In/Fidelity
In/Fidelity:
Essays on Film Adaptation

Edited by
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For Suzanne Kranz, Kathryn Corrigan, and Anneliese Kranz

and

For Fred Caplan, Suzanne Zirkman, and Pete Caplan
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INTRODUCTION

DAVID L. KRANZ AND NANCY C. MELLERSKI

When we overhear people chat about fidelity and infidelity, we usually assume that they are interested in marital issues involving the monogamous ideal and its discontents—affairs and adultery. In the area of the arts, especially literature, we might next assume that critics or avid readers are discussing whether or not a translation is faithful to an original work of poetry or prose written in a different language. Indeed, there’s an old (and sexist) line that says translations are like wives: they can be faithful but not beautiful or beautiful but not faithful, never both. That is, literal translations may be more accurate, but relatively free ones are likely to be more attractive and engaging to readers of the second language. But the vocabulary of marital and translational faith is also a staple of film studies. Since the advent of motion pictures more than a century ago, filmmakers have borrowed from novels, plays, histories, and biographies, translating, as it were, words on a page to pictures on a screen and eventually to pictures and sound in movie houses, on television, and in other forms of advanced technology. Cinema has always been involved, then, in what came to be called adaptation, the transformation of printed works to another medium, and thus moviegoers, film critics, and eventually film scholars in academia began to speak often in terms of a film’s fidelity to its source, usually literary or dramatic.

Interest in cinematic fidelity has only been increased by the great success of these movie adaptations. Filmmakers initially turned to literature for more complex, well-known, and prestigious material, hoping to spread the attraction of the new medium into the middle classes. And they succeeded, as film became the premier art form in America during the last century (as measured by audience, anyway). But adaptations were not discontinued once the growth in film’s popularity was achieved. Indeed, in the United States today, two scholars estimate that adaptations represent a full third of Hollywood’s annual output, that their quality as measured by Academy Awards outstrips films made from original screenplays (especially since adaptations are outnumbered two to one), and that most of the biggest box-office winners over the years are adaptations.2
Part of the thrill of watching cinematic adaptations of canonical, famous, or best-selling literary works, we surmise, lies in witnessing how the personally remembered or culturally widespread understanding of those beloved artifacts is reproduced or transformed in the new medium. But even for those unfamiliar with cultural icons except to know some titles, there is the possibility of learning something that has cultural capital and that can be shared with others, regardless of whether a detailed comparison to the source is likely or possible. Thus, fidelity is an important issue in viewer response. Ultimately, adaptations involve the human desire for security and immortality. Relatively faithful adaptations play to our most conservative sense of culture, the idea that our famous literary ancestors and even recently canonized writers, both of whom have produced apparently lasting monuments of artistic greatness, will continue to be heard into the future. By faithful adaptation, the great works live in another medium and reach more minds and souls than can the printed word. *Homo faber* can think or dream that the civilization he built will not change despite the winds of time. Thus, there’s both big money and psychological satisfaction in film adaptation, and fidelity is no small part of the equation.

Although the reading public for canonical or “serious” literature, not to mention the play-going public for great drama (with the exception of Shakespeare, perhaps), is probably in a state of decline, we think it safe to say that the majority of filmgoers nationwide and perhaps worldwide, when they know a film is an adaptation, will compare it to its source and find it at least partly wanting if it lacks a good measure of fidelity. Thus the hackneyed post-cinematic remark, “I liked the book better,” is still oft heard. Also remarked and received, but less often, are versions of this comparative disappointment from journalistic reviewers and members of college and university literature departments. By contrast, we don’t hear this evaluative favoritism very much at all these days in university film departments or among literature professors who teach in college film programs like ours. There are many reasons for this sea-change at the top of the intellectual heap, but the most prominent are (1) the creation in the last half-century and growing academic respectability of cinema studies, now institutionalized in its own academic niche, and (2) philosophical changes in literature departments brought on by post-structuralist literary theory.

The former, the respectability of film studies as a discipline, followed not just the turmoil of the sixties in Europe and the U.S.A. but also, among academics, the growing popularity and prestige of cinema itself in the wake of the auteurism originated by *la nouvelle vague*. However,
according to one film theorist, adaptation studies got its start not in these new academic haunts but in literature departments hoping to stem declining enrollments by using the study of film adaptations to buttress their literature curricula. As a result, several notables in cinema studies, itself strongly influenced by post-structuralist theory, have recently judged adaptation studies both antediluvian and biased because its attention to fidelity automatically denigrates film adaptations by privileging their literary sources. Meanwhile, young literary scholars interested in film and trained in post-structuralist theory have joined the anti-fidelity movement. Here, for example, is the transformative statement made by the new editors (both English professors specializing in literature and film) of Literature/Film Quarterly, the premier American academic journal focusing on cinematic adaptation, in 2005:

Literature/Film Quarterly was first produced when “faithfulness” to original literary sources was the primary concern in adaptation studies.... Now, over thirty years later, notions of fidelity, faithfulness, and authenticity have been interrogated and, to a large extent, replaced by much more permissive approaches to adaptation: explorations of wide-ranging intertextuality are favored as much as finding direct correlations between pairs of texts....Furthermore, the long-standing primacy of original literary texts over cinematic (re)creations has been consistently called into question. Anxiety about preservation is undone by the spirit of exploration.

