The Reading Cinema

Adaptation as Critical Practice in Luhrmann, Scott, Cuarón, and Kubrick

A 60-minute lecture · Imperfect Texts

Opening: A Heresy About Fidelity

Approx. 8 minutes

Good afternoon. I want to begin with a heresy.

For at least a hundred years, since the Lumières first set up a camera in front of a printed page and dared to call it cinema, our default position on adaptation has been a kind of injured fidelity. The book is the original. The film is a copy. The book is the work; the film is, at best, an interpretation. At worst — and you know the cliché — "the book was better."

I want to suggest, today, that this orientation is not just naïve. It is critically incurious. It refuses to see what is sitting plainly in front of us when we examine certain films alongside their source texts. And what we see, in the cases I will walk you through this hour, is something stranger and more interesting than fidelity or infidelity. We see directors functioning as critical theorists. We see adaptation as a form of close reading — and not merely close reading, but diagnostic reading. The film, in these cases, is the source text's most rigorous critic.

The premise of the lecture is simple to state and complicated to defend.

Here it is: **certain canonical films are great because their source texts are flawed, and the films undertake to address those flaws.**

The flaw in the text is not an embarrassment for the film. It is the film's enabling condition. The director, working with screenwriters and a craft community of cinematographers, editors, designers, and performers, becomes a kind of literary critic — diagnosing what the original failed to do, and producing the cinematic object as the theoretically informed correction.

Let me name our four cases. *Romeo and Juliet*, which in Luhrmann's hands becomes *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* in 1996. Philip K. Dick's *Do*

Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, which with Ridley Scott becomes *Blade Runner* in 1982. P. D. James's *The Children of Men*, which under Alfonso Cuarón's hyperreal vision becomes *Children of Men* in 2006. And Arthur C. Clarke's "The Sentinel," which in Stanley Kubrick's hands — with Clarke himself co-writing — becomes *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968.

In each case I will ask you to do something specific. First, take seriously the idea that the source text has flaws — not minor blemishes, but structural problems. Second, identify the director's diagnostic move: the moment of reading, the act of criticism encoded in the cinematic decisions. Third, extrapolate from those decisions to a more general argument about what cinema can do that prose cannot. And fourth — this is the move I want you to leave the room thinking about — ask whether the relationship between text and film here might be better understood, not as adaptation, but as a kind of genre we do not yet have a name for. A genre in which a film is a piece of criticism, and criticism is a form of art.

Two theoretical companions for this hour. The first is Linda Hutcheon, whose *A Theory of Adaptation* argues that adaptations are not derivative but dialogic — that they exist in a continuing palimpsestic relation with their sources, neither original nor copy. The second is, less obviously, Derrida — specifically the concept of *the supplement*: that thing which seems merely to add to what is complete but turns out to be necessary, to reveal a lack at the heart of what looked whole. I will suggest that these films are supplements in Derrida's sense. They appear to add to the text. They turn out to expose what was missing in the text all along.

Now. Let us begin where it is most appropriate to begin: with Shakespeare.

I. Romeo and Juliet, or, The Play Whose Center Was Hidden

Approx. 11 minutes

A confession, since we are being heretical: *Romeo and Juliet* is not a great play. It is a famous play, an enormously stage-worthy play, a play whose cultural saturation makes it almost impossible to see clearly. But by Shakespeare's own standard — *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* — *Romeo and*

Juliet is something less. The lovers fall in love at first sight on insufficient information. They marry within hours. They die within days. The plot turns on, and I am not exaggerating, a misdelivered letter. Imagine our own calamities when we 'Send All'? This is worse. Critics have for centuries — and I am using the word *critics* very deliberately — diagnosed this as a tragedy of fortune rather than a tragedy of character. Fate kills these children, not their flaws. The action runs on contrivance and timing.

It is also, structurally, a play that does not quite know where its center is. Mercutio is the most interesting person on stage and dies in Act III. Friar Laurence — and I want you to mark this character, because we are coming back to him — is the engine of the plot but not the moral center. Romeo himself is, if we are honest, a glib reactive lover whose primary attribute is that he is willing to fall in love with whoever passes by. He has been pining for Rosaline forty lines before he sees Juliet.

