Filming the “Unfilmable”: The Golden Bowl on Screen

Lee Clark Mitchell thus comments on the difficulties that the filmmakers who aim to adapt Henry James’s late fiction for screen inevitably face:

Yet it hardly need be observed that James stymies filmmakers, not only in his relative lack of interest in plot closure, but in his taste for dilations of psychological nuance—for people thinking about what others are thinking. And this preference makes James’s three late novels radically untheatrical. The Golden Bowl in particular resists either paraphrase or dramatization in fundamental ways, since establishing what happens is always a matter of establishing first whose view is taken.¹

Such a reworking of The Golden Bowl (1904) that suits the needs of cinematography seems to be an impossible task, and yet in the years 1972 and 2000 there were two noteworthy attempts to film this particular literary work: the former was a serialized version directed by James Cellan Jones for the BBC, with Jack Pulman as the author of the screenplay, and the latter was a feature film made by James Ivory and written by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. This article offers a discussion of these two adaptations. The two films differ from each other indeed strikingly, therefore the article will present divergent aspects of the two cinematic adaptations of The Golden Bowl: the introduction of the narrator and its consequences in the earlier film and the construction of the plane of social and cultural critique in the recent version.

The action of The Golden Bowl is set mainly in London and its surroundings, although the characters also make trips, for instance, to Brighton and Gloucester. The novel introduces four main characters: Adam Verver, an American millionaire and an art-collector, Maggie Verver, his daughter, Prince Amerigo, an impoverished Italian aristocrat and Maggie’s husband, and Charlotte Stant, the Italian’s former beloved and Maggie’s friend. The action begins a short time before Maggie and Amerigo’s wedding day: the lawyers of both parties finish drawing up the marriage contract, meanwhile the would-be husband and wife make decisions about their

guests at the wedding ceremony. To their surprise, Charlotte comes to London to celebrate the event; her appearance chagrins Fanny Assingham, who is a friend and a confidant of both Maggie and Amerigo. Charlotte, a person with a very mysterious past, in the course of time attracts Adam Verver’s attention and eventually marries him with a little help from Maggie, who believes that the father makes a sacrifice for her in giving up the chance of a second marriage. The father and the daughter have become intensely involved with each other’s lives since the death of Maggie’s mother many years before. Maggie’s and her father’s marriages do not weaken strong emotional ties between them. They remain inseparable and together bring up Principino, Amerigo and Maggie’s son. They hardly ever attend social occasions, asking Amerigo and Charlotte to represent the family at balls and parties.

In such circumstances, Charlotte and the Prince take to each other again, remembering that the only reason why their love in the past did not end in a lasting relationship was that neither of them could afford it. Maggie, who was initially indifferent to the closeness between her husband and her father’s wife, begins to suspect that matters have gone too far when she finds out that Charlotte and Amerigo prolonged their stay at a friends’ country estate and went on a tour to Gloucester without any company. Although she does not really discover any details, she decides to prevent them from committing further errors and, more importantly, to protect her father from the painful knowledge of his wife’s possible infidelity. She spends more time with her husband and Charlotte, gives Amerigo to understand that she has guessed many things about him and Charlotte and that it would be best for all of them if her father did not learn about anything. However, when she is about to talk seriously to Charlotte, the latter informs her that she has persuaded Adam that they should go to live in America. In the end, Amerigo and Maggie become reconciled; however, their reconciliation has a bitter taste for both of them because it is marked by concessions and understatements.

The eponymous golden bowl appears at the beginning and at the end of the story, constituting its symbolic frame. First, Amerigo and Charlotte go for a walk under the pretext of buying a wedding present for Maggie. In a small shop selling old jewelry, they find a beautiful gilded bowl offered at a moderate price because of an unnoticeable crack in the crystal. However, the former lovers give up the opportunity to buy it. At the end, in turn, several years later Maggie purchases the bowl as a gift for her father. When the shop-owner delivers the bowl to Maggie’s place, he recognizes Charlotte and Amerigo on a photograph and recalls their memorable visit to Maggie.

