Book-Review:
Science Fiction Adapted to Film

Don Riggs

It seems that many more people know science fiction through films than through the literary works on which the films are based, which paradoxically contradicts the common axiom concerning cinematic adaptation of text that "the book is always better than the movie". Nicholas Ruddick, in his study of a wide range of such adaptations, contributes a useful distinction between science fiction and other fantastic modes of narrative, then uses this distinction to winnow out what would otherwise be a plethora – that is, an excess – of both literary texts and cinematic "texts" derived from them: for Ruddick, science fiction starts with H. G. Wells as the first fabulist to take into account Darwin's Theory of Evolution as a principle of his speculative fiction. Although this may ruffle the feathers of those who, following Brian Aldiss, regard Mary Shelley as the mother of science fiction and Robert Louis Stevenson as her successor, or even Jules Verne through his meticulously designed futuristic hardware in *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* and other adventures, Ruddick makes up for this dismissal of such authors and works from the SF canon by discussing some of the many films that have been inspired by these works of "proto-science fiction", evidently because of their significance for the genre over the years.

Ruddick eschews the term "adaptation" in favor of "remediation" since most of the worthwhile films derived from literary SF texts are what he terms a "tertiary translation", or translation from one medium (text) to the very differently constituted medium of film – a "multitrack audio-visual medium" (16). In his first, and shortest, section, Ruddick discusses the expressed attitudes of SF writers towards film makers and vice-versa, generally arising from mutual incomprehension between print vs. video media manipulators.

The second, slightly longer (34 pages) section deals with theory, although Ruddick acknowledges that theory "in the humanities is a term too often used to give an [sic] spurious aura of objectivity to subjective analyses" (22). Ruddick's definition of SF as literature and film within the Wellsian/post-Wellsian "tradition" of Darwinian evolutionary consciousness gives Ruddick a defined understanding of what is and is not science fiction; for example, the three major films associated with the genre to be released in 1931 – "Frankenstein", "Dr.

Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" and "Dracula" – are considered horror rather than SF. Ruddick defines horror as "a mixture of primal emotions associated with a malign Other: fear, loathing, disgust, nausea" (51). However, the first two of these films had an impact on what Ruddick considers to be "Wellsian" SF with Darwinian implications. In fact, the Kubrick film *2001: A Space Odyssey* does have a Frankensteinian A.I., HAL. Ruddick does find one element of the 1931 film of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to be Darwinian; the way Frederic March's Hyde is developed via makeup represents a human devolving into a Neanderthal with the characteristic low brow and flattened skull, reaching back towards the "missing link" towards the primordial pre-human hominid (59).

The theory outlined by Ruddick in his chapter on theory, despite the snarky tone of his comment on the use of theory in the humanities, is what enables him to judge adaptations of novels to films along the lines of their science fictionality. In discussing John Wyndhams's novel *The Midwich Cuckoos* and Wolf Rilla's film version of *Village of the Damned*, Ruddick analyzes the evolutionary elements of the novel and their total absence from the subsequent film: "Note that the film's title acknowledges the generic shift from the source text: 'Damned' evokes the quasi-theological frame of supernatural horror, not the agnostic-rational frame of sf" (37); likewise, very "little remains of the novel's evolutionary frame" (41).

Ruddick is a very learned and perceptive reader and viewer of SF texts and films, and in many respects this work is a fine example of connoisseurship. For example, concerning George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Ruddick says, "Orwell proposes that totalitarian regimes maintain power as much through the scientific manipulation of language as through intimidation and torture" (104). Then, concerning Michael Radford's 1984 film *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (the fourth film remediation of Orwell's novel), he calls it an

> intelligent reading of the novel, concentrating on exploring how a totalitarian regime might control reality via propaganda, surveillance, and violent coercion. As we have seen, the theme of reality control is more conducive to cinematic exploration than, say, that of linguistic manipulation. (112)

In other words, in order to convey the essence of Orwell's message in film, the emphasis has to shift from language to depiction. Ruddick's touchstone of successful remediation is summed up in his section title "Fidelity and Spirit Capture" – fidelity is not, despite what many assume, the retention of as many particulars in plot, setting, and detail from a novel in a film, but whether the essential project of the film has been successfully transferred between the genres.

Once beyond these opening chapters, the majority of the book is taken up with specific analyses of individual literary works and one or more of their remediations in film. Part III in over a hundred pages tackles 15 different instances of "High Adaptability" in a historical perspective. Here, despite his earlier relegation of Shelley, Verne, and Stevenson to "proto-science fiction", Ruddick devotes a chapter to adaptations from one text by each, presumably because of their extreme popularity. He then moves on to assess remediations of texts by Wells, H. Rider Haggard, John W. Campbell, Stanislaw Lem, Pierre Boulle, and others, plus two chapters devoted to remediations of works by Philip K. Dick.

