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The Discursive Subject in Adaptation: A Study of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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Abstract: This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of John Fowles's postmodern novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and its 1981 film adaptation directed by Karel Reisz, with screenplay by Harold Pinter. Employing theoretical frameworks from poststructuralism, narratology, and adaptation studies, this study examines how both texts negotiate the construction of subjectivity, narrative authority, historical representation, and gender politics across different media. The novel's experimental narrative structure, characterized by metafictional commentary and multiple endings, finds its cinematic equivalent in the film's innovative dual-narrative framework that juxtaposes Victorian and contemporary storylines. This analysis demonstrates that the film functions not as a derivative reproduction but as an autonomous artistic creation engaged in critical dialogue with the source text. The study contributes to contemporary discourse on intermedial transformation by establishing how adaptation can serve as critical intervention, illuminating the ideological underpinnings of both historical fiction and cinematic representation. Both works ultimately challenge conventional narrative structures while addressing the postmodern concern with the discursive construction of the subject within specific historical and cultural frameworks.

Keywords: adaptation theory, metafiction, postmodernism, gender representation, historiographic metafiction

Introduction: The relationship between literary texts and their cinematic adaptations has long been a subject of critical inquiry, particularly as adaptation studies evolved beyond simplistic fidelity criticism. John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and Karel Reisz's 1981 film adaptation with screenplay by Harold Pinter provide an exemplary case for examining how postmodern narrative techniques translate across media boundaries. Both works fundamentally interrogate questions of narrative authority, historical representation, and the politics of gender—concerns that transcend specific mediums and historical contexts. This analysis examines how both novel and film deploy medium-specific techniques to challenge conventional narrative structures and explore the construction of subjectivity. Both

texts emerged during periods of cultural transformation: the novel amid the social upheavals of the 1960s, the film during the feminist movements of the early 1980s. Their formal innovations continue to offer valuable insights into narrative forms that challenge dominant ideologies and conventional modes of representation.

Theoretical Framework and Metafictional Strategies: The theoretical understanding of adaptation has undergone significant transformation since the early days of fidelity criticism, paralleling broader paradigmatic shifts in critical theory that have fundamentally reoriented our understanding of textuality, meaning-making, and cultural production. This evolution reflects the influence of poststructuralist thought, which has systematically challenged traditional hierarchies between original and copy, source and adaptation, primary and secondary texts. Both Fowles's novel and Reisz's film adaptation operate within this transformed theoretical landscape, deploying sophisticated metafictional strategies that foreground the constructed nature of narrative and identity while simultaneously interrogating the epistemological foundations of representation itself.

Michel Foucault's conceptualization of discourse provides the most crucial framework for understanding how both texts negotiate the complex relationship between knowledge, power, and subjectivity. Foucault's discourse analysis moves beyond traditional linguistic approaches to examine what he terms the "rules of formation" that govern the emergence of statements, objects, and subject positions within specific historical configurations. For Foucault, discourse serves as what Tony Davies describes as "the capillary structure of social cohesion and conformity" that "situates us as individuals, and silently legislates the boundaries of what is possible for us to think and say" (Davies 70). Both novel and film engage productively with this Foucauldian understanding by exposing how subjectivity is constituted through discursive structures rather than existing as a transcendental foundation prior to discourse.

The genealogical method that Foucault develops provides additional analytical tools for understanding how both texts approach historical representation. Rather than treating the past as a repository of fixed facts awaiting discovery, genealogy examines how historical knowledge is constructed through specific discursive practices that simultaneously reveal and conceal the power relations underlying their formation. This approach proves particularly relevant to analysing how both Fowles and Reisz engage with Victorian culture, not as an object of nostalgic recuperation but as a discursive construct that illuminates contemporary ideological investments and blind spots.

Robert Stam's influential reconceptualization of adaptation through intertextual theory, drawing upon Gérard Genette's comprehensive taxonomy of transtextuality, provides essential frameworks for understanding the productive dialogue between novel and film. Stam argues that adaptations participate in what he terms "cultural ventriloquism," where texts speak through and to other texts, creating what Julia Kristeva conceptualizes as an "intertextual dialogue" that challenges hierarchical relationships between sources and their

transformations. This theoretical perspective liberates adaptation from the subordinate position implied by fidelity criticism, positioning film adaptations as autonomous works engaged in creative dialogue with their sources rather than derivative reproductions of pre-existing content.