Most adaptations of classic English novels prepared by the BBC are characterized by their greatest possible fidelity to background literary texts; *The Golden Bowl* is no exception. The composition of the film mirrors that of the book: the six
episodes of the serial, each titled after the name of one character, correspond to
the six untitled parts of the novel, itself divided into two “books”: “The Prince”
and “The Princess.” More importantly, however, the BBC adaptation introduces a
narrator, unlike James Ivory’s film. In fact, if fidelity to the original is the fundamental
assumption, the narrator must be present in the film version. Extended narrative
parts predominate in The Golden Bowl, here and there interspersed with dialogues.
These narrative parts are responsible for the effect of compositional and
conceptual consistency. If the narrator were to be eliminated, the coherence of a
film plot would depend on radical modifications of the literary material.

Essentially, there exist three options concerning the choice of a possible
narrating presence. The narrator could be introduced simply as voice-over; this
variant of narration would, indeed, be the closest to the narrative perspective
constructed in the novel because it would enhance the significance of a mediator
who does not interfere with the course of the events. However, what undermines
the tangibility of this option is that the position of the narrator in the film would
not be in any way comparable to that of the textual narrator due to the unavoid-
able, drastic reduction of his parts. In other words, this solution would be impractical.
Therefore the figure of the narrator should be present in the film; this conclusion
leads us to two further possibilities: we can have either a narrator who is present
on the screen, but does not participate in the events, or one who is personally
involved in the action. For instance, one could imagine a narrator resembling
Henry James; such a recognition of the author would be interesting and meaningful
insofar as it would foreground the question of the construction of narrative authority.
Yet, there would arise a complication connected with the tone of the narration.
Because of the reductive treatment of the narration, the film has to work out
entirely new proportions between long narrative passages and dialogues and, in
consequence, create an alternative, somewhat lighter and less obliging, so to
speak, form of narration. This assumption, in turn, is very much at variance with
the idea of using a narrating person modeled on the author.

Finally, the remaining variant of the narrator is a character from the literary
text, assuming in the film the position of the teller. Naturally, none of the four
main characters should fulfill such a function. The next character to be taken into
consideration is Fanny Assingham, befriended with both couples, a woman who
values good manners and social conventions and concomitantly is well aware of
the subtlety of interpersonal relations. What disqualifies Fanny as a potential
narrator is the fact that she engages too much in the lives of the main characters,
feels responsible for them, and often tries to influence their decisions and
attitudes. The only option that is left turns out to be Bob Assingham, Fanny’s
husband, a secondary character who, importantly, in contrast with other
background characters, acquires certain knowledge about Maggie, Amerigo,
Charlotte, and Adam from conversations with his wife and from his own
observations. It is Bob Assingham who was chosen for the narrator in the film version of *The Golden Bowl* by the BBC screenplay writer, Jack Pulman. The viewer of the serial who is acquainted with the novel might initially be surprised about this choice, but after some consideration they would probably admit that it is the most appropriate and logical variant of the narrating presence.

In the novel, Bob Assingham appears, to put it tautologically, very much as “the husband of his wife.” This does not mean that he allows her to dominate him completely, gives up his own opinions, or uncritically accepts whatever Fanny tells him. Rather, this remark concerns his position in the text, the major indicator of which are his conversations with his wife. Unlike Fanny, he does not see the need to witness the events which she expects him to have an opinion on. As James characterizes him in the novel, “He could deal with things perfectly, for all his needs, without getting near them.”² Bob’s skills as an observer, the feature which the reader can easily overlook, are enhanced in the film. In the BBC adaptation of *The Golden Bowl*, Bob Assingham’s common sense and skepticism, stemming from his life experience, counterbalance the melodramatic³ ups and downs of the four main heroes as well as Fanny’s frustrations. Thus, his alleged lack of refinement, often criticized by Fanny, proves to be a very healthy quality, especially in the film: “He knew everything that could be known about life, which he regarded as, for far the greater part, a matter of pecuniary arrangement” (58). He embodies cognitive moderation and emotional balance, which contributes to the trustworthiness of his narration in the BBC’s *The Golden Bowl*.

