

In any case, the film got made and I'm happy for that. More people – throughout time – will learn of Frida and her work and her life than ever would have known about her without the film. And, like any writer, the screenwriter who does adaptations wants to bring lives and worlds to life. And the nice thing about film is that it *is* accessible and will live forever.

In many ways, Frida's life *was* unfilmable – because no one could conceive filming those scripts of her as a whiney victim, and even if we were to film her actual whiney-victimy-life, my guess is that nobody would come. To make her life filmable meant making the choice to focus only on a *part* of that life. But, at the very least, we can all now see that part. And a little of Frida is better than no Frida at all.

As a screenwriter, I want to find stories to tell that are important. If my hands are tied so that I can't tell the complete story, I'm not going to flounce off in a huff that the industry doesn't understand what art is, I'm going to do my best to tell the essence of that story in whatever way I can that will please the powers that be as well as allow the script to be written. After all, writers and artists throughout history have worked at the pleasure of the king . . . now just replace "king" with "studio" and you get an idea of what today's screenwriter goes through. But, in the end, it's worth it. I get to work in what, to my mind, is the art form of our time. Do I always agree with the studio? Not by a long shot. But I fight for what I can, and sometimes I even win a battle or two and convince the studios to take a bit of a chance – and that, too, is what adaptation is all about.

So if there's an "unfilmable" book/story out there, I've yet to see it. The particular talent of the screenwriter needs to be to dig inside *any* story and find the movie – and with every book/story I'm sent, the adrenaline starts flowing as I read, ponder, reread . . . and then imagine the film that might be.

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