Linda Hutcheon's comprehensive theory of adaptation advances this reconceptualization by proposing adaptation as simultaneously process and product, involving what she identifies as three distinct but interrelated perspectives: adaptation as formal entity (product), as process of creation, and as process of reception. Her concept of adaptation as "palimpsestuous"—where audiences experience works through accumulated layers of previous interpretations—proves particularly relevant to analyzing *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, where both novel and film self-consciously acknowledge their constructed nature while engaging with multiple literary and cinematic traditions. This palimpsestuous quality creates what Hutcheon terms "repetition with critical difference," wherein adapted texts simultaneously install and subvert the conventions they deploy.

The analysis of metafictional elements in both texts requires sustained engagement with narrative theory, particularly Gérard Genette's influential work on narrative levels and metalepsis. Genette's systematic distinction between story (histoire), narrative (récit), and narrating (narration) provides crucial analytical tools for understanding how Fowles's novel disrupts conventional storytelling through narrative intrusions, temporal manipulations, and multiple endings that refuse definitive closure. His concept of metalepsis—the transgression of narrative levels—illuminates how both texts create meaning through deliberate violations of conventional boundaries between different orders of narration.

Patricia Waugh's foundational definition of metafiction as fiction that "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact" directly applies to both the novel's narrative strategies and the film's innovative dual-story structure. However, both texts extend beyond simple self-reflexivity to engage with what Linda Hutcheon terms "historiographic metafiction"—narratives that simultaneously install historical referentiality while problematizing the epistemological grounds of historical knowledge. This mode neither denies the existence of the past nor accepts uncritically the ways it has been represented, instead occupying a productive intermediate space that challenges binary thinking about truth and fiction, reality and representation.

Fowles's literary experimentation employs multiple sophisticated techniques that systematically disrupt conventional narrative expectations while engaging with fundamental questions about the nature of storytelling itself. The most prominent strategy involves the intrusive narrator who not only comments on the dramatic action but explicitly discusses the process of fiction-making, famously declaring in Chapter 13: "This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind." This metaleptic intervention deliberately shatters the mimetic illusion that traditional realist fiction labours to maintain, forcing readers to confront the constructed nature of fictional representation

while paradoxically enhancing rather than diminishing their emotional investment in the characters and situations.

The novel's temporal structure creates additional layers of complexity through its strategic deployment of anachronistic references and modern perspectives that create what Genette would term "narrative metalepsis"—violations of narrative levels that make visible the historical constructedness of the text. The narrator's discussions of Darwin, Marx, and Freud as influences on Victorian consciousness demonstrate how the past is inevitably filtered through present understanding, while his frequent references to contemporary events and perspectives foreground the impossibility of authentic historical reconstruction.

The film adaptation faced the challenge of translating literary metafiction into specifically cinematic form, a problem that Pinter's screenplay brilliantly solves through the innovative dual narrative structure that juxtaposes the Victorian story of Charles and Sarah with the contemporary story of actors Mike and Anna filming that very narrative. This device creates what might be termed "cinematic metalepsis"—a violation of diegetic levels that mirrors the novel's narrative transgressions while employing distinctly cinematic techniques to achieve comparable effects.

Reisz's direction employs specific cinematographic strategies to create metafictional effects that foreground the filmmaking process without destroying dramatic engagement. The strategic use of the clapperboard to signal transitions between narrative levels makes the film production apparatus visible, creating a cinematic equivalent to the novel's authorial intrusions. Mirror shots and frames-within-frames generate visual metaphors for the relationship between representation and reality, while the casting of Jeremy Irons and Meryl Streep in dual roles creates a performative commentary on identity construction that visualizes the gap between Victorian and modern sensibilities while suggesting fundamental continuities in human experience across historical periods.

Gender, Subjectivity, and the Politics of Representation: The poststructuralist paradigm shift in epistemology inaugurated by Saussurean structuralist thinking has fundamentally reoriented critical attention toward the wider discursive structures within which individuals find themselves, effectively displacing traditional phenomenological approaches that privileged consciousness as the foundation of human experience. This theoretical transformation, subsequently radicalized by poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Julia Kristeva, has systematically challenged essentialist discourses of the subject as a self-present and transcendental entity possessing stable, unified identity. Both Fowles's novel and Reisz's adaptation engage productively with this theoretical revolution through their sophisticated treatment of gender construction and representation, demonstrating how subjectivity emerges through performative iteration rather than expressing some pre-given ontological core.

Judith Butler's influential theorization of gender performativity, though published several years after both texts, provides retrospective illumination of their innovative approach to identity construction. Butler's argument that gender identity is constituted through repeated performances rather than expressing essential inner truth resonates powerfully with both works' treatment of character development and transformation. This performative understanding of identity fundamentally challenges the liberal humanist conception of the subject as autonomous agent, instead revealing how seemingly natural categories are produced through culturally specific practices of iteration and citation that create the illusion of stable identity while actually constituting it through their repetition.