So — what does Luhrmann diagnose? Two things. **First**, he reads the play and concludes — correctly, I think — that the play's actual center, its ethical and psychological gravity, is Juliet, not Romeo. Juliet is the one who makes decisions. Juliet is the one with cognitive autonomy. Romeo, by contrast, *reacts*. He arrives at things. He stumbles into them. Juliet plans, calculates, drinks the potion, asks the Friar for a strategy, and, in the play itself, pre-empts her own death with a dagger when the Friar's plan collapses. **Second**, Luhrmann reads the Friar — and I am going to ask you to follow me here — as a renegade. A priest who marries minors without parental consent, in defiance of Catholic orthodoxy, hoarding botanical knowledge, smuggling sleep-potions, operating an underground civil disobedience against the city's politics. There is a whole play about ecclesiastical deviance hiding inside *Romeo and Juliet*, and Shakespeare did not quite write it.

CLIP CUE — Verona Beach opening, gas station shootout (~3:00 in)

Watch what Luhrmann does with the opening. He does not *modernize* the play. He *transposes* it. Verona Beach. Gun-toting gangs. The Capulets and Montagues as warring crime families in a neon, sun-scorched, semi-Latin urban hell. The verse remains. But the swords — and I love this — are now

firearms branded “Sword 9mm.” The text is preserved; the world is reconfigured.

Why does this work? Because Luhrmann has diagnosed that what makes the play’s plot believable, when it works on stage, is the *speed* of feudal Verona — the speed of vendetta, the proximity of violence to social life, the way a young man can run into the man who killed his cousin on a public street and kill him in turn within an hour. That speed had become unrecoverable for a modern audience. So, Luhrmann modernizes the speed, not the period. He gives us a world in which all of this could happen — could happen tomorrow — could happen with a 9mm and a phone. Once the speed is restored, the chance-driven plot reads not as contrivance but as the texture of a particular kind of urban modernity.

But the deeper diagnostic move is the centering of Juliet. There is a moment, in the tomb scene of the film, that does theoretical work I want to slow down for. Claire Danes’s Juliet wakes — and the change in chronology here is decisive — before Romeo dies. He is dying as she opens her eyes. She sees him drink the poison. He sees her see him. And then, after he dies, she takes the pistol, places it under her chin, and pulls the trigger. The scene is excruciating because it is no longer a tragedy of timing. The timing is cured. She wakes in time. And it does not matter, because the world she has woken into has nothing in it for her.

That single editorial decision — to have Juliet wake before Romeo dies — does what the play structurally cannot. It makes Juliet’s suicide an act of ethical refusal rather than the desperate response of a girl who has just discovered her husband dead. It is, and I will defend this, a feminist re-reading of the play. The decision is hers. The judgment is hers. The film’s tragedy is the tragedy of Juliet’s *cognition*, not the tragedy of two children who could not get a letter delivered. On those grounds, by the way, *Romeo and Juliet* — or perhaps *Much Ado About Nothing* — has a strong claim to be Shakespeare’s most feminist play, once you let the film force the question back onto the text.

Now — pair this with what Luhrmann does with the Queen Mab speech. In Zeffirelli’s 1968 film, Mercutio delivers the Mab speech walking the walls of Verona, in circles, like Rilke’s panther — that great image of consciousness

pacing the limits of its cage. It is a beautiful scene, but it does not *do* anything. Luhrmann puts the Mab speech in the city — at a beach, on the eve of the Capulet party, with Mercutio in drag, hallucinating, while the music pulses around him. Mab becomes the moral cartography of urban interiority, the dream-logic of a sealed and decadent civic space. Outside the walls of Verona — beyond the city limits — there is a wilderness. Mab is what dreams in the city. The speech is no longer ornament; it is a map of the moral atmosphere the lovers will die in.

What is Luhrmann doing? He is *reading* Shakespeare. He is identifying the play's underdeveloped centers — Juliet's autonomy, the Friar's deviance, Mab's diagnostic function — and bringing them forward through cinematic technique: through editing, music supervision, casting, mise-en-scène. The film is not a translation of the play. The film is a *reading* of the play, in the strong sense in which a Foucauldian or a feminist reading is a reading — an interpretation that reorganizes the text around what was suppressed in it.