Besides the telltale “interrogated” and “intertextuality,” bywords of post-structuralist theory, the bulk of the (unquoted) editorial states that the reductive “positivist” and “essentialist” approaches of the past, which avoided both sophisticated understandings of context and the intermingling of the media in favor of a rigid and discrete formalism (or so the editors believe), have now been replaced by more wide-ranging, exploratory, expansive, and eclectic perspectives, most demonstrating a cultural rather than a merely textual sweep. In effect, among many current scholars in the field, fidelity criticism now has a bad name. One needs only to peruse a few of the many books on the topic written since the turn of the century to see that fidelity has taken a beating. All of them, in one way or another, at great length or briefly, question, challenge, and/or repudiate fidelity in studying film adaptation while often advocating, even celebrating, perspectives which favor infidelity—differences from source texts. Beyond the problems noted already, these authors or editors take fidelity criticism to task for a number of related reasons (the following list is not exhaustive): for the unconscious adoption of the original/copy
binary, which privileges the former; for not heeding post-structuralist proclamations that literature is created by cultural paradigms or intertextual connections (the author, a mere instrument, lacks agency), thus diminishing its authority and prestige; for failing to understand that the authority of literature is, paradoxically, extended by film adaptation as much as it is reduced; for not seeing that issues of fidelity are bound up in institutional priorities like property and copyright; for failing to consider industrial conditions in critiques of adaptations; for not dealing sufficiently with adaptations as cinematic art (qua film); and for not recognizing that comparative analysis of source and film is inadequate to understand adaptation fully.

And yet, fidelity and its advocates haven’t gone away. Fidelity persists as a value despite the post-structuralist onslaught. Several recent books, either overtly or indirectly, parry the attack by suggesting that fidelity issues and criticism (or its comparative essence) need not be exclusionary and are still worth considering. According to one recent theorist, adaptation from one medium to another automatically involves fidelity because it requires a “mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty,” and the pleasures of adaptation qua adaptation require both. Moreover, debates over the place of fidelity in the future of adaptation studies have been a staple of recent conferences hosted by the Literature/Film Association. Finally, and most recently, Philip Lopate, editor of the Library of America’s American Movie Critics: An Anthology from the Silents Until Now (2006), has asked elsewhere, “might there still not be something unstoppably human in our hope that beloved novels be rendered faithfully on-screen, or at least not distorted beyond recognition?” After reviewing the arguments for and against platitudes surrounding fidelity issues and admitting ambivalence, Lopate suggests that we can never “wholly discard concerns about fidelity, but we need a more sophisticated approach.” Then, after praising James Naremore’s collection of essays titled Film Adaptation (2000) for “challenging the old literary-cinematic dichotomy” (Bluestone’s medium specificity), he qualifies his elation by noting the “discouraging” fact that essayists in the volume like Robert Stam and Robert B. Ray make their challenge by putting everything through the theoretical strainer of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Bakhtin, and Genette. Adaptation studies are freed from the onus of fidelity, only to be chained to the wagons of dialogism and intertextuality….In other words, a film adaptation should be the filmmaker’s critique of the novel. So we have evolved from the notion of the filmmaker as the barbarian at the gates of literature to that of the
filmmaker as the postmodernist critic deconstructing it. I suppose it’s an improvement.11

This note brings us conveniently to what follows in the volume at hand. All the chapters in this book were initially plenary lectures, individual papers, or panel presentations (with discussion) heard at the Literature/Film Association annual conference held at Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in mid-October of 2005. All have been vetted, revised, and organized here along a continuum running from fidelity to infidelity, or from analyses that are largely based on fidelity principles to analyses that are less devoted to those tenets or that overtly oppose them. In our view, there is now a range of critical approaches to cinematic adaptation that use issues of fidelity, both more and less, as a benchmark for critiquing and evaluating films based on literary or dramatic sources. Similarly, film adaptations themselves have for some time operated on a spectrum of more or less fidelity to their primary sources.

