

On the Page/On the Screen: Two Ways of Reading Joyce

Vickie Olsen
Universidad del Pais Vasco

Abstract

This article takes a look at the historiography of the screen adaptations of four Joyce texts: Mary Ellen Bute's film version of *Finnegans Wake*, Joseph Strick's screen adaptations of *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and John Huston's posthumous film version of *The Dead*. A series of parallel and contrasting analyses between the written and film texts attempts to illustrate how the reception of the Joyce canon can be enriched by expanding the reading of these texts from page to screen. Important elements, including alterations in narrative technique and evidence of cultural transfer, are taken into account.

One great part of every human
existence is passed in a state
which cannot be rendered sensible
by the use of wide-awake language,
cut-and-dry grammar and go-ahead plot.

James Joyce

This survey of the relationship between some of Joyce's narrative fiction and a series of corresponding film adaptations has clearly been fueled by an attempt to incorporate the methodology of cultural studies into classroom practice. The enthusiasm with which a group of literature students undertook a comparative textual analysis between Joyce's last story in *Dubliners* and Huston's last film, *The Dead*, encouraged me to research Strick's two film adaptations of *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* which I knew existed. As I dug deeper into the historiography of Joyce and film, a fourth adaptation, Bute's version of *Finnegans Wake*, surfaced as well.¹

All four of these films based on Joyce texts were made by American directors. Curiously enough, they were produced in converse order to their actual writing. Thus, Joyce's last novel, *Finnegans Wake*, published in 1939, was the first to be filmed in 1965 by Mary Ellen Bute. Joyce's *Ulysses*, published in installments in Paris in 1922, and in novel form in the U.S. and Britain in 1933 and 1936 respectively, was adapted for the cinema by Joseph Strick in 1967. After a ten-year lapse, in 1977 Strick directed a second Joyce film, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, based on the novel which had been published in 1916. Finally, a decade later, John Huston fulfilled a long-standing ambition to film a Joyce text, although his 1987 adaptation of *The Dead* was not released until a few months after his death.

The dates are interesting because they demonstrate an initial willingness on the part of the directors of the two earlier films, made within two years of each other, to tackle seemingly uncinematic texts. The lack of a clear-cut narrative plot in *Finnegans Wake* or *Ulysses* is resolved on screen through the use of avant-garde techniques, such as collage, reverse footage, montage, juxtaposition and subtitles, to produce examples of inventive cinema which are not bound by the traditional tenets of a film medium accustomed to dealing with visual objects in a realistic way. The film versions of *Portrait* and *The Dead*, made in the seventies and eighties, though visually exquisite and faithful to the historical periods in their *mise-en-scène*, are far more conventional. Interestingly, of all four films, Huston's *The Dead*, the only adaptation that bears the indelible stamp of Hollywood manufacture, has enjoyed the greatest commercial success.

Mary Ellen Bute was the first person to film a Joyce text. *Finnegans Wake* was made on a shoestring budget in thirty-two days for \$250,000 and was shot in the Nemeth studios in New York and on location in Dublin. The film was produced by Expanding Cinema, run by Bute and her husband, photographer Ted Nemeth. They had been working with avant-garde non-narrative film since the 1930s but none of Bute's films had run over twenty-five minutes until she made the ninety-seven minute feature film of *Finnegans Wake* in 1965.

In April 1958, a university theater production of Mary Manning's dramatization of *Finnegans Wake* had so impressed Bute that she applied for the film rights to both Manning's play and Joyce's book.² Manning was immediately asked to do the screen adaptation. It took the next six years to iron out the pre-production problems and to find financing, but the most time-consuming part of the project by far was preparing a workable shooting script. The Irish playwright and poet, Padraic Colum, an associate of Joyce himself who had immigrated to New York in 1914, was an active advisor to the Bute film project.³ Other Joyce associates, such as Maria Jolas, who proofread the original manuscript of the novel (and whose husband, Eugene, published the Paris quarterly *Transition* in which *Finnegans Wake* first appeared in installments as a work in progress), and Harriet Shaw Weaver, Joyce's patron and publisher, participated in the film project. Members of Bute's unofficial advisory committee enjoyed solid reputations as noteworthy Joycean scholars, reflecting her meticulous concern about respecting what she referred to as Joyce's "enormous, healthy, robust affirmation of life" (Weinberg 1964, 27). Her objective was to capture this attitude on film, instead of draining it of life on the screen; not allowing it, in her words, to "become querulous instead of positive" (Weinberg 1964, 27).