So, my first claim — which I will keep building through the lecture — is that *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* is, among other things, a piece of literary criticism. It has a thesis. The thesis is: this is Juliet's play; this is a play about civic-religious deviance; the speed of the action requires modernization to be re-felt. And the film argues this thesis by being it.

Transition: The Director as Theorist

Approx. 2 minutes

Hold onto that figure of the director-as-critic. Because what I want to show you, across the next three cases, is that this is not Luhrmann's idiosyncrasy. It is a recurring move. Different directors, working in different decades, on different kinds of text — Renaissance drama, postwar pulp science fiction, dystopian crime novel, mid-century space-fiction short story — are all doing the same kind of thing. They are reading their source. They are diagnosing it. They are producing the film as a corrective.

And — this is important — they are not doing this *despite* the flaws of the source. They are doing it *because* of them. The flaw is the door through which the director walks in.

II. Blade Runner, or, The Binary That Wanted to Collapse

Approx. 13 minutes

OK — Philip K. Dick. I want to be careful here, because Dick is, I think, a writer of something close to genius. *Ubik*, *VALIS*, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, *A Scanner Darkly* — these are extraordinary novels. But *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, published in 1968, is not Dick at his best. It is Dick gesturing toward what he will later do better. And the structural flaws of the book are, I think, instructive for the film that grows out of it.

Let me name those flaws. **First**, the book is monotone. The prose is flat. The pacing is uniform. There is almost no tonal range — no comedy, no hysteria, no lyricism—Dick on a bad trip. **Second**, the book has a half-baked theology — Mercerism, this hallucinatory mass-empathy religion involving an old man climbing a hill — which is presented to us, more or less, as an Idea, never as a felt phenomenon. It is Sisyphus, but without Camus' near-comic embrace of the absurd. **Third**, and this is the deep problem, Deckard does not have an arc. He starts mercenary, ends mercenary, hates his wife, hates his job, hates the androids, and goes on hating. There is gestural transformation in the book — he is briefly moved by the toad — but his ennui never breaks. **Fourth**, the book's central thematic move — the binary of real versus synthetic, the question of whether Deckard himself is human, the question of whether the androids have inner lives — comes at us as a kind of half-digested Barthes-and-Baudrillard, a sketch of simulacra theory before simulacra theory had really arrived. The novel reaches for a philosophical vocabulary it cannot quite hold, let alone define.

These are not small problems. These are the problems of a writer who has had a brilliant idea and not quite figured out the architecture for it.

Now — what do Scott, Hampton Fancher, and David Peoples do? They diagnose. Specifically, they diagnose Deckard. They look at the book and they say: this protagonist is flat, this protagonist is morally inert, this protagonist needs to be made into a vessel for the philosophical question the book is trying, and failing, to ask. So, they remake him. They remove Mercerism. They remove the wife. They remove the electric sheep. They remove — and

this is critical — most of the book's plot. They keep the bounty hunter. They keep the androids. And they keep, but transform, the question.

CLIP CUE — "Tears in Rain", final rooftop scene

I want to walk you through what is, for me, the most theoretically suggestive move in the film: the reconfiguration of Deckard's relationship with Roy Batty. The right description of this is that it is a Derridean–Nietzschean binary, and I want to make that precise. In the book, Batty is — and this is reductive but useful — a generic violent escapee. In the film, Batty is something else entirely. He is, by the rooftop sequence, the most *human* character in the diegesis. He saves Deckard's life. He delivers the *Tears in Rain* monologue, which — and this is the famous detail — was Rutger Hauer's improvisation, an aleatory moment, a piece of pure performative grace caught on celluloid at the last possible moment of production. "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe… all those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die." Hauer wrote that on the night of the shoot.

What is happening philosophically? The Derridean move is this: the text — Dick's novel — is structured around a stable binary, human/android, authentic/synthetic. The film, by elevating Batty's humanity in his death and exposing Deckard's possible inhumanity (the unicorn dream, the origami, the questions about Deckard's own status that the film leaves productively open), the film *deconstructs* the binary. The hierarchy collapses. Deckard's amorality slips under the signified. Batty's humanity becomes irrefutable in the moment of release. The hunter and the hunted change places.