One can risk a thesis that the function that James envisaged for the Assinghams and the authors of the BBC adaptation willingly confirmed can be described in such metanarrative terms as “author,” “text,” and “reader.” In a sense, Fanny is the “author” of the events presented in *The Golden Bowl* since she encouraged Maggie and Amerigo’s engagement, even though we do not know in what particular way she influenced their relationship. Beside the Prince and Charlotte, she is the only person who knows about their former deep feelings for each other. Additionally, she possesses such knowledge about the characters that enables her to guess their intentions, predict their deeds, and even prevent, or at least try to prevent, the stupidities they could commit. What marks the opening of *The Golden Bowl* is the implication that the “text” created by Fanny begins to slip out of her control: the marriage contract has been agreed upon and thus, in other words, a certain arrangement, revealing the features of a narrative

² Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963), 58. All subsequent references are to this edition of the novel, with page numbers provided in parentheses.
sequence and initiated by Fanny, has almost reached its conclusion, when Charlotte appears, reminding Fanny about Amerigo’s dangerous fascination from the past. In our metanarrative configuration, Charlotte represents a “chapter” in a longer story, a chapter that seems to have been “closed” but is not. If we recognize Fanny as someone akin to the “author,” then Charlotte is responsible for the “narrative chaos” that contaminates Fanny’s “work.” Moreover, since Charlotte’s arrival in London, Fanny keeps speculating about possible developments of events and sharing her observations and worries with Bob.

From the very first page of the novel, the reader of The Golden Bowl is faced with bewildering psychological divagations, with countless inconclusive, if not completely misleading, hints about the motivation underlying the protagonists’ thoughts and actions. The invention of a figure like Bob Assingham can be seen as James’s sympathetic gesture toward the confused reader. Namely, Bob does not only listen to his wife’s observations, suppositions and doubts, as if out of marital duty: he asks her questions, which she sometimes dismisses as “vulgar,” but which stress the need of formulating unequivocal statements. Whereas he does not interfere with the course of events, he believes that his point of view deserves some notice, at least insofar as the characters’ experiences concern him, and they do concern him because Fanny hardly ever talks to him about anything else.

The conversations between Bob and Fanny belong to the most brilliant and dynamic passages of the novel. Their liveliness derives from the juxtaposition of the tone of Fanny’s utterances, which reflects her anxiety, bafflement, and incertitude of her own surmises, to the tone of her husband’s deliberations, which suggests that he would not care about the whole affair if he did not feel obliged to do so by his wife’s involvement in it. In the book, these dialogues function as interludes; in the BBC serial, their importance increases due to Bob Assingham’s privileged position. While in the literary work Fanny is essentially the only source of her husband’s knowledge about the relations between Charlotte, Amerigo, Maggie and Adam, in the film Bob depends on his own observations, discovers connections between facts, ponders the motivations behind the characters’ gestures and words. Indeed, in the BBC version, he takes on the task which in the literary text is allocated to his wife, trying to understand others and to help the viewer comprehend the entire situation. Interestingly, the film suggests the possibility of interpreting Bob’s remarks as James’s self-ironic comment on the innumerable complications he included in The Golden Bowl.

The foregrounding of the figure of Bob Assingham elicits, or even creates, the humorous potential of James’s novel. The comic effect is almost impossible to discern in the literary narrative due to the apparent weight and the evident insolubility of the problems depicted in it, whereas in the film it results from the bringing together of the opposite and concomitantly mutually complementary
characters of Bob and Fanny Assingham as well as from the quality of communication between them. Their communication differs from the linguistic contacts between the other primary characters in the film version, as it also does in the book. Bob and Fanny strive to reveal, name, or at least signal as many things as possible to each other, but since they often do not find adequate words, the messages that they impart sometimes cause misunderstandings. Nevertheless, their sincere attempts at communicating important things to each other look convincing and their misunderstandings never lead them to mutual suspicions of ill will. By contrast, the ambivalence of the communication between the four central characters is overwhelming, because they either are unable to or do not want to reveal what they really have in mind and what causes their disquiet.