Fowles's Sarah Woodruff functions simultaneously as character and cultural symbol, embodying Victorian anxieties about female sexuality while providing a powerful critique of the patriarchal discourses that sought to contain and define feminine identity. Her enigmatic presence within the text serves to destabilize conventional narrative authority, particularly through her strategic resistance to definitive interpretation and her refusal to conform to established feminine archetypes. The novel maintains her fundamental unknowability through a sophisticated narrative strategy that acknowledges the limitations of male narrative authority; even the ostensibly omniscient narrator admits uncertainty about her motivations, declaring his inability to penetrate the mystery of her consciousness. This narrative restraint suggests that female subjectivity cannot be fully captured or contained by patriarchal discursive structures, anticipating contemporary feminist theoretical insights about the irreducibility of feminine experience to masculine categories of understanding.

Sarah's self-designation as "the French Lieutenant's Woman" represents a particularly complex instance of what Butler would subsequently theorize as performative identity construction. This appellative identification constitutes her social identity through its very enunciation, transforming what might appear as victimhood into a form of strategic self-fashioning that grants her a certain power within the constraints of Victorian social conventions. The ambiguous status of her relationship with Varguennes—whether seduction, abandonment, or perhaps conscious fabrication—remains deliberately unresolved, creating interpretive spaces that resist definitive masculine appropriation while highlighting the constructed nature of feminine identity within patriarchal culture.

The novel's treatment of Sarah's supposed "fallen" status reveals the ideological mechanisms through which Victorian society constructed female sexuality as either pure or corrupted, virgin or whore, with no intermediate possibilities for complex feminine subjectivity. Her strategic deployment of her marginal status—living in the liminal space of social respectability—enables her to achieve a form of agency unavailable to more conventionally positioned women, while simultaneously exposing the arbitrary nature of the moral categories that regulate feminine behaviour. This sophisticated analysis of how women might navigate restrictive social structures anticipates later feminist theoretical work on agency and resistance within patriarchal systems.

The cinematic adaptation's embodiment of Sarah necessarily transforms her from literary construct to physical presence through Meryl Streep's complex performance, involving what phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty would conceptualize as the fundamental shift from "word-body" to "flesh-body"—from linguistic representation to material embodiment with its own signifying potential. Streep's interpretation constructs meaning through specifically cinematic codes: subtle facial expressions that suggest interiority without fully exposing it, gestural economies that convey both vulnerability and strength, vocal modulations that maintain the character's essential mystery while providing emotional accessibility, and strategic positioning within the cinematic frame that emphasizes both her isolation and commanding presence.

The film's most significant theoretical intervention lies in Streep's dual role as both Victorian Sarah and contemporary actress Anna, creating what might be termed a "performative palimpsest" that literalizes the theme of identity as ongoing construction while providing critical modern perspective on historical gender constraints. Anna's professional success and sexual autonomy represent possibilities largely foreclosed to her Victorian counterpart, yet her relationship with Mike (Jeremy Irons) reveals persistent gender asymmetries: professional competition inflected by sexual tension, affective dependencies that reproduce traditional patterns, and power imbalances that echo their Victorian roles while taking new forms appropriate to contemporary contexts.

This doubling strategy creates multiple interpretive layers that complicate simple narratives of historical progress in gender relations. Anna's performance of Sarah becomes a meditation on female performance across historical periods, while her ultimate rejection of Mike suggests that modern women possess forms of agency unavailable to their Victorian predecessors. However, her emotional struggles and professional challenges indicate that liberation remains incomplete, constrained by new forms of patriarchal authority that have adapted to changed social conditions without fundamentally altering underlying power relations.

The novel's treatment of Charles Smithson provides an equally sophisticated analysis of masculine subjectivity in crisis, embodying what Elaine Showalter identifies as the pervasive "crisis of masculinity" characteristic of late Victorian culture. His scientific interests, particularly in Darwin and geological speculation, position him as a representative modern man struggling to maintain traditional masculine authority while accommodating new forms of knowledge that challenge conventional certainties. His engagement to Ernestina represents conventional masculine duty and social expectation, while his attraction to Sarah suggests deeper desires for authenticity and emotional connection that exceed the boundaries of respectable Victorian masculinity.

The novel traces Charles's progressive destabilization through his encounters with Sarah, culminating in the famous multiple endings that offer different resolutions to his identity crisis. Each ending represents a different model of masculinity: the first

conventionally Victorian (accepting social duty and patriarchal responsibility), the second romantically modern (pursuing individual desire over social obligation), the third existentially contemporary (embracing uncertainty and the impossibility of definitive resolution). This structural innovation refuses to privilege any single resolution, instead suggesting that masculine identity, like its feminine counterpart, remains fundamentally open to multiple possibilities and interpretations.