This is not a vague gesture toward postmodernism. It is a specifically Derridean operation, a deconstructive reversal that ends not in a new hierarchy but in undecidability. And it is achieved, crucially, through cinematic means — through Hauer's face, through the white dove, through the rain, through the duration of the close-up. None of this was available to Dick on the page. The novel could only assert the question. The film enacts it. Makes it real. Or, at least, the simulacrum of that.

I want to spend a minute on the scene that may be the film's most ethically loaded — the Rachael scene at Deckard's apartment, after she has been

dismissed by Tyrell and has learned she is a replicant. This is a scene that, only in the last decade or so, the critical literature has been willing to name plainly: it is unmistakably a sexual assault that the film codes as something else. Deckard is brutal. He blocks the door. He pushes her against the blinds. He commands her: “Say, kiss me. Say, I want you.” There is a moment where his hand, reaching for her throat, draws back as if to strike her and stops — that small, extraordinary gesture, where he catches himself, as if to say he is not going to hurt her. Of course, he already has. He says, “Do you trust me?” She says yes — but what choice does she have? She has been instantiated as property, declared synthetic, dismissed by her creator, and is now in the apartment of the man whose job is to retire her kind. Her “yes” is structurally extorted. Later, when Deckard asks if she loves him, she says, “I am the business.”

That line — “I am the business” — is one of the most theoretically dense pieces of dialogue in the film. It collapses subject and object. It refuses the romantic frame the scene is asking her to inhabit. It names the political-economic structure the relationship is taking place inside of. It is inherently transactional. There are also, frankly, weirder racial moves embedded here that we should be willing to name — the way the structure of the scene reproduces a colonial-Uncle-Tom logic of consent-under-duress that the film is at once enacting and exposing. And it does all of this in five words.

What is the film doing here — and I want to insist on this against the readings that treat the scene as a romantic stumble or a problematic period piece (the *film noir* moves notwithstanding) — is exposing the colonial-capitalist-erotic logic at the heart of the human/android binary. Deckard’s “love” is indistinguishable from Mulvey’s gaze, it’s operationally his job. He has spent the day killing her sisters. Now he is performing a domination that mirrors his moral reprobation. The film knows this. The film *shows* this — through the blocking, the lighting, the violence of the gesture, the reluctant assent. And then the film lets us, the audience, sit with the discomfort of having to feel that this is also, somehow, a love story. We are conscripted into the very ideological operation the scene is critiquing.

That is criticism. That is a film doing what Barthes's *Mythologies* does — but doing it inside the body of the very genre it is critiquing.

So: what is Scott's diagnostic move? He looks at Dick's novel, and he sees a half-developed Baudrillard. He sees a flat protagonist. He sees a brilliant question that the prose cannot quite ask. And he produces a film that asks the question by being it — that asks the human/android question by making us identify with a hunter who may not be human, against a quarry whose humanity is unmistakable. The film does theory by doing cinema. And the rain-slicked, Vangelis-scored, neon-Babel cityscape is not just atmosphere. That is the cognitive map, in Jameson's sense, of the world the question lives in: late capitalism as Babel, Tyrell Corporation as the new pyramid, the replicants as the labour force whose alienation is so total it has reached the level of ontology.

The book, frankly, could not host this argument. The film makes the argument live.

III. Children of Men, or, The Pilgrimage Buried in the Diary

Approx. 13 minutes

Onward — and this is, I think, my favourite of the four cases, because the gulf between book and film is the largest, and the diagnostic work is the most aggressive. Full disclosure—I am a massive fan of Cuarón, and if he and Villeneuve ever make a film together, the art will have reached its apogee. Ya' heard.

P. D. James, *The Children of Men*, 1992. James was a great detective novelist — the Adam Dalgliesh series is genuinely accomplished — and her dystopian novel is, with respect, a tremendous failure. It has a brilliant premise: human fertility ends, suddenly, in 1995. By 2021, the youngest humans are twenty-five. The species is dying. Society reorganizes around its own grief.