In the film made by the BBC, the Assingham play a very crucial role which does not have its equivalent in the novel: their marriage can be seen as a kind of standard the reference to which enables the viewer to assess the disturbing inclinations of Charlotte, Amerigo, Maggie and Adam and the emotional consequences of their often inexplicable behaviors. Bob and Fanny have been married for many years and their relationship has become a routine; however, it is the kind of routine which is not tiring to the individuals involved and which gives them a sense of composure and security. They do keep a certain tension that energizes their marriage, playing seemingly perverse, but in fact innocuous, verbal games, assuming poses, and ritualizing their contacts. Therefore when Fanny occasionally manifests her indignation with her husband and deems him “vulgar,” he does not feel offended, because this is precisely the kind of reaction he expects from her. Bob himself, in turn, is always ready to hear Fanny out, although seemingly he treats his wife’s endeavors as well as her worries and apprehensions with a pinch of salt. Paradoxically, his skeptical comments and provocative questions can serve as a remedy for Fanny’s restlessness, a remedy that helps her regain the peace of mind through self-discipline (Bob, by the way, is a former soldier). Contrary to Charlotte and Adam as well as to Maggie and Amerigo, the Assingham know very well what they can afford to do in their marriage and where or when marital tolerance ends. James Cellan Jones and Jack Pulman have made this contrast more conspicuous in presenting Bob and Fanny not just as a model married couple, but as spouses whose relationship borders on some stereotypes of marriage. Bob Assingham tells his tale either sitting alone by the fire at night or staying at a club which does not admit women and where he does not seek male company, but simply peace. In fact, he admits this without any hesitation, as if blinking his eye at the viewer. While James symbolically describes the relations between the primary characters by means of an image of a beautiful gilded bowl with a crack hidden under the thin surface of gold, an analogous symbolic characterization of the Assingham would possibly be the image of an exquisite-looking, but reasonably priced, glass vessel without any flaws.
The standard that the Assinghams embody also has an economic dimension. Bob is a retired soldier, in the army he reached the rank of a colonel, which indicates that he and his wife are well-off enough to lead their lives with a sense of dignity and stability, but not as rich as to be able to satisfy all their caprices. Symptomatically, when introducing himself briefly at the beginning of the film, Bob says a few words about his material status. In turn, Adam Verver is unbelievably wealthy and belongs to the most famous, respected and influential art-collectors staying in Europe; he can afford such extravaganza as the foundation of American City, a gigantic half-city, half-museum, where all his art objects purchased in Europe will be exhibited. It goes without saying that Maggie benefits from her father’s fortune and that she can have much more than she needs. Finally, as far as Charlotte and Amerigo are concerned, they are poor people by economic standards, but sophisticated and elitist by social standards. Their good manners can be regarded as a compensation for their limited means. Mark Seltzer remarks that “The Golden Bowl is a novel about power—conjugal, commercial, and imperial—but throughout the novel power is represented in terms of ‘mildness,’ ‘harmony,’ and ‘calm.’ More precisely, the name that James gives to the exercising of power in The Golden Bowl is love.”

The critic refers to the binary oppositions that underlie the construction of the plot and the presentation of characters. In the BBC film, the presence of the Assinghams tones down the contrast resulting from the striking difference in the four main characters’ material status.

The placement of the Assinghams in the foreground suggests interpretative possibilities which visibly depart from those authorial intentions which made James compose The Golden Bowl as a study of impenetrable human psychology. The serialized version is a story about the manners of upper social classes. Such an interpretative solution reduces the ambivalence of characters and makes it impossible to show the nuances of individual attitudes and gestures. The principal characters are one, at best two-dimensional. The male protagonists appear to be rather monochromatic: Adam Verver is a good-natured and meditative millionaire, Prince Amerigo emerges as a permanently bewildered dandy. Maggie’s transformation from a trusting and devoted daughter, wife, and mother into an embittered and disappointed woman seems too abrupt. Finally, Charlotte is both a calculating seductress and a romantically-inclined person longing for love.