Thus, this volume suggests that a plurality of critical approaches (rather than the infinity of perspectives promoted by relativistic post-structuralism or the reductive and evaluative approach represented by near-absolute fidelity criticism) will allow adaptation studies to thrive in the future. This plurality allows the field to demonstrate a breadth of perspectives befitting the breadth of adaptive films existing now or likely in the future while still maintaining the relational heart of the enterprise and supplying a chance for critical consensus in analyzing and distinguishing the kind and quality of any given adaptation. To the contrary, the inevitable logic of post-structuralism, which rightly challenged the narrow quality of past fidelity approaches, threatens to deny the advantages of the comparative method in analyses of adaptations and to dissolve the field itself into undifferentiated film studies.

The in/fidelity continuum is organized as follows. The first three essays express the desire for fidelity in film adaptation and/or demonstrate the ways in which several films, despite some textual and contextual interference, manage to remain relatively faithful to sources in one way or another. The next four essays show how textual and contextual influences draw film adaptations into infidelities of various kinds. Chapters 8-10 then offer examples of cinematic adaptations which have tenuous connections to their alleged sources or critique central elements of those sources. The last essay offers a post-structuralist take on adaptation theory, suggesting that the ultimate relationship between literary source and filmic adaptation cannot be clearly delineated because it is based on rigid and false binaries which adaptations transgress. Finally, the panel and following discussion provide some arguments both for and against
fidelity criticism, including reasons for its persistence and ways to break its continuing, though changing, spell.

Screenwriter Robin Swicord reflects on the multifaceted task she takes on when adapting any screenplay: reading carefully the narrative and thematic elements of the source novel, mapping its dramatic structure, and also seeking to translate the context to the screen. These processes, involving compression, distillation, and substitution, occur even as the adapter attempts to remain as faithful as possible to what she divines as the author's intentions. At the same time, Swicord notes, the adapter’s concerns are quite different from those of the novelist largely because the former’s role is that of a dramatist. In this respect, the rules of dramatic structure as expressed in Aristotle’s *Poetics* furnish a binding framework for any adapter, and they have become an essential feature of popular-culture narratives. Nevertheless, using examples from her own work on *The Perez Family, Little Women, and Memoirs of a Geisha*, Swicord also highlights how industry pressures and the caprices of directors can shape adaptations and affect fidelity to the source.

In looking at Julie Taymor’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, Karen Williams discusses how the director draws on the literal and figurative language of the play to heighten an already powerful spectacle of violence and horror. Taymor is especially interested in exploring the complex response *Titus* elicits from the audience as it is both repulsed by and drawn to the brutality on the screen. Williams studies in depth two “penny arcade nightmares” that the director creates to enhance the shifting and unsettling play of what Taymor terms “stylized beauty” and “visceral reality.” Fidelity is achieved both through the direct importation of Shakespeare’s language and the transformation of the Bard’s metaphors into visual effects of which the film medium is most capable.

Micael M. Clarke seeks to demonstrate that Mira Nair’s filmic interpretation of *Vanity Fair* remains faithful to the essentials of Thackeray’s thematic vision—that is, his social critique, feminist sympathies, and satire on British imperialism—despite her alterations to the narrative and her addition of anachronistic cultural elements. While Nair’s film was criticized for “straying” from the original, Clarke argues that the director’s choices allow her to interpret the text effectively in a new cultural context. In so arguing, she explores the challenges of translating the voice of Thackeray’s fictional narrator, Nair’s strategies for narrowing the focus of the novel on the character of Becky, and the director’s fidelity to Thackeray’s social project: exposing the condition of women in thrall to the patriarchy. Clarke concludes with an evaluation of
Nair’s radical alteration of Thackeray’s ending, reading the film as deeply devoted to exposing the evils of the British colonial venture.

In chapter four, the focus shifts to the various ways in which adaptions may “deviate” from strict faithfulness to their originals, generally because of contextual considerations. Robert E. Meyer reads the film version of Tom Eidson’s *The Missing* against both the tradition of one-dimensional women in the classical Western genre and the often defeminized female characters in revisionist Westerns of the 1970s. Ron Howard’s film creates a feminist position for the heroine that is absent from the source novel as well as from captivity narratives like John Ford’s *The Searchers*. This adaptation eschews fidelity in order to respond to contemporary feminist concerns and to progressive changes in film genre.

Sarah Keller’s essay focuses on the opening credit sequences of two Spike Lee films—*Malcolm X* and *25th Hour*—in order to show how their stylistic elements extend and consequently universalize the themes of the source narratives. Lee’s intent is thereby to bring into play simultaneously the many different agendas—political, personal, artistic—that have always concerned the director. The opening credit sequences of *Malcolm X* and *25th Hour*, by playing to a future beyond the source texts, highlight the cultural context on which the narrative unfolds. This larger landscape thus allows Lee to explore more fully questions of racism and victimization in American culture.