Both texts engage critically with the dynamics of looking and being looked at, particularly regarding gendered power relations that structure social interaction. Laura Mulvey's influential theorization of the "male gaze" in cinema, though formulated in relation to classical Hollywood film, provides useful frameworks for analyzing how both works explore the politics of visual representation. The novel explicitly thematizes Victorian scopophilia through Charles's scientific observation that gradually transforms into erotic fascination, while the film translates this dynamic through cinematographic choices that frequently adopt Charles's point of view, potentially implicating viewers in his objectifying gaze while simultaneously creating critical distance through various formal strategies.

However, both texts complicate simple applications of gaze theory by providing Sarah with her own forms of visual agency and resistance. In the novel, her strategic self-presentation and manipulation of her own image demonstrate forms of feminine agency that exceed traditional victim/object positions, while the film grants her moments of direct address that rupture conventional spectatorial relations. These instances when Sarah looks directly at the camera break the fourth wall and challenge viewer expectations, creating what might be termed "counter-gaze" that resists easy appropriation within traditional scopophilic structures.

The politics of representation extends beyond gender to encompass broader questions of cultural authority and historical consciousness. Both texts engage with what Hayden White terms the "narrativist" understanding of historiography—the recognition that historical representation necessarily involves narrative construction rather than transparent transmission of past reality. This sophisticated understanding of historical representation's constructedness parallels their treatment of gender identity as performatively constituted rather than naturally given, suggesting broader theoretical connections between different forms of cultural construction and ideological reproduction.

Discourse and Power: Historical Representation and Temporal Consciousness: Discourse for Foucault is what relations of production are for Marx, the unconscious for Freud, the impersonal laws of language for Saussure: the capillary structure of social cohesion and conformity. Both novel and film grapple with how discourse constructs historical consciousness and representation.

Fowles's narrator explicitly acknowledges the impossibility of authentic historical reconstruction: "I cannot give you the full and complete alphabet of the English language as

it was spoken in 1867." This admission reflects what Hayden White terms the "narrativist" understanding of history—the recognition that historical representation necessarily involves narrative construction rather than transparent transmission of past reality.

The film translates these historiographic concerns through specifically cinematic means. The parallel narrative structure creates what Deleuze and Guattari might call a "rhizomatic" temporality—multiple temporal planes existing simultaneously rather than in linear succession. The visual design creates additional temporal commentary: Victorian sequences employ conventions of heritage cinema (careful period detail, painterly compositions, measured pacing) while contemporary sequences use handheld cameras, natural lighting, and rapid editing. These stylistic differences make visible the constructedness of period representation while highlighting continuities between past and present.

Both works maintain critical distance from their Victorian subject matter while acknowledging the seductive power of period nostalgia. The novel achieves this through ironic narration that simultaneously evokes and undermines Victorian literary conventions. The film uses the contemporary narrative to provide critical perspective on the Victorian story's romantic elements. This double consciousness reflects what Fredric Jameson identifies as postmodernism's "nostalgia mode"—the aesthetic citation of past styles without their ideological commitments.

Adaptation as Critical Intervention: Dialogue Between Texts: The film adaptation demonstrates what Lawrence Venuti calls "foreignizing" translation—adaptation that makes visible its own transformative processes rather than creating seamless equivalence. The dual narrative structure announces the film's interpretive stance, revealing adaptation as creative reading rather than transparent transmission.

The relationship between novel and film exemplifies what Mikhail Bakhtin terms "dialogism"—texts existing in responsive relationship rather than hierarchical subordination. The film responds to the novel's themes and techniques while establishing its own autonomous significance. This dialogic relationship generates new meanings unavailable to either text alone. The film's feminist revision of the ending—Anna's rejection of Mike—comments on both the novel's gender politics and the historical moment of adaptation.

The temporal gap between novel (1969) and film (1981) introduces historical and ideological differences that shape the adaptation process. The film emerged during second-wave feminism's height, influencing its treatment of gender themes. The rise of heritage cinema in 1980s Britain created new contexts for representing Victorian drama. These contextual differences demonstrate how adaptation involves not just formal transformation but ideological negotiation.

This comparative analysis demonstrates the value of approaching adaptation through multiple theoretical lenses. Rather than privileging fidelity or even creative transformation, it reveals how adaptations exist in complex intertextual networks, generating meanings through dialogue between texts, media, and cultural contexts. The study illuminates how metafictional techniques translate across media, requiring medium-specific strategies to achieve comparable effects.

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