The fact that the BBC filmmakers have modified, slightly but noticeably, the ending of the novel confirms their intention of eliciting the melodramatic content


[5] The following discussion of the ways of fashioning characters in the serial can be seen as a polemic with Lee Clark Mitchell, who praises Gayle Hunnicut (Charlotte), Barry Morse (Adam) and Jill Townsend (Maggie) for ambivalent roles. However, I fully agree with the critic that the biggest asset of the BBC serial is the narration. Mitchell, 297.
of the narrative. The book closes with the scene of Maggie’s and Amerigo’s reconciliation:

It kept him before her therefore, taking in—or trying to—what she so wonderfully gave. He tried, to clearly, to please her—to meet her in her own way; but with the result only that, close to her, her face kept before him, his hands holding her shoulders, his whole act enclosing her, he presently echoed: “‘See’? I see nothing but you.” And the truth of it had, with this force, after a moment, so strangely lighted his eyes that, as for pity and dread of them, she buried her own in his breast. (511)

Critics willingly talk about the ambiguity of this concluding scene, stressing the impossibility of determining whether Maggie taking her eyes off Amerigo’s expresses her utter disappointment, and even terror, or timidly admits to her hope for the future, because, all in all, she has solved all major problems in the way that suits her best. Quite predictably, the film has two endings: the closure of the story of Amerigo, Charlotte, Maggie and Adam, and the closure of Bob Assingham’s narration. The first ending is melodramatic insofar as it is Amerigo and Charlotte who exchange their last glances in the scene wherein Amerigo and Maggie say goodbye to the Ververs, who are preparing for their journey to America. The Prince and Charlotte look at each other the moment she is leaving the room, as if it were their last meeting and they wished to preserve vivid images of each other in their memories.

The very concluding scene in the film shows the Assinghams during an evening conversation. Trying to sum up the events he has seen or heard about, Bob says to Fanny that the whole affair is a grim story. This remark is addressed to his wife as much as to the viewer; Fanny immediately responds to it, offering a different view of the baffling incidents. In her opinion, what happened to the two married couples is sad, first and foremost. Such a statement reveals Fanny’s melodramatic disposition. Since Bob knows very well that he will never convince his wife to accept his differing point of view, he admits that she may be right, which of course does not mean that he agrees with her. The viewer thus has the opportunity to choose either Bob’s or Fanny’s assessment of the story and, more generally, to support either of the two divergent interpretative directions suggested by the Assinghams.

In conclusion, it is worth stressing that the primary significance of the motif of manners and of the melodramatic paradigm results in the reductive treatment of the so-called “international theme,” one of Henry James’s most easily recognizable thematic interests. Let us mention briefly that the motif of the contrasting attitudes assumed by Americans and Europeans whom the writer portrays is present in most of his works. Fred Kaplan, one of James’s biographers, claims that the writer’s three last novels, that is *The Golden Bowl, The Ambassadors*, and *The Wings of the Dove* “embody a culmination of his concern with the international theme. Now raised to a level of intense complication and subtlety, the theme is
transformed from the satirical comedy of misperception into a drama of the search for self-knowledge." In the BBC film, the international theme amounts to a handful of biographical facts about particular characters; their national background matters far less than their financial status and social position.

While the authors of the BBC’s *The Golden Bowl* simplified the meaning of the story described in the novel, which would be inevitable in any film adaptation of this work, they confirmed the fact that what contributes the most to the uniqueness and the potential of James’s fiction is the narrator’s voice. Paradoxically, although the filmmakers invented an alternative narrating figure, it is in this respect, and not in the building-up of the plot, that the film seems to be the closest to the spirit of the novel. Cyril Cusack, who plays Bob Assingham, gives the most interesting performance in the serial. In comparison with the other, slightly puppet-like central characters, he is the most fully and consistently developed protagonist. The viewer witnesses his transformation from a person, who is mystified by the motivation that inspires the actions of the main heroes and who glosses over his ignorance with skepticism and a sense of humor, into an armchair psychologist, willingly exploring the secret recesses of human nature.