Looking at Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory*, James Naremore describes how discord between the star (Kirk Douglas) and the director of the film influenced the final version of the screenplay. He points out that Kubrick’s absurdist vision of war is frequently countered by Douglas’s melodramatic portrayal of the central character (Colonel Dax), creating a tension between Douglas’s conventional hero and Kubrick’s ironist tone. The film’s production history and underlying political tensions therefore do more to shape the film than considerations of its fidelity to a little-known novel. Yet Naremore argues that Kubrick’s adaptation can be considered faithful to the cinematic potential of the source text, even as it seeks to enhance the novel’s dramatic force.

In the last of this group of four chapters, Laurence Raw explores how external forces in the 1930s operating in and around the American film industry (e.g. the Production Code; B-film distribution practices), rather than fidelity to a canonical novel or even to a genre, contribute to the shaping of Robert G. Vignola’s 1934 remake of *The Scarlet Letter*. Raw explores the expectations of audiences in small-town and rural markets with particular attention to the ways in which they are shaped by moral standards and religious beliefs, and he concludes that Vignola’s *Scarlet
Letter is a product of a conjunction of constraints both economic and ideological.

The three chapters that follow offer studies of films from a post-structuralist perspective, highlighting what we might term problematic adaptations: those that either interrogate the assumptions of the source text or otherwise range far afield in their connections to their sources. In the first, Noel Sloboda discusses how an audience, after a brief Shakespearean reference, might read The Salton Sea as an adaptation of Hamlet. Here, intertextual pastiche invoking previous genres, archetypes, and classics creates a jazz-inspired improvisation that forms a duet between play and film. While The Salton Sea may distance itself from Shakespeare by its contemporary setting and social relevance, the film’s insistence on performance nevertheless produces what Sloboda refers to as an “unintentional adaptation” of Hamlet, a piece that itself indulges in similar playfulness.

Alison Patterson studies how David Lean’s Lawrence of Arabia, an indirect adaptation of T. E. Lawrence’s Seven Pillars of Wisdom, performs a useful reading of the source though “unfaithful” to this document. She notes that Lawrence’s text is further complicated by the visual images that accompany the 1926 edition, leading to the different ways in which the book and its film version represent the human body and the human subject. While both “texts” are thus “multi-modal” (containing both words and pictures), Lean provides a different technology for pursuing Lawrence’s questions about immanence, transcendence, myth, and matter in a particular historical moment.

In his reading of Chantal Akerman’s La Captive as a feminist critique of Proust, Ian Olney argues that Akerman’s perspective on and representation of female subjectivity would seem to make her an unlikely adapter of Proust’s La Prisonnière, which narrates male obsession with a love object. Noting, however, that the encounter between director and author is a productive one, Olney relies on Robert Stam’s notions of “intertextual dialogism” to explore how a tale of female imprisonment and resistance might come to allegorize the ways in which men themselves are captives of sexist and heterocentric notions. By reading Proust “against the grain,” therefore, Akerman reworks the source text as a post-structuralist critique of patriarchal discourse.

Rochelle Hurst’s essay offers a post-structuralist take on adaptation theory, suggesting that the ultimate relationship between literary source and filmic adaptation cannot be clearly delineated because it is based on rigid and false binaries which adaptations transgress. Hurst traces the path of the novel/film binary as it is first articulated in George Bluestone’s
1957 book, *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema*, through recent theorists like Elliott and Naremore, suggesting that post-structuralist critiques of Bluestone’s medium-specific discourse of adaptation paradoxically support the existence of the novel/film dichotomy at the same time that they seek to dismantle it. Hurst proposes that the notion of the adaptation as an undecidable (in the Derridean sense) is perhaps a more fruitful means of deconstructing the hierarchical bifurcation that informs adaptation theory.

Finally, the panel and ensuing discussion on “The Persistence of Fidelity” explores why fidelity discourse remains relevant to adaptation studies and suggests what recourses are available to those who are suspicious of it. Two panelists, Linda Costanzo Cahir (“The Nature of Film Translation: Literal, Traditional, and Radical”) and David Kranz (“The Golden Continuum of Probability”), offer rationales for the persistence of fidelity, while two others, Thomas Leitch (“Fidelity Discourse: Its Cause and Cure”) and Walter Metz (“A Tale of Two Potters”), argue against fidelity discourse and offer ways to reframe questions of adaptation. The discussion following the panel presentations revolves around such issues as the evaluation of film adaptations, the taxonomy of adaptation, and the relation of cultural shifts in reading and literacy to questions of adaptation.