Passages from Finnegans Wake is the culmination of Bute's artistic quest to combine kinetic form and the spoken word. In Joyce's language, she found the kinetic and the visual elements that she felt would reach beyond the art-house audiences to which her previous work had been directed. To guarantee that the movement and energy of Joyce's language be able to combat the paralyzing stare of the camera, Bute cast professionally trained, mostly Irish actors whose enunciation and personalities would be able to make Joyce's language intelligible, even to an audience that might not have read him.

Eventually, Bute decided to use subtitles on-screen to allow the spectator's eye to see each new twist of meaning that the ear was hearing in the voices of Earwicker (Martin J. Kelley), Anna Livia (Jane Reilly), Shem (Peter Haskell) and Shaun (Page Johnson). Other cinematic devices, such as the use of still pictures, stop-motion photography, animation and bizarre montages, help give visual life to the screen.

Bute's film is a precursor to the postmodern game-playing between author, text and reader/spectator, as is, of course, Joyce's novel itself. This postmodern scenario is reinforced by the film inasmuch as Bute, the filmmaker, is author as well as recipient of the text and her artistic creation is both a James Joyce film and a Mary Ellen Bute film. She is careful to point out that "the film is not a translation of the book but a reaction to it" (Weinberg 1964, 27). The critical reception of the film, premiered on May 21, 1965 at the Cannes Film Festival, described *Passages from Finnegans Wake* as "the opening of a door to Joyce's work", a film that "shows the cinema for once doing literature justice"⁴ and in the *London Sunday Times*, critic Dilys Powell exclaimed that Bute's film "has sent me scurrying back to Joyce". Indeed, the spectator of these filmed passages of Joyce's text is sent back to the written words which, after viewing Bute's film, acquire an aural value that enriches the silent imag(in)ing of those passages in the mind's eye.

In an interview published in 1964 in *Film Culture* (Weinberg 1964), Bute was asked if she would be interested in filming another Joyce text, *Ulysses* perhaps. At the time, the rights to that book were already in the hands of Joseph Strick who had acquired them once Hollywood producer Jerry Wald's option to *Ulysses* had expired. In that interview Bute expressed regret that Wald's project had never been realized, adding that she hoped Strick would be able to carry out his own plans to film *Ulysses*. As for her own intentions, Bute declared herself strictly:

A *Finnegans Wake* girl ... I may never do another Joyce work but I would like to make several films on different aspects of *Finnegans Wake* ... Several people have already prepared treatments which could easily be adapted for this ... Joyce loved the movies and hoped his works would be filmed. (Weinberg 1964, 26-7)

Bute never directed another treatment of *Finnegans Wake* for the screen; Strick, however, did film not only *Ulysses*, but *Portrait* as well.

Joseph Strick was only one in a long line of film producers and directors obsessed with filming Joyce's *Ulysses*. Serguei Eisenstein, who once said he learned much of his technique from *Ulysses*, spoke of casting Charles Laughton in a screen version of the novel; Samuel Goldwyn actually discussed filming the book with Joyce himself who reportedly wanted British actor George Arliss to play Bloom; Warner Bros. studios was interested in *Ulysses* for a while and eventually producer Jerry Wald, whose films were being released through Fox studios in the late 1950s, outbid Joseph Strick for the book rights. When British film director Jack Cardiff failed to come up with a promising shooting script by the time Wald's option expired in 1964, Strick was able to obtain the rights for a token \$75,000.