It can be said without much simplification that two important aspects of *The Golden Bowl*—class difference and cultural difference—that have been made less evident in the BBC adaptation constitute primary concerns of James Ivory’s recent film version of *The Golden Bowl*. While the serial surprises the viewer who knows the novel with its fidelity to the original plot development, Ivory’s film departs from the background literary work in many ways. Lee Clark Mitchell estimates that more than half of the scenes in this adaptation do not have their equivalents in James’s book. Indeed, the film makes one realize how many additions to and omissions in the original plot are necessary in a cinematic adaptation of this literary narrative. From among countless added sequences, two deserve closer examination: one is the beginning of the film, comprising a scene evoking a terrifying incident from the history of Amerigo’s family as well as a scene that follows immediately and shows Charlotte and the Prince at Palazzo Ugolini near Rome, Amerigo’s family house in a state of dilapidation, the other one is the alternative conclusion, which depicts, in a documentary fashion, the arrival of Adam Verver and Charlotte in America.

While the introductory scene presenting Charlotte and the Prince at Palazzo Ugolini is necessary for the viewer to realize immediately what kind of relationship exists between them, the additions at the very beginning and at the very end of the film appear to be rather superfluous as far as the viewer’s ability to follow

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7 Mitchell, 282.
the plot is concerned. The half-historical, half-legendary story that Amerigo tells
Charlotte evokes his ancestor, a cruel duke, who having discovered a secret love
affair of his second wife and his son ordered the servants to kill the adulterers.
The unfaithful wife was reputed to be a greedy and passionate person. No wonder,
the sixteen-year-old son begged his father’s mercy, claiming that his step-mother
had seduced him. James Ivory’s *The Golden Bowl* tells a much more ambivalent
story of betrayal in a family, with Amerigo and Charlotte reenacting the forbidden
love affair. Thus, as Krzysztof Loska rightly states, the introduction establishes a
paradigm for the main narrative of Ivory’s adaptation.\(^8\) Undeniably, what is crucial
about this alternative beginning is the figuration of the step-mother, who embodies
a specific kind of female temperament, as both a temptress and a victim. The
woman did not try to explain anything to her husband; the son, conversely, hoped
that his father would believe in his lascivious wife’s sole responsibility for the
misconduct. The scene at Palazzo Ugolini and the concluding shots of the
Ververs’ arriving in America stress the similarity between the legendary depraved
step-mother and Charlotte, who is first shown as temptress and later as a victim,
 facing the unpleasant consequences of her initiatives.

The additions at the beginning and at the end of James Ivory’s *The Golden
Bowl* function not only as elements of the narrative frame, but they also emphasize
a significant theme of the film, namely Charlotte’s dependence on men. It seems
justified to assume that Charlotte, played by Uma Thurman, is the character who
should attract the greatest attention from the audience. In her conversation with
Amerigo that opens the movie, Charlotte makes the final attempt to dissuade her
beloved from marrying Maggie. In spite of various privations which she must have
suffered in America due to her low material status and comparatively high
aspirations, she is ready to sacrifice whatever vague prospects she has for the
sake of emotional fulfillment by the Prince’s side. Her image as a temptress thus
receives a tinge which was apparently missing from the image of the legendary
step-mother. Amerigo advises Charlotte that she should marry a rich man. The
Italian aristocrat, a man so fond of family legends and of the symbols of his fam-
ily’s past achievements, proves to be a very pragmatic person. His pretended
care about his mistress’s well-being conceals his apprehension of, first, taking
responsibility for both her and himself, and, second, of living in poverty. Charlotte
emphasizes her confidence in Amerigo’s good will and courage, but first of all in
his love; his reply, however, destroys her lingering delusions. In the conclusion of
the film, we see a different kind of dependence, this time strictly economic: Charlotte
comes to America as a priceless addition to Adam’s treasures. In a sense, the

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\(^8\) Krzysztof Loska, “Miłość i niewierność. O filmowej adaptacji Złotej czar.” *Filmowe gry
film depicts a critical period in the life of Charlotte Stant, the time during which she resignedly complies with the truth which she often tried to deny: that she must accept the world as it is, because the world will not respond to her innermost needs and desires.