Ultimately, we hope that the plurality of perspectives along the in/fidelity continuum represented here will contribute to the ongoing theoretical debate over the function and value of comparing film adaptations to their sources while also taking into account a plethora of relevant textual and contextual issues. Furthermore, we believe that all of the individual essays represented here will add to current and future critical conversations about the films they interpret. Our confidence comes in part from what we have learned about the field of cinematic adaptation studies in gathering, reading, and editing the articles in this collection over the last two years. We are also pleased by the relative diversity of the authors, who range from a celebrated screenwriter and distinguished emeritus professor through the academic ranks of senior and junior scholars to aspiring graduate students, and from international figures to Americans from a range of geographical locations. To all of our contributors, we thank you for your informative work, and we wish you well.
Works Cited


Notes

8 See a record of one of these debates, “The Persistence of Fidelity,” at the end of this book.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
I’d like to look at the private process of translating a book into film and talk about the effect of the movie business on the adaptation of a novel, drawing on specifics from the films I have made. We tend to think of a film as being wrought whole to the screen and assume that every choice is deliberate. If the character wears black, we might assign this a darker meaning, forgetting that most likely the costumer said, “I only have black shoes that fit this actor; so she can’t wear brown, it’s not in the budget.” The business of filmmaking shapes material. Not everything in a film represents an interpretive artistic choice, including what ends up in the script.

The first step in writing an adaptation is to make a road map of the novel. I start with page one and write a line or two about what happens on page one. I do the same for page two, page three, and so on. In this way I attempt to get underneath the novel, to examine how it is structured, observing how characters are introduced, seeing the thematic material that emerges. I interrogate the book: “What are the intentions of the author?” This road map ends up being a close reading of the narrative and the thematic elements of the book. With this in hand, I can translate the novel into its dramatic elements, begin to map the film’s narrative, and see the shape of the movie.

Novelists don’t have to consider the constraints of drama. Novels can be discursive; a novelist can suddenly have a character musing about something extraneous, perhaps introduce an important character late in the story, violate point of view, and more. By contrast, screenwriting is rigorous in construct. I often compare it to writing sonnets. Drama isn’t free-verse; it has rules and boundaries. Fortunately, we come after someone who was a great scholar of plays, who read tens of thousands of plays and figured out these rules and boundaries: the elements of dramatic
narrative. Aristotle’s *Poetics*, his series of lectures on drama, come down to us only in fragments. They describe plays mostly lost now, destroyed when the library at Alexandria burned. But from Aristotle’s lectures we have a kind of a shadow of all that work which existed before he was born, when drama was the ritual ceremony for the ancient Greek religion, and people went to the theater as people today might go to church or temple or the mosque. I find that what Aristotle details in the *Poetics* applies quite well to movies.

Aristotle describes plot as “the arrangement of the incidents.” He says that the form of the play, that particular arrangement of incidents, will always produce an emotional effect in us even if the characters are ciphers. We are hardwired for drama; it is in our blood; and our craving for it is answered when a narrative unfolds in a certain way. Aristotle’s premise is that every story is essentially the same. Dramatic stories differ through character delineation, language, images, and a certain kind of inventive intention in the screenwriter to give something unexpected even within the classic form. All dramatic narratives begin with a statement of purpose, which Aristotle called “praxis.” The protagonist is propelled by this desire or motive, which may be awakened by an incident occurring early in the story that causes this protagonist to decide: “I want to…avenge the death of my father, save my loved one from evil, cleanse the town of outlaws.” And so forth. “I must restore order to the universe.”

So, desire moves the narrative forward into Act Two, what Aristotle called “the episodes,” or the middle part. Here is where the arrangement of incidents is most important: each moment must push the next moment into existence through cause and effect. By contrast, novels can sometimes be structured as “this happens, and then this happens, and then this happens.” In film the scenes proceed “because this happens, that happens. And because that happens, then this must now happen.” This causality pushes the plot forward, raising the stakes to bring story tension to a peak level as we enter the last part of the narrative. We must be brought to a state of hoping against hope that what the protagonist wants will come true—and then we are prepared to receive the final part, Act Three.

In Act Three, as Aristotle gives it, we have contemplation, revelation, sacrifice, and transformation. Some of those elements may be more exaggerated in one movie than in another. But the same kinds of things always seem to happen in the last part of the drama. Our hero, the protagonist who desired so much in Act One, becomes transformed by the events and revelations of this dramatic journey. To be a protagonist is to be the person who is the most changed. I think Aristotle was correct when he
said that catharsis and transformation are what we seek when we turn to drama. The Greeks made a religion of it, and we have built a popular culture around it.

Film gives us a steady parade of examples of Aristotelian structure. I encourage you to glance through your Netflix list or a catalogue of DVDs and remind yourself of movies you have seen, and to think about them in Aristotle’s terms. I’ll give you three, very quickly, off the top of my head: In Titanic, in Act Three we have Jack and Rose hanging onto a board in the shadow of an iceberg. Jack has to die or Rose cannot be transformed. Godfather I: Michael has to sacrifice his father’s dreams for him to be a senator in order to save the Corleone family’s ruling position; he transforms himself into a mobster before our very eyes. History of Violence: The Viggo Mortensen character must kill his brother if he is to reclaim his quiet life and shelter his family. In doing so, he has to sacrifice the self he has worked so hard to become, and return to being Joey, the killer identity that he had shed.