Strick was sixteen when he first read *Ulysses* in 1939. The copy in his Pittsburgh home had been brought from Europe by his immigrant father. When Strick became a filmmaker after World War II, he became obsessed with making *Ulysses* into a movie. Once the film rights were in his pocket, Strick began his own personal odyssey in search of financing. He encountered even more impediments to his Joyce project than Mary Ellen Bute had several years earlier; because Strick had made it clear that he would take the novel itself as a screenplay with very few words added and of course, without any of the explicit words being cut, most investors fled from the project. They assumed that a filmed version of *Ulysses* would cause the same sort of scandal as Joyce's novel had, a scandal that did not subside in the case of the novel until U.S. Judge Woolsey's 1933 court decision lifted the ban on *Ulysses*. In that decision, Woolsey had suggested, probably unwittingly, the cinematic characteristics of Joyce's *Ulysses*. His verdict, which permitted the legal import of the book into the U.S. for publication, called Joyce's novel "a multiple exposure on a cinema film which would give a clear foreground with a background visible but somewhat blurred and out of focus in varying degrees" (quoted in Robinson 1967, 42). When Strick was offered capital, strings were inevitably attached, such as one studio executive's demand that American actor Tony Curtis play the role of Bloom. Bewildered by Strick's outraged reaction to this suggestion, the executive defended his choice by pointing out that Curtis, like Bloom, was "Jewish and ... thirty-eight, too" (Robinson 1967, 58). Walter Reade, Jr., an important U.S. exhibitor and distributor, eventually financed the film which was produced for less than a million dollars on location in Dublin during a twenty-six-week shoot.

The distribution of the film was also highly problematic. After 135 U.S. exhibitors sat through a screening of the Molly Bloom soliloquy at the end of the film, only sixteen theaters were still willing to show *Ulysses*, and eight of them were producer Reade's own. Three day-exhibition contracts were finally signed with sixty-five theaters in forty-three cities, providing for high admission prices (\$4.50-\$5) and distribution of film programs announcing that

The most important novel of the 20th century now comes to the screen with all its frank, bold, searing insight into the heart and mind of man ... [We] are happy it is able to reach the screen in this country for this performance in its uncut form.⁵

The program reference to the "uncut form" of exhibition in the U.S. is clearly aimed at criticizing the censorship problems the film encountered in Britain and even at Cannes, where, as an official British entry, it was screened with mutilated subtitles in French.⁶ A feisty Strick threatened to withdraw *Ulysses* from the festival, while asking other directors to do the same with their films and jury members to resign if the film was screened under similar conditions again. He did not receive satisfaction, and he withdrew the film from competition.

In Britain, the British Board of Censors demanded at least twenty-nine cuts which

Strick agreed to do, only if he could provide beeps for the sound track, a blank screen for the images cut and a glossary describing the censored portions. Because film screenings in Britain are controlled by local authorities, *Ulysses* was shown under license by some local councils, including the Greater London Council, at the time of its world premiere in 1967 in the uncut version. British film critic Penelope Gilliatt commented:

It might be forty-five years ago, when James Joyce's book was first burnt by New York Post Office authorities. Sometimes it seems as if history is the process by which we learn nothing at all. Joseph Strick's film, a dedicated version of one of this pinched century's most liberating and charitable works of genius, is meeting nearly as much trouble as the novel once did. We are back to square one.⁷

In 1973, BBC2 finally televised an uncut, unblipped copy of *Ulysses* on a Friday evening at prime time. In Ireland, however, the film was denied a cinema screening license in 1967 and again in 1975. In 1979, it was dropped from an Irish TV scheduled showing and replaced by Strick's less controversial Joyce film, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Strick's *Ulysses*, like Bute's *Passages from Finnegans Wake*, is filmed in stark black and white. As in *Passages*, there is an obtrusive feeling that scenes have, of necessity, been excerpted from the novel which, in turn, sends the spectator back to the written word. So again, the film encourages the spectator to go to the novel. One Joyce scholar viewed the film in 1967 and commented that

If progressive education continues to progress [*Ulysses*] may someday be required reading for even high school students. Thus, it is momentarily ironic that contemporary standards deny admittance to all under 18 years of age. (Robinson 1967, 47)