Krzysztof Loska claims that since Charlotte persuades Amerigo that they should stay longer at Matcham and make a trip to Gloucester, where they hire a room in an inn and have intimacy, she commits a rebellious act which threatens the established order. Marital infidelity is a consequence of a lack of control over two destabilizing internal forces: independence and sexual freedom. Their excess justifies harsh punishment. Loska highlights such features of Charlotte’s character as intelligence, curiosity of the world, determination, readiness to take on initiatives, and juxtaposes them to the Prince’s reticence and at times even passivity. It seems, though, that Amerigo’s reticence, so striking in the novel, in Ivory’s film is something of a pose; namely, the Italian allows Charlotte to take over the initiative because only on such condition can she be held solely responsible for the affair. He readily responds to her suggestion that they stay in Matcham and he is excited about the trip to Gloucester. His only worry in this respect is not a sense of guilt, but incertitude as to what Fanny is going to say to his wife. One might even say that the Prince exercises a subtle control over Charlotte and takes advantage of her willingness to yield to him. The love scene at the room in Gloucester, a daring one for a film based on Henry James’s novel, shows the Prince acting with utmost freedom.

Given the film’s apparent focus on Charlotte’s experiences, it is worth considering whether Ivory’s adaptation can be seen as a feminist re-interpretation of James’s narrative. Despite striking differences in the fashioning of the main heroines in Ivory’s The Golden Bowl and in Jane Campion’s film version of The Portrait of a Lady some comparisons are tenable, because they shed light on the presentation of Charlotte. Briefly speaking, Campion concentrates on the question of the awakening of female consciousness; her Isabel Archer is appalled at the astonishing and disheartening course of events she has believed herself to be in control of. It is possible to recognize a certain breakthrough in this process of a woman’s painful maturation, the breakthrough signified by a clear caesura between the time before and the time of Isabel’s marriage to Osmond. While in Campion’s film the psychological plane turns out to be more significant than the social plane, in Ivory’s production these two planes are more effectively combined. Unlike Isabel, Charlotte does not undergo any kind of transformation; there are, as if, two struggling selves within her and she renounces her more idealistic self quite early in the film, when her plea to Amerigo does not bring desired results. However, Charlotte’s two selves: that of a woman in love and that of a person in

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9 See Loska.
desperate need of financial means, would be easily reconciled if her economic status were better. Accordingly, psychology is here, to a great extent, a matter of complicated interpersonal relations, which is quite in keeping with the director’s assumed intention of presenting a broader social context and to stress the formative influence of external circumstances on individual selves.

The assumption that James Ivory’s adaptation can be regarded as a feminist re-approach to the background text is, above all, justified by the critique of patriarchal structures which the film presupposes and which is connected with the presentation of Adam Verver. Needless to say, Verver’s authority as a patriarch rests upon his economic power. What is symptomatic is that in the film we learn about how he came into his fortune and we get to know some details of his transactions in the art market, while James never pays attention to such particulars. Likewise, in the literary work, the reader does not find any direct examples of Amerigo’s and Charlotte’s material dependence on Adam Verver, because perhaps it is too obvious a fact, an inconvenient subject to write about, or perhaps a circumstance that does not interest James, whereas in the film Maggie’s father helps his son-in-law to restore the family estate soon after the couple were married. Adam Verver often acts like a guardian, in a double sense of the word. On the one hand, analogically to what we find in the book, he treats Maggie with ultimate gentle care, as if he were her guardian angel and the protection of his daughter were not just his responsibility, but his mission. On the other hand, he behaves in such a way as to prevent certain things from happening. His apparent interventions seem unintended and accidental; nevertheless, the impression remains that these are, indeed, interventions. On such occasions his guardianship is akin to surveillance. There are two situations in the film that substantiate such a view of Adam Verver: one is when he goes for an outing with Amerigo and Principino and tells his son-in-law that he would be ready to kill anyone who would hurt Maggie, the other one is when, coming out of a brightly-lit chamber, he spots Amerigo and Charlotte whispering nervously in the dim corridor.