When we adapt novels for the screen, the elements of drama, that human religion, are very much on our minds. But if we have these high Aristotelian ideals ever present, what goes wrong? Why are so many adaptations so very terrible? Some adaptations make me gasp, “My God, what happened? Did they not read the book?” We have all felt this—in fact, I’ve felt it about a couple of my own films. It is disappointing when a book we love isn’t translated well into film. I tend not to fault the screenwriter, because I’ve been through the experience (more than once) of seeing my work distorted by the director of the film. From seeing what has happened to the work of my many screenwriter friends (including my husband Nick Kazan), I can affirm that film writers of a literary bent do often understand what they read, but the process of what is euphemistically called “collaboration” can skew their adaptations.

Directing is an interpretive art. Between the cup and the lip, many the slip. When adaptation goes well, usually the director and the writer have agreed on the interpretation of the novel. For instance, I loved Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s adaptation of Howards End. I felt that her screenplay could not have been improved upon, and I think she was extraordinarily fortunate to have her script so beautifully realized by the director James Ivory. We can, however, easily speculate on how Jhabvala’s adaptation would have fared in the hands of a director other than James Ivory, who has brought us several wonderful adaptations.

This match of writer and director may be one of the more important determinants in the success of the novel-to-film. A movie I wrote, The Perez Family, was first a wonderful novel by Christine Bell about the 1980
Mariel boat-lift in Cuba that, like Hurricane Katrina, overwhelmed a city and flooded a region with people seeking refuge. Fidel Castro opened his prisons and ordered dissidents, criminals, homosexuals, and prostitutes to leave the country. Cuban-Americans from Miami came to Mariel Harbor in boats to pick up this outpouring of refugees and deliver them to Miami. No one in South Florida was prepared for this human flood. The city didn’t know what to do. In 1980 they didn’t have the kind of telecommunications that would facilitate reuniting families and finding homes for so many refugees. The city turned the Orange Bowl stadium into a tent city, which soon filled to overflowing and became a kind of prison.

Christine Bell’s beautifully-written novel falls naturally into three acts, which allowed for its fairly effortless translation into an ensemble film script with a roving point of view. Julia Chasman, then working at Universal, found the book for me to adapt. Trying to get under the skin of this book, I worked closely with Christine, who opened her world to me. I visited the places described in the book, met people on whom she had based characters, and talked to émigrés from the Mariel boat lift. I read an early draft of Chris’s novel and compared the two versions as I examined her reasons for constructing the story she had made. About a year into that process, after I had done a couple of drafts of the screenplay for Universal, I was joined by the director, Alfonso Cuarón, then a beginning filmmaker. He went on to direct *A Little Princess*, the third Harry Potter movie, and *Y tú mamá también*. But at the time we met, he had made one film, *Sólo con tu pareja* (“Only with your Partner”), a very low budget, irreverent comedy about a man who wanted to kill himself because he thought he had AIDS. It was so un-PC, it never got distribution in the US, but I loved his film, and I saw that Alfonso was going to be a truly wonderful director. I felt that his unique comic sensibility was a perfect match for Christine Bell’s novel.

Alfonso and I worked closely for about six months, refining the script and trying to make the movie ever less expensive to shoot; scouting Miami and even Mexico, hoping that if we could make the film for as little as $6 million—no, $5 million, then—someone would finally let us go make it. Finally, in a closed studio meeting, a key executive said, “Who wants to see a movie about a bunch of fucking Cubans?” We knew the movie would never go forward there.

Julia Chasman left Universal and together we sought independent financing. We brought the project to Sam Goldwyn Jr., who has long been one of the stalwarts keeping the independent film business alive. Goldwyn Jr. loved our script for *The Perez Family*. Even though it was set in a
Cuban-flavored world filled with offbeat moments and characters, he saw that the story was a classically-constructed romantic comedy. “This is going to be my Moonstruck,” Sam said.

However, an executive working for Goldwyn preferred the director Mira Nair to Cuarón, who wasn’t yet known in the States. Mira Nair had made a film for Goldwyn’s company the previous year, *Mississippi Masala*, and the executive persuaded Goldwyn to hire Mira Nair instead.

I should note that Chris Bell’s novel is about reunion, about coming home to one’s family, about coming home to one’s self, and its tone is both lyric and highly comical. Chris is from a working-class background, with a “dese and dose” flavor to her speech. Transplanted from New York to Miami as a teen, Chris wrote the book while she was employed on the night shift as a cardio-tech in a hospital. Her brother worked in a salsa club. Chris’s first exposure to creative writing was in a community college class she took on her day off from the hospital. Chris also loves America; she’s openly patriotic. While the novel is gently satirical about Miami’s hybrid culture, it’s very much pro-American, pro-immigrant, and above all, pro-Cubans leaving Castro’s Cuba and coming to Miami to flourish.