The film's restricted budget accounts for the 1960s Dublin *mise-en-scène* which, surprisingly, does not detract from the film text but rather reflects the unlimited contemporaneity of Joyce. In fact, the more ostentatious attention to period detail in Strick's later Joyce film, *Portrait*, and especially in Huston's *The Dead*, could be evaluated as a limiting factor which isolates each of those texts in their replicas of nineteenth-century Dublin, while the film *Ulysses*'s combination of past and present affords it a certain timelessness. Luckily, the going rates for the Abbey Players were within reach of *Ulysses*'s low budget, which permitted Strick to contract Milo O'shea as Bloom, Barbara Jefford as Molly and Maurice Roeses in the role of Stephen.

From his knowledge of Joyce and the Joyce canon, scholar Richard Ellmann disputes Strick's choices of what to retain and what to leave out. At no time is Strick unfaithful to Joyce, but the obvious inviability of filming everything in the massive novel leads to what Ellmann labels "a new form of censorship" (1967, 40). His major regret

with regard to Strick's film is that the script "deprive[s] us of Bloom's monologue [which] is to leave out nine-tenths of Bloom, keeping only the inane residuum" (1967, 40). His suggestion that *Ulysses's* resistance to film adaptation is just another example of the book's refusal to conform is supported by what Ellmann calls *Ulysses's* obsession with language. But the film medium, though clearly visual, is not exclusively so. Just as Bute's film captures the aural together with the visual, Strick's *Ulysses*, by transforming the written into the visual and aural, acknowledges its debt to the novel and encourages the spectator to return to a reading once the viewing is over. Ellmann himself concedes that "committed readers of the book may have the pleasure of disagreeing with the film and of imagining a better scenario" thus making "the latest Joyce game ... a good one" (1967, 41).

Prior to his film version of *Ulysses*, Strick had adapted Jean Genet's controversial play, *The Balcony*, to the screen in 1963 and in 1970 he tackled Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. Both of these low-budget productions were dismissed as failures and both caused eyebrows to be raised, as *Ulysses* did, mainly due to Strick's devotion to the *verbo intacta* method of adapting books to the screen. In keeping with his penchant for adapting unlikely literary properties, Strick obtained the rights to Joyce's 1916 autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and began the twelve-week shoot from a script written by the American short-story writer, Judith Rascoe, on location in Dublin and Cork in May 1976. Like *Ulysses*, *Portrait* was an independently financed production with a cast selected largely from Abbey Theatre actors. In fact, all the actors were Irish except for John Gielgud, who played the role of the Jesuit priest that terrorizes Stephen and his college mates with his sermon about hell.

The American premiere of *Portrait* took place at the 779-seat Wheeler Auditorium on the University of California Berkeley campus in October 1971. Strick's distribution strategy was to screen the film initially on college campuses and then follow with art-house billings in college towns. *Portrait* finally had a first-run in New York and other major cities, including London, in May 1979, playing to almost no attention. The poor reception given in commercial movie theaters to Strick's adaptation of Joyce's *Portrait*, a text considerably more comprehensible to the average reader than *Finnegans Wake* or *Ulysses*, and presumably to the cinemagoer as well, offset by the overflowing crowds at university screenings. The critical reaction of audiences in Britain and Ireland is practically undocumented.

The film version of *Portrait* is clearly more conventional than those of *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*. The use of color photography and the linear narrative development contribute to this effect. The exciting free-associative flashbacks and fantasy sequences of Strick's earlier Joyce film are missing here, but then, they are from the novel as well. The film's *mise-en-scène* is respectful of historical authenticity and the script is totally faithful to Joyce's text. At times this fidelity almost converts the film into a dramatic reading, but for the spectator familiar with the written text, the memories the film evokes can be pleasurable. At first glance, a dramatization of *Portrait* might seem quite simple, but a deeper analysis of the written text supports the idea that its substance is not the

events that occur, but the language by which Stephen arrives at his decision to go into self-exile. Language spoken on-screen in dialogue or voice-over runs the danger of becoming boring. But even in the event that *Portrait* as film text should demonstrate this sort of deficiency, this could be interpreted more positively as an illustration of the differences between word and image, an understanding of which is essential for those of us who advocate the coexistence of reading and viewing.