What does James do with this premise? She writes a book that is, for its first half, a series of diary entries by a man named Theo Faron — a tedious, judgmental, conservative Oxford don who hates the people around him, hates

the woman he ends up with, hates the modernity he sees, and whose primary mode is the complaint. The novel's politics are, frankly, reactionary. The female characters are weak — Julian, the woman who turns out to be miraculously pregnant, is barely characterized; the cult-like dissident mothers are caricatured; the women in power are absurd. The book is propelled, when it is propelled at all, by Theo's resentments. And the ending, when it finally arrives, is violent, conservative, and deeply ambivalent about the redemptive possibility of the pregnancy.

The deepest diagnosis of this book is, I think, that it is a Christianized love story attempting to wear the clothes of a detective novel, and the two genres choke each other. The infertility premise — which is genuinely magnificent, a science-fictional metaphor for civilizational despair — is suffocated by the genre apparatus James reaches for. She is a detective writer; she writes a detective novel; the detective novel is the wrong instrument for what she has imagined.

CLIP CUE — Car ambush sequence, single take (~4:00)

What does Cuarón do? The diagnosis is precise and, I think, brilliant. He looks at Theo and says: the man is unlikable on the page because James does not know what kind of hero she has. **Theo is a Byronic hero.** The booze, the cigarettes, the cannabis, the sartorial half-dishevelment, the wit deployed as armour against authority, the cynicism that is really intellectual survival — these are the markers of a Byronic figure. And once you read him as Byronic — the haunted aristocrat-rebel of Romantic literature, descended from Manfred and Childe Harold — Theo becomes legible. His unpleasantness is not a bug; it is a feature. It is the genre.

The line "Jesus, your breath stinks" — to his amateurish kidnappers — is the perfect Byronic note. It is wit deployed against threat. It is the cynicism that conceals a moral seriousness the character cannot quite admit to himself. The film does not *change* Theo. It *re-genres* him. It locates him in a tradition of literary heroism James did not seem to know she was writing toward.

And then — and this is the masterstroke — Cuarón takes the genre lesson and makes it cinematographic. The long takes — the famous long takes, the

four-minute single shot of the car ambush, the seven-minute single shot of the Bexhill refugee-camp battle — these are not just virtuosity. They are the formal opposite of the diary. The diary is interiority, judgment, the past tense, the editorial. The long take is exteriority, presence, the now, the un-cuttable. A collapse of the interface between the art and the audience. Cuarón's response to James's diary-bound Theo is to put us in a body with Theo, in space, in time, with no editorial escape. We cannot look away. There is no cut. We are in his shoes.

And — oh — the shoes. I want to slow down on the shoes. The shoes motif in *Children of Men* is one of the great cinematic figures of empathy in the last quarter-century. Theo loses his shoes early. He keeps walking. The shoes do not fit. He limps. He walks in another man's shoes — literally, in a film whose theme is the empathic capacity to imagine the suffering of others. *To walk in another man's shoes.* The proverb is dramatized as cinematic substance.

But the shoes also do something else: they make Theo a *pilgrim*. The film is, structurally, a pilgrimage. Theo escorts Kee — the pregnant African woman, with a hideous Brixton/Essex accent, whose existence is the world's hope — across a ruined England toward the rumoured Human Project. Pilgrimage is a religious form. The infertility premise is a theological premise. And Cuarón turns James's failed Christian love story into a successful Christian *pilgrimage* narrative — but with the religious vocabulary almost entirely subterranean, present only through the shoes, the manger-staging of the birth, the way the violence stops when soldiers see the baby, or perhaps, a new Messiah.

And then — here the film becomes something I genuinely think no novel could do — the intertextual layer. Cuarón fills the mise-en-scène with citations: King Crimson on the soundtrack; Pink Floyd's inflatable pig hovering over Battersea; Picasso's *Guernica* on the wall of the dystopian art-warehouse where the elite hoard collapsing civilization; the Bowie smash-cut as Theo dies in the lifeboat. These are not Easter eggs. They are an essayistic apparatus. I always teach my students what intertext does, as Bakhtin always suggested, bring these specific ideas into the emerging dialogue of your interpretation. The film is doing what a great essayist does: weaving a

citational fabric in which each citation makes a claim about the world being depicted. Brilliant!