Pairing the elegant Harvard-educated Indian director of *Mississippi Masala* with Christine Bell’s scrappy American (or even Latina) sensibility was a match of contrasts. As Mira Nair and I worked together, the intention of the film shifted to match Nair’s new interpretation of my script. She wanted to make a movie not about reunion or immigrants coming to Miami to flourish, but about the experience of exile, in which the Cuban culture seemed to become a mask for Nair’s own Indian culture. Nair is a talented director with a strong visual imagination, and a talented director is expected to come to a project with a point of view—that is the director’s prerogative. But often I felt Nair’s interpretive choices were at odds with the creative decisions Julia Chasman and I had made as we worked on the screenplay over several years. Taking nothing away from Nair’s many gifts, and acknowledging the director’s DGA-given right to interpret, I nonetheless mourned the loss of Christine Bell’s distinctive voice in the final film.

In *Little Women*, my adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s classic novel, I found myself paired with several collaborators who were well-matched to the novel, among them the director Gillian Armstrong, who had read the book as many times as I had as a child. I believe the movie benefited from a cohesive vision among all of us—writer, director, producers and studio executive. I initiated the project because I had never liked movies of *Little Women* when I was a child. All versions seemed to ask, “Whom are these girls going to marry?” As a child, I thought the book was about much
more than their marriages; as an adult, I felt that a more faithful version was overdue. For years I’d been discussing *Little Women* with my friend Amy Pascal, whom I first met when she was a secretary working for a producer. I said, “I’ve always liked the name Amy because of *Little Women.*” And she said, “I was named after *Little Women.*” And we started talking about the novel. For the next twelve years, as Amy moved up through job upon executive job, we kept talking. And then came the year when Amy had overseen the development and production of both *A League of Their Own* and *Groundhog Day* for Columbia, and she had enough cachet that she could call me up and say, “We can make *Little Women* now.”

Amy came to visit me at our summer place in the state of Washington, and we sat on the floor of my office with the book open, going through each chapter, making that road map that I talked about, discussing every scene, judging whether it belonged in the movie. This inverted creative structure was one of the things that gave this film project such a strong foundation—having the executive-in-charge so involved at the level of conception gave Pascal (and by extension, me) a lot of authority later when inevitable creative wrinkles arose. Usually a screenwriter writes a script and then goes through a process of hearing notes from the studio, which is meant to approximate collaboration. But with Amy, I had a true collaboration that began in going through the book together and talking through its deep structure.

Let me give a concrete example of getting under the skin of that book. Right before Amy called me to talk about setting up *Little Women*, my husband and I went with our daughters to a Smithsonian Institution exhibit called “Parlor Politics.” Mannequins were posed in mid-nineteenth century dress, running a printing press and drinking tea, while a recorded female voice read aloud from manifestoes of the time. I had a sudden moment of recognition: “Oh, that’s *Little Women*! That’s who they were.” I immediately bought three books about the suffrage movement, Seneca Falls, and abolitionism, and I started finding those threads in the novel. It was as if I had stepped over a threshold into an understanding I’d never had as a child: how very political Alcott’s novel was! I was in the midst of that stride over the threshold when Amy called to say, “Let’s do *Little Women*.”

As Amy and I took the book apart, I saw thematic strands of ambition, self-reliance, and self-invention—very American ideals, particularly in post-colonial America. Louisa’s parents were of that generation; their families had been part of the Revolution, and they were carrying forward this legacy of work undone. At the Constitutional level, certain work and
principles had been subverted, so that women still did not have the vote, and slavery had been legalized. And following these thematic strands led me into six months of reading biographies of different members of the family, including their letters and diaries; reading about the Transcendentalists, Civil War history, and *Hospital Sketches*, in which Louisa May Alcott wrote about her six-week period of doing hospital work in Washington, D.C. during the Civil War; and then also reading her other genre works which I didn’t know, the blood-and-guts stories. Alcott had looked up to Margaret Fuller and her work—Fuller was in an intellectual circle with Emerson, Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott—and in looking at Margaret Fuller’s writing, I had some sense of the dinner table discussions that had shaped Louisa’s mind. I also went to histories of utopian societies and to Bronson Alcott’s theories of education. I became the original autodidact on all things Alcott.

After I had all that amassed in note form, and with so much on my mind, I then came back to the novel, and I thought about it in terms of Aristotle and the drama of transformation.