The latest cinematic adaptation of a Joyce text is John Huston's film version of the short-story *The Dead*. Just as all four of the film versions of Joyce's texts were produced in converse order to their original dates of publication, so too did they move from greater to lesser in terms of length, density and/or experimental character. Huston, even more so than Strick, was accustomed to making screen adaptations of literary works. And like Strick too, his inability to retain the "thematic complexity and texture of the originals" (Miller 1980, 84-5) was the major criticism directed at his literary films. Although both directors were particularly interested in adapting Joyce to the screen, Huston's projects, far more grandiose than Strick's, ran into even more serious problems in finding financial backing. Strick virtually beat Huston to the draw in making *Ulysses* into a movie; by 1970, though, Huston was working on a film adaptation of *Portrait*, even planning to use Maurice Roebes to play the role of Stephen, which he had already done three years earlier in Strick's *Ulysses*. But again, financial problems prevented Huston from carrying out that project on time and Strick bought the rights to the book, completing his own film version of *Portrait* in 1977.

Finally, in 1987, Huston, eighty years old and confined to a wheelchair due to a chronic heart condition, undertook, in the company of his son Tony, as scriptwriter, and daughter Anjelica, as female lead, what he envisioned as his master project, the film that "would be something we could hold our heads up about afterward" (Huston 1980, 351). But in spite of an expressed desire "to be loyal to his own Irishness, as well as to Joyce" (Grobel 1989, 9)—his Irish roots were, incidentally, at least two generations removed from Nevada, where he was born—the film was shot in thirty-three days on a set built in a warehouse near Hollywood. Only the final landscape exteriors were shot on location in Ireland. And even though Huston's concern with historical accuracy in the *mise-en-scène* in *The Dead* surpasses Strick's in *Portrait*, Huston tends to be far more interested in interpreting the text on screen. Unlike Strick and Bute, whose films desperately attempt to abide by the letter and spirit of Joyce's works, Huston's shooting script takes liberties with the written text that actually alter the short-story. Whereas Bute and Strick find themselves forced to omit portions of the written texts from their films, mainly due to length, Huston makes important lengthy additions which seem to respond to his American way of addressing Irishness. Not least of these is Huston's decision to include direct ideological references taken from the context of turn-of-the-century Dublin and its obsession with Home Rule in which Joyce situates his story but which he excludes from the narrative. These blatant additions clearly reflect Huston's preoccupation with the Irish troubles as he perceived them from the other side of the Atlantic. The inclusion in the film of a passage from Lady Gregory's translation from the Irish of "The Grief of a Girl's

Heart”—the invented character Mr. Grace’s recitation of “Broken Vows” in the film—would not have met with Joyce’s approval, in the opinion of Clive Hart, academic advisor to the James Joyce Estate. Hart contends that “Joyce would have hated the introduction into his story of a passage of Celtic revival literature—especially a passage from a writer for whom he had so little respect” (Hart 1988, 10).

In the transformation from written text to film text, *The Dead* loses much of what Ellmann terms as “Joyce’s first song of exile” (1982, 253), becoming instead Huston’s final song of return to what he imagined to be his own Irish roots. In this connection, it seems entirely appropriate that only Huston’s film should have omitted Joyce’s name from its title. The film *The Dead* is clearly more Huston than Joyce, but this does not necessarily eradicate its worth as entertainment or academic tool, or both.⁸

The inclusion of film as a parallel or alternative way of approaching Joyce does not forebode the death of the written text. My objective in this brief survey has been to introduce the four existing cinematic adaptations of Joyce from a historical perspective, emphasizing, wherever possible, ways of reading these films either parallel or in contrast to the written narratives they use as their base. In fact, it seems appropriate, in this centennial year of cinema, to recall Joyce’s status as a film pioneer himself. Not only did Joyce develop a narrative style that film theoretician Eisenstein would quickly identify as a useful cinematographic guide, but he actually established Dublin’s first cinema, the Volta, with financial help from promoters in Trieste (Burgess 1988). This venture failed due to the inability of Dublin spectators to respond to the Italian films that were shown there. Expanding the reading of the Joycean texts discussed here from page to screen, however, enriches the Joyce experience by exposing the viewer simultaneously to narrative techniques which are plotted visually through sequences of time and space on the screen and to varying degrees of cultural transfer which condition the film-makers’ readings of Joyce and which, in turn, are filtered down to the spectator.