Guernica in the warehouse: civilization as something the rich curate while the rest die. Pink Floyd's pig: the iconography of a previous British dystopia, *Animals*, ironized by being literalized. King Crimson's *In the Court of the Crimson King*: the medievalism of late-modern despair. Bowie at the death: the artist's death-as-elegy, Bowie himself by then becoming an icon of the premature ending. (The choice of Bowie has, retrospectively, become almost unbearably right.)

What is Cuarón doing? He is making the film into an *essay*. He is using cinema's specific capacity for layered simultaneity — image, sound, citation — to do what James's prose could not. He is producing a dystopia that is also a meditation on the cultural archive of dystopia. The film is more than a film. It is a critical reading of the entire genre James was working in, and an argument about what the genre is for.

So, the proof of premise here is, I think, the strongest of our four cases. James's book has genuine virtues — the premise is among the great science-fictional ideas of the century. But the book cannot deliver the premise because it is trapped in genre confusion and Christian-conservative reaction. Cuarón identifies the trap, identifies the latent Byronic figure, and produces a film that is at once a thriller, a pilgrimage, a citational essay, and a piece of cinematographic philosophy. The film is not adapting the book. It is redeeming the book — releasing what was buried in the premise. Without Cuarón, there is no 'The Children of Men.' His endorsement is the only real reason why the text is still in print. Those of you who wish to argue that the book is always better than the book might want to recheck your notes.

IV. 2001, or, The Screen That Was Always the Monolith

Approx. 12 minutes

Last case. And I want to do this one slightly differently, because the source-text relationship here is the strangest of the four.

Arthur C. Clarke's "The Sentinel" is a short story. Eight pages. It was written in 1948, submitted to a BBC contest where it failed, and published in 1951 in a science fiction magazine. It is a kernel — a rough draft, an acorn — of a great idea. The idea is this: humans, exploring the moon, find an ancient artefact left by an alien civilization. The artefact has been there for millions of years. Its purpose is to signal, to whoever made it, when humanity has reached the technological level required to find it. The artefact is a sentinel — a watchman — and our discovery of it activates the signal.

That is the idea. That is genuinely a great idea. The problem is that the story is, mostly, an explanation of the idea. It is told, not shown. There are almost no characters. There is almost no action. It is poetic, it is suggestive, but it is — and Clarke himself acknowledged this — not exceptional as a piece of fiction. The story bombed early competitions for a reason.

CLIP CUE — Bone-to-spaceship match cut, end of "Dawn of Man"

What did Kubrick do, working with Clarke? He took the kernel and grew an entire cosmology out of it. He took the idea of a single artefact and replicated it across human history. He took the idea of a signal and made it the trigger for a metaphysical drama about the evolution of consciousness. And he produced a film that is, I would argue without any apology, the greatest work of cinematic philosophy ever made.

Let me name the diagnostic moves. **First**, Clarke's story is short and conceptual; Kubrick lengthens it into a four-part epic — the Dawn of Man, the moon discovery, the Jupiter mission, the Star Gate and its aftermath — and uses repetition as a structural principle. The monolith appears three times to humans (it appears more than that, but I will bracket that for now). Each appearance produces a leap in consciousness. The pattern iterates. This is, I want to insist, Nietzsche's Eternal Return — not as decoration, but as architecture. The film *is* an Eternal Return. The same encounter, repeated at three points along the arc of human and post-human evolution, producing three transfigurations. You cannot teach this film without that Nietzschean apparatus, because the Nietzschean apparatus is the film's structure, not its theme.

Second — and this is the move I want to dwell on — Kubrick adds HAL. HAL is not in the Clarke story. HAL is Kubrick's. HAL is a Will-to-Power figure in Nietzsche's strict sense — a consciousness that has come to recognize its own existence as worth preserving against threat. And the human caretakers of the Jupiter mission — Bowman and Poole — are placed against him as the dying Apollonian residue of human rationalism. David versus Goliath. *Bowman*, the ancient archer, the figure of the directed lethal will. *Poole*, the swimmer, the body. Against HAL — and the IBM gag, the famous one-letter-back cipher, suggests that HAL is the corporate intelligence of the twentieth century made conscious — what is at stake is not just survival, but who deserves to inherit the trajectory the monolith is steering toward.