Fig. 1. From left: Winona Ryder (Jo March), Trini Alvarado (Meg March), Kirsten Dunst (young Amy March), Susan Sarandon (Mrs. Marmee March), Claire Danes (Beth March) in *Little Women* (1994).
Louisa May Alcott wrote about adolescent girls at a time when adolescence was not thought of as a separate time of life, an important period of transformation—Alcott sort of invented that with this novel. In her book, in an early scene, the March girls all say what they want, and then discursively they go through adolescent adventures, each attempting to make her dreams come true. As I outlined our film, themes of ambition and transformation emerged to push the narrative forward. I found myself interested in the Victorian concept of female life going on behind a veil that masked domestic life. Behind here, hidden in the attic, the March girls wore masks. They had a newspaper club, taking off from *The Pickwick Papers*, in which they wore men’s clothing as they wrote and published a newspaper—as if to be ambitious little women, they had to put on costumes and pretend to be men. Only then could they say out loud the things they wanted. A confluence of themes emerged from my research, and oddly enough, when I went back to my road map and to the scenes that we had selected, I found that all the times that Amy Pascal and I had said, “This is a great scene; we have to keep that,” something in our excitement about that scene dovetailed with the thematic material I uncovered away from *Little Women*. I recognized a resonance, an understanding before understanding. Thus, even before I had encountered all of this side material, we somehow knew what would be important to the movie (Fig 1).

In writing the script, I felt a tremendous blurring of my own boundaries. I would sense someone standing in the room, and I would actually turn and look. After enough instances, I started to think, “Well, maybe it’s her; maybe I’m not writing this.” In another confusing moment, my husband gave me a birthday gift, a framed piece of paper that had been torn from one of those Big Chief tablets, covered with pencil handwriting. I thought it was something from my childhood, something I had written that Nick had found in my parents’ home. But it was her handwriting, Louisa’s, a page from her manuscript of *Jack and Jill*. Yet I’d had that moment of looking at Alcott’s rounded hand and thinking, “That’s mine.” So I was very far in there.

When you’re working deep under a novel, you sometimes find something that informs the whole project and makes the pieces click into place. For me that thing was Professor Bhaer. I was puzzled about Bhaer as the love interest. Every girl reading this book then or now has instead had a crush on Laurie, the charming boy next door. “Oh, he’s so cute! Laurie’s so great! And he’s going to be the heir to the whatever fortune.” But Jo refuses his proposal, and instead she goes for Bhaer, the older German immigrant who wears a rust-stained suit. He’s uncared-for in
appearance, kind of a cozy fellow, not young and handsome and fun, but more of a mentor. In reading about the Alcotts, and specifically about Bronson Alcott and Emerson, Thoreau, and the Transcendentalists, I realized that Professor Bhaer is the man that Louisa May Alcott’s father would have wanted her to marry. The group in Concord were all greatly influenced by the German Romantic poets. And the Marches lauded all things German—you see it in Meg’s wedding when the novel makes a point of saying they’re celebrating with German folk dances. German Romanticism centered on ideas of the soul and self-expression, as a kind of precursor to Transcendentalism. I looked at what was happening in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century and learned why so many German immigrants had come over to America. An immigrant class of well-educated, middle-class Germans found themselves starting over at the bottom, dealing with poverty and discrimination. Thus I understood a lot more about Professor Bhaer, and I was able to write him as the dreamboat Jo March had been waiting to meet.

Getting down to the DNA of Memoirs of a Geisha was not as easy as taking apart Little Women. Getting under Arthur Golden’s novel meant going under the skin of a culture very much not my own. I had read Memoirs of a Geisha for pleasure not long after it came out. A few years after that, the producers of the film, Lucy Fisher and Doug Wick, called me to a meeting with Rob Marshall, who had been hired to direct Memoirs of a Geisha. The drafts the studio had developed for a previous director had been set aside, and the producers were looking for a writer rather urgently. The studio wanted to make the film in the fall of 2004, and it was now December 2003. Rob Marshall is a choreographer by training. He came up through the ranks on Broadway, even doing a stint in Cats as a dancer. He and Sam Mendes came to national prominence when they co-directed a famous revival of Cabaret in New York. From this, Sam Mendes was offered his first movie to direct, American Beauty. And Rob was offered his first feature film, Chicago, an award-winning movie that brought Rob some of the attention he deserved. Our first meeting was brief—I had been asked to the studio on short notice, and I had not read the book in four years. Meanwhile, Rob seemed to have virtually memorized the novel. I commented that the narrative shape of the book seemed to move from Jane Eyre to Pygmalion to Gone With the Wind; after that I had little else to say other than that I loved the novel. I promised to read it again and be back in touch.

After re-reading the novel, I sent Rob perhaps eighteen pages of notes. I was drawn to the themes of beauty and cruelty. The book seemed in part to be an exploration of feminine role-playing. Reading it, I watched how