NOTES

¹ *James Joyce’s Ulysses*, *James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *The Dead* are all available on videotape. *Passages from James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake* is available for viewing in 16mm. format at the Donnell Media Center Film Archives, New York Public Library, by appointment.

² Mary Manning’s dramatic play *Finnegans Wake* was staged at the Minor Latham Playhouse at Barnard College in New York City by the all-women Barnard student theatrical company, *Wigs and Cues*, from April 9-12, 1958. The production was directed by Peter Kerr Buchan. Mary Ellen Bute tried to get backing for an off-Broadway production of Manning’s play from the James Joyce Society, but Frances Stelloff, the Society’s secretary, explained that sponsorship had already been offered to Majorie Barkentin’s dramatization, *Ulysses in Nighttown*, which was, in fact, successfully

produced off-Broadway that year. Manning's play had short but successful runs in London and Paris in the autumn of 1958.

³ By the 1950s, Padraic Colum had become a lecturer on Irish literature, including the Joyce canon, at Columbia University. At the time of the Bute project to film *Finnegans Wake*, Colum was the president of the New York James Joyce Society.

⁴ Both these critiques, originally issued at the time of the premiere showing of Bute's film at the Cannes Film Festival in 1965, are included in the Expanding Cinema promotional flyer edited for the film's re-release in New York in October 1982. The first one is accredited to Cannes Film Festival critic, Robert Benayoun. The second appeared first in Alexander Walker's article on Cannes in the May 22, 1965 edition of the *London Evening Standard*.

⁵ See the promotional program for the U.S. premiere of *Ulysses* on file in the Billy Rose Theater Collection at the New York Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.

⁶ For a more detailed account of the Cannes screening, see the news article, "Director of 'Ulysses' Raps Cannes", which was published on May 1, 1967 in the *New York World Journal Tribune*.

⁷ Penelope Gilliatt openly challenges the attitude of the British Board of Censors towards Strick's film adaptation of *Ulysses* in her article "Funking the Issue" (Gilliatt 1967).

⁸ A detailed contrastive analysis between Joyce's short-story and the Huston film is undertaken in my article "Filming Irish Voice and Form: The Hustons and *The Dead*" (Olsen 1994).

WORKS CITED

- Burgess, Anthony. 1988. "The Task of Turning Joyce's Prose to Film Poetry". *The New York Times* 3 January: 15.
- Ellmann, Richard. 1967. "Bloomovie". *The New York Review* 15 June: 40-41.
- . 1982. *James Joyce*. New York: Oxford U. P.
- Gilliatt, Penelope. 1967. "Funking the Issue". *The Observer*. May.
- Grobel, Lawrence. 1989. *The Hustons*. New York: Scribner.
- Hart, Clive. 1988. *Joyce, Huston and the Making of 'The Dead'*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe.
- Huston, John. 1980. *An Open Book*. New York: Knopf.
- Miller, Gabriel. 1980. *Screening the Novel: Rediscovered American Fiction in Film*. New York: Frederick Ungar.

- Olsen, Vickie. 1994. "Filming Irish Voice and Form: The Hustons and *The Dead*". *La Europa (Cultural) de los Pueblos: Voz y Forma*. Vitoria: Edit. Univ. Del País Vasco. 165-74.
- Robinson, Barry. 1967. "On *Ulysses*", *Media & Methods* May: 42-58.
- Weinberg, Gretchen. 1964. "An Interview with Mary Ellen Bute on the Filming of *Finnegans Wake*". *Film Culture* 35. 26-7.