As with many of the literary and cinematic texts in the study, Ruddick gives a commendably brief yet detailed assessment first of the novel or story, then of the film or films. One may agree or not with his assessments, depending upon one's individual tastes or vision, but Ruddick always supports his assertions with examples or quotations from relevant critics. One may be dismayed, as this reviewer was, by Ruddick's assertion that *Blade Runner*, director Ridley Scott's remediation of Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, has "little more to offer than an immersive visual experience" (161). What about Rutger Hauer's closing monologue as the replicant Roy Batty, dying atop the Bradbury Building in the rain, as Harrison Ford's Decker looks on in awe? Still, Ruddick's assessment of Richard Linklater's rotoscoped remediation of Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* – the film shares the novel's

title and is correspondingly closely faithful to the novel's text – is detailed, nuanced, and places both novel and film in historical context. For example, concerning the rotoscoping of the images, he points out that in the flesh "neither [Keanu] Reeves nor [Winona] Ryder are versatile performers, but when simplified to line, colour and highlight, their facial expressions matched by animators to the dialogue, the improvement is remarkable". Also, while acknowledging that Linklater is "highly literate", Ruddick asserts that by dropping Dick's direct quotations in German from Goethe, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, and Heine, Linklater knows that the "visual motif of the blue flower, an ironic allusion to the Romantic poet Novalis's mystical *blaue Blume*, does the job of culturally elevating his film more subtly and efficiently" (175).

The final section of the book, roughly the same length as "High Adaptability", is "Successful Adaptive Relationships: Ten Case Studies". The historical range goes from H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* in two remediations made a half century apart to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, with its one film version from 2009. In between, there are eight examples from various times in the 20th-century, including the adaptation of Serbian-born but French-adopted Enki Bilal's graphic novels to a film that Bilal himself directed. The analyses of these texts and films are, as in the preceding section, precise, concrete, and expressed with a stylistic flair delightful to read. For example, in assessing David Cronenberg's adaptation of J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash*, Ruddick succinctly says that "Cronenberg found an elegant solution to the problems of adapting a very literary text: he abandoned any attempt to be literary" (248). Ruddick states that the "dense poetic texture of Ballard's novel does not lend itself to translation into film", quoting a representatively "unfilmable passage" to the effect that in "each sexual act together we recapitulated her husband's death, re-seeding the image of his body in her vagina in terms of the hundred perspectives of our mouths and thighs, nipples and tongues within the metal and vinyl compartment of the car" (247). Ruddick says that "very little of Ballard's actual text" is preserved in Cronenberg's published screenplay of the film and "even less appears in the laconic film itself" (247).

Furthermore, in discussing Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and its first (1990) adaptation for television by Volker Schlondorff, Ruddick, who has taught in Canada for over four decades, shrewdly observes that one explanation for Atwood's aversion to being called a "science-fiction writer" is that the "label is associated with American popular culture, while she is the leading literary figure in Canada, a nation that defines its identity by contrast with its giant neighbor" (264). This is an example of how *Science Fiction Adapted to Film* pays at least equal attention to the literary side of the equation as to the films arising – or shooting away – from it.

Ruddick quotes Russian SF novelist Arkady Strugatsky in his first epigraph: "Explicitness, full statement, it seems to me, are only good in books on the care of houseplants" (1), and as initial conditions are important in subsequent developments of any dynamical system, this statement is a warning to the reader not to expect an encyclopedic investigation of the topic. A glance at the 19½ pages of the small print "Checklist of Significant SF Film Adaptations and Their Sources" at the back of the book will show why writing an exhaustive treatment of all the SF films adapted from or indebted to original SF texts would be impossible in a book of a mere 365 pages. One may regret certain omissions – this reviewer would have loved to read Ruddick's treatment of David Lynch's *Dune* film, for example – but what Ruddick does is provide the reader with a set of interpretative tools and a good number of examples of their application for them to follow when next reading a text and then seeing the film made from it, no matter how distant in time. This book will be of great interest to a wide variety of readers and film viewers, even outside the golden ghetto of science fiction; indeed, Ruddick's book fills a gap in SF critical literature: while there are numerous anthologies devoted to the evolution or various themes in SF films, there are none in this reader's experience devoted to the relationship between SF texts and the films that were made "after" them.

Biography: Don Riggs has been watching SF films since one could glimpse the zippers running down the backs of Martians and reading SF books since Heinlein's juvenile fiction. More recently, he has taught courses on science fiction in texts and the films made from them, as well as the cinematic remediations of *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Game of Thrones*.