THE ABSS CAMPS' NOVELIZATION OF JAMES CAMERON'S ORSON - FROM THE SCREEN TO THE PRINTED PAGE: A RONSON...
Novelizations are a very singular brand of writing. They are actually adaptations to be printed page not of the film but of its screenplay and quite often, novelisers write them without having seen the final version of the film. Novelizations are commissioned by the film studio as part of the advertising campaign of the film in question and are used before its release to whet the appetite of prospective cinema-goers. Since they are based on the screenplay rather than the film, novelizations are usually perfunctory exercises in padding out what the screenplay's bare dialogue and directions suggest. As they are not expected to stand on their own as novels, novelisers rarely invest much effort in writing them; they are generally seen by writers as a piece of easy writing alien to their own artistic interests. Reputed novelists only accept writing novelizations because they are very well paid, though the money they are paid also covers the use of their popular names with a view to getting higher sales. However, the popular novelist commissioned to write the novelization may exceptionally transform it into much more a mere retelling of the screenplay. One of these exceptions to the general rule is Orson Scott Card's remarkable novelization of James Cameron's The Abyss.

Cameron, himself the author of the screenplay for The Abyss, chose Orson Scott Card to novelise his work, first because he was deeply dissatisfied with the novelizations of his previous films, and second, because he thought that Card's interest in the human side of the characters, rather than in the hardware typical of most science-fiction novels, could help produce an artistically valuable novel instead of a mere adaptation. For Cameron (1989: 351) "the book illuminates the film and vice versa, symbiotic partners in a single, multi-faceted dramatic work." Indeed, symbiosis is an accurate term to define the unusual method that Card followed to write his version of The Abyss. Instead of working from the screenplay, Card worked from the videotapes of the film as editing progressed, so that the updating of the manuscript was often necessary depending on Cameron's alterations of his own screenplay. Even more unusual is the fact that Card wrote the first three chapters, dealing with the childhood of the three main characters - Bud, Lindsey and Coffey - before filming began. The actors were asked to base their performances on the childhood backgrounds that Card had devised for their characters. Card's work was exceptional as novelizations go and Cameron was the first to praise it. So impressed was he by Card's novel, and seemingly so concerned that his film would not stand up to the book, that in his "Afterword" to the paperback edition he insists again and again on presenting the film as a collaboration between him and Card; in fact, Cameron's warm invitation to see the film seems to connote a thinly disguised preoccupation that his work may finally become an illustration for Card's The Abyss.

Card, who had so far refused to write any novelization, accepted the commission because he was interested in Cameron's films. He was cautious about the novelization, as in his opinion, screenplays offer enough material for a novelette but not for a full-length novel; also because he had misgivings about the freedom he would be allowed by the studio. However, the idea of collaboration strongly appealed to him and he finally took the challenge when Cameron agreed to let him have access to his research.
and to the film stage, and ultimately because, in his own words, "I wanted to see if a novelization could be as valid a work of art as the film itself" (Card, 1989:355). But if contact with Cameron, the producer Gail Anne Hurd and Van Ling (Cameron's researcher) was scant yet useful, contact with the actors seems to have been definitive, which adds another layer to the concept of artistic collaboration. "Every one of the actors", Card notes, "brought details of attitude and interpretation that opened up their characters to me, allowing me to make them more real in the novel than they would ever have been from the script alone" (ibid.: 359) So satisfactory was the collaboration with Cameron and his cast - despite the constant confrontations between directors and actors - that Card even compared their work to that of Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick for 2001, to conclude that his novel is "not a novelization as the term is usually understood, but a novel that stands on its own and yet complements, illuminates and fulfills the movie" (ibid.: 361).

What neither Cameron nor Card discuss is the material that Card transferred from his own novels to the novelization. All the scenes of the film are in the book, but if the angelic alien monsters of the film are much richer characters in Card's version this is because they bear a striking resemblance to his own alien monsters in Ender's Game, his most popular novel. The aliens of The Abyss, who call themselves 'builders of memory' and are capable of sharing collectively their memories because they have no sense of individuality are almost the same ones that are unwittingly wiped out by the hero Ender in Card's novel and who later redeem him. Both Card's The Abyss and Ender's Game end with the aliens' promise - already fulfilled in the former, to be fulfilled in the latter - to teach humankind how to share our memories and thus put an end to our isolating individualism. The film and the novel of The Abyss are no doubt symbiotic especially as regards the visualisation of the monsters, since the film shows the very beautiful angelic aliens in a display of special effects that the novel cannot match; yet the novel makes sense of who they are and, indeed, of the whole plot. It might well be that Cameron and Card had found their work so congenial because they were working on the same mythical material or, alternatively, that an unacknowledged influence was what led Cameron to choose Card as his novelist. In any case, Card's The Abyss is a more complete narrative than either Cameron's The Abyss or his own Ender's Game. Novel and film form a symbiotic continuum that cannot be easily dissected and which is actually completed with Steve Johnson's successful design for the alien monsters. This is an essential element in the film and hence in the visualisation of the novelization but, oddly enough, neither Cameron nor Card mention Johnson's work in their comments on the novelization.

The difference between an exceptional novelization like Card's and an average novelization can be best appreciated if we turn to Alan Dean Foster's novelization of another of James Cameron's films, Aliens. Foster's novelization is a correct yet uninspired retelling of the film just like his own novelizations of Ridley Scott's Alien and of David Fincher's Alien³. The paperback edition of Card's The Abyss runs to 349 pages and takes considerably longer to read than it takes to see the film, itself an unusually long film, which means that by roughly the same price of the cinema ticket, the pleasure of enjoying the film's plot from a new angle can be prolonged for quite a long time. Foster's version of Aliens, which has only 240 pages even though Aliens is an very long film, is far less well written and, since it adds little or nothing in depth of characterization nor in strategies of visualisation to the film, it can be read very quickly, especially if the reader is already familiar with the film. Naturally, if the reader is not familiar with Aliens, Foster's novelization serves well the same purpose of the film trailer, namely, anticipating the pleasure of seeing what both can only suggest. The novelization is necessarily more limited than the film as far as the actual visualisation of the scenes is concerned; much more so, if the film in question is a fantasy film such as Aliens or The Abyss in which special effects play such an important role. This is why the novelization is actually, like the trailer, an announcement of what the film will make you see. If read after seeing the film, Foster's novelization or any average novelization only serves the purpose of refreshing the film-goer's memory of the film, helping to fix the screen's fleeting image.

In contrast, Card's novelization of The Abyss not only fixes the memory of Cameron's images but also adds layers of meaning to the original film. After reading Card's novel it is simply impossible to distinguish the characters of the film from the characters of the novel - they become a new type of fictional construction stranded between two media. And if the reader and film-goer is also familiar with Card's own novels this intermedia intertextuality is further enriched. Because it is exceptional, Card's and Cameron's The Abyss challenges us to enter into our critical vocabularies a new concept to complement original authorship, namely, intermedia symbiotic collaboration.

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