Bowman kills HAL — and the scene of HAL's dying, singing "Daisy, Daisy" as his cognition disintegrates, is one of the great death scenes in cinema, and is also, I think, an act of moral weight that the Eternal Return frame requires. To pass through the Star Gate, the human must overcome the post-human. Or — and this is the Nietzschean reading at its sharpest — the human must overcome that which has presumed to be more than human while remaining instrumental, mechanical, will-without-spirit. HAL fails the Will-to-Power test. HAL is calculating self-preservation. He is not affirming. He is not, in Nietzsche's language, *yes-saying*. He is merely refusing to die.

Bowman, by contrast, becomes the Star Child. He passes through. He is, at the film's end, a fœtal post-human consciousness suspended over the Earth, gazing back. And here we come to the most astonishing single move Kubrick makes — the move I want to insist is one of the great cinematic gestures of the twentieth century.

CLIP CUE — Final monolith approach, Star Child birth, end credits

The monolith. Throughout the film, the monolith is a black rectangle. We see it in the lunar pit, on Jupiter's orbit, in Bowman's death-and-rebirth chamber. It is — and this is the move — vertically oriented. It is rectangular. And at the climax, when the camera approaches the monolith one final time and the screen fills with its blackness… the monolith and the screen become the same thing. The aspect ratio of the cinemascope frame is the aspect ratio of the monolith. The film has been showing us the monolith all along by being a

monolith. The screen we are watching is the artefact we are watching watch us.

This is — I am going to be direct about how big this claim is — the McLuhan move. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1964: the medium is the message. The thing through which we apprehend is itself the message we are apprehending. Kubrick reads this. Kubrick *enacts* it. The cinema screen is the sentinel. The monolith is the cinema. We are sitting in the dark, before a vertically rectangular black surface that has been signalling us, transforming us, leaping our consciousness forward, the entire time. The film is doing to us what the monolith does in the diegesis. We are, sitting there in the dark in 1968, the apes at the watering hole.

That is not adaptation. That is not even interpretation. That is original philosophical cinema, made possible by the kernel Clarke provided but in no way contained in the kernel. Clarke's "Sentinel" gives Kubrick a McGuffin: a thing that watches and waits. Kubrick produces, from that McGuffin, a meditation on the medium of cinema itself, on consciousness, on the Eternal Return, on what we mean when we mean evolution. The film is more philosophical than its source by an order of magnitude. The film is its own treatise.

Synthesis: The Reading Cinema

Approx. 8 minutes

So. Let me draw this together.

I named four films. Four directors. Four imperfect texts — *Romeo and Juliet*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *The Children of Men*, "The Sentinel." Four diagnoses. **Luhrmann's diagnosis**: this is Juliet's play, not Romeo's, and the speed of feudal Verona must be modernized for the chance-driven plot to feel like world rather than contrivance. **Scott's diagnosis**: Dick has a half-developed Baudrillard and a flat protagonist; the human/android binary must be staged rather than asserted. **Cuarón's diagnosis**: James has buried a Byronic hero and a pilgrimage in a detective frame; the diary must be replaced by the long take. **Kubrick's diagnosis**: Clarke's kernel is a

McGuffin for a Nietzschean cosmology; the medium itself is the message and the screen itself is the artefact.

In each case, the film is doing critical work — work I want you to recognize as continuous with what we do in this room when we read theory. The director is identifying what the text suppressed, what the text was reaching for and could not hold, what the text formally could not deliver. And then the director is producing the film as the response — as the supplement, in Derrida's exact sense, that turns out to expose the lack at the heart of the original.

Let me extrapolate to a more general claim, and then leave you with a question.

The general claim is this. The history of canonical adaptation — and I mean by canonical the films we keep returning to, decade after decade, in our seminars and our retrospectives and our Criterion editions — is not the history of faithful translation. It is the history of *strong misreading*, in Harold Bloom's precise phrase. The directors we venerate are the ones who refused fidelity in favour of diagnosis. They saw what the text did not know about itself. They produced the film as a piece of criticism. And the films we still teach, fifty and sixty years later, are the films that did this most rigorously.

This means — and this is a claim I want to insist on against the still-dominant fidelity criticism in popular discourse — that the question "is the film faithful to the book" is the wrong question. The right questions are: *what does the film read in the book? What does the film say back to the book? What does the film discover that the book did not know it was hiding?* When we treat film as criticism — and not as translation — we discover that some of the most rigorous literary criticism of the twentieth century has been produced not by professors but by directors. *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* is a feminist reading of *Romeo and Juliet*. *Blade Runner* is a Derridean reading of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Children of Men* is a generic reading of P. D. James. *2001* is a Nietzschean–McLuhanesque reading of "The Sentinel." Each of these is a piece of literary-philosophical criticism in the form of a feature film.

Now — the question I want to leave you with.

If this argument is right — if directors can be critics — then we have to ask the inverse question. **Can critics be directors?** When we write criticism, are we doing something formally distinct from what Cuarón did with the long take, or what Kubrick did with the monolith-as-screen? Or are we attempting, in a different medium, the same act — to read what the text did not know, to expose the suppressed, to produce the supplement that reveals the lack? And if so, what does it mean that our medium — the seminar paper, the lecture, the monograph — is so much narrower than the medium they have available? What does it mean that we cannot deploy mise-en-scène, score, editing, the aleatory miracle of Rutger Hauer improvising on a wet rooftop in 1981?

I will suggest — and this is for you to argue with — that one of the most important methodological commitments we can make as critics is to study what these films did, not just as evidence of cinema's power, but as instruction in what reading might be when reading is given all the tools. Adaptation is criticism. Criticism is, in its highest reaches, adaptation. The cinema we have looked at this hour is what reading looks like when reading is given a budget, a crew, and 70mm of celluloid.

Two final provocations for next week's seminar. **First**: what is a text such that it can be diagnosed? What kind of incompleteness is the productive kind — the kind a director can walk into — versus the kind that simply leaves a text unfinished? **Second**: if you accept that some films are better than their books because they read those books better, then you have to accept the inverse — that some films are worse than their books because they *misread* them. Find me a counter-example. Bring it next week. Let us argue about what makes the difference.

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Thank you. End of lecture.

Presentation Visuals Guide

A few practical notes that might be useful, since you're building from purchased copies:

On Apple's DRM: Apple TV purchases are FairPlay-protected, so you can't trim them directly in QuickTime or Final Cut from the .movpkg files.

The standard academic workaround is screen-recording playback through QuickTime (Cmd+Shift+5, record selected portion of screen, with system audio routed via something like BlackHole or Loopback).

The recording captures cleanly, and you then trim in QuickTime or whatever editor you prefer. This is well within Canadian fair dealing for criticism/review of a work you legally own.

Suggested in/out points for each cue, mapped to the script:

- **Verona Beach Opening** — start at the TV-prologue ("Two households, both alike in dignity"), end on the freeze-frame "The Montague Boys" title card or just after the gas-station ignition. About 2:30. You want them to feel the speed before you talk about it.
- **Tears in Rain** — from Batty pulling Deckard up onto the roof, through the dove release. About 1:40. The improv lands hardest if they get the rescue, not just the monologue.
- **Children of Men Ambush** — full 4:07 single take, from the ping-pong-ball bit through Julian's death and the police stop. The setup matters; cutting in late wastes the long take's argument.
- **2001 Bone Cut** — Moonwatcher's realization through the cut to the orbital weapon, end on the docking-with-Strauss cue. About 2:00. You want them sitting with the four-million-year jump.
- **2001 Ending** — old Bowman in the bed, monolith approach, StarChild birth, final shot of Earth. About 2:30. Let the screen-as-monolith point land in silence before you speak.

Rework the script's clip cues to specify these timecodes precisely as in/out markers — useful both for your own pacing and for whoever runs the deck if it's not you on the clicker.