Lee Clark Mitchell makes the following remark on Nick Nolte’s impersonation of Adam Verver: “This fiercely masculine strain resonates through the film, given Nolte’s large, magnetically engaging presence. He is clearly a man capable of handling others directly rather than (as the novel represents him) a small, pot-bellied figure, managing affairs unobtrusively from afar.”¹⁰ In Ivory’s The Golden Bowl, Adam Verver does not hesitate to impose on others when the accomplishment of his goals is at stake. During one of his first conversations with Charlotte, he tells her how he built his enormous fortune thanks to the drudgery of an army of laborers who worked for him “twelve hours a day, seven days a week, all year round;” in spite of the undeniable rhetorical effect of such a statement,

¹⁰ Mitchell, 292.
it does sound as if Verver had established some kind of a temporal norm of labor. An unbelievably rich man, he now wants to pay back his debt of gratitude to thousands of nameless laborers by founding a large museum for them in American City. What he perceives as an acknowledgment of his gratitude is yet another act of imposition because this time he wants to decide how workers will be spending their time outside work. In a sense, as an art-collector and a patron, he has reached a higher level of ownership. His interest in art is thus very much in keeping with his earlier activities in business. Characteristically, while as a capitalist Verver keeps up with the spirit of the times, as a patron he appears to be anachronistic. He says to Charlotte that the only obstacle in the establishment of the museum is that there are plans for a streetcar route to be built in the area and he adds that, if need be, he will buy the whole street. Charlotte defies him, remarking that people want a streetcar, not a museum, thus symbolically identifying with the working class. Very appropriately, at the very closure of the film we see headlines from newspapers announcing the Ververs’ arrival in America. One of the headlines, in *The Call. Devoted to the Interests of the Working People*, reads: “Workers Angry, Verver Spends Millions on ‘Useless’ Art.”

One of the crucial aspects in the presentation of Adam Verver is the contrast between this protagonist and Amerigo: the former is defined through his recent and present pursuits and the latter through the splendor of his family in the past. Amerigo gives his father-in-law a medallion with the image of Amerigo Vespucci, the famous ancestor after whom the American continent was named. There is a family tradition that obliges parents in each generation to name one son after the great explorer. Ironically, in the case of the Italian Prince in Ivory’s film, his name is basically all he can pride himself on. He is fond of telling stories about his family’s distant past, but reticent about revealing anything about his own more recent past. In turn, Adam Verver’s personal history begins at the time when he became a successful businessman and an employer; his earlier years remain a complete mystery, therefore it looks as if Verver had been born an entrepreneur. Like the mythical American Adam, he appears out of nowhere and instantly begins to order the world around him in accordance with the principles which he deems proper. He has a sense of civilizational mission; he contributed to as well as benefited from the industrial development of America. Verver says to Charlotte that American City will be erected on “a piece of barren wasteland,” but the pictures of the location show an urban area. He is interested primarily in projects which can be conducted on a large scale; the scale of an enterprise is the main guarantee of his satisfaction. When he looks at the design of American City he is worried that the main staircase is too narrow. His knowledge of art is rather unquestionable, nonetheless what casts doubt on his zeal of collecting beautiful art objects is that their quantity matters to him as much as their quality.
Moreover, apart from genuine works of art, he gathers beautiful fakes and art objects whose origin, authorship or value cannot be determined.

The fact that Adam helps Amerigo to restore his family’s historical palace has symbolic significance. After the renovation, the place becomes a tourist attraction; at one point, the film depicts a slide show of the beautifully renewed building, accompanied by the story of the cruel duke who murdered his wife and son. Thus, Adam relieves Amerigo from his duty as the sole guardian of the family’s memory; in more general terms, European splendor is preserved thanks to American money. European heritage has become an interesting relic which, if properly managed, can generate means for its own maintenance. Unlike the BBC version, in which the international theme is treated reductively, Ivory’s adaptation places this thematic concern in the foreground. Cultural difference is defined on the basis of two criteria: first, the presence versus the absence of economic potential, and second, the concentration on present occupations and interests versus the fruitless adherence to past achievements. Importantly, what is missing in Ivory’s film is the emphasis on the difference between American and European manners, a central concern in James’s earlier fiction, albeit not so straightforward in *The Golden Bowl*. In comparison with the novel, though, the film offers a much more unequivocal critique of American cultural imperialism.

The only central character that has not been discussed so far is Maggie Verver. Mitchell remarks that while the other primary characters “evolve into more forceful cinematic presences, Maggie in a kind of reciprocal economy becomes at once less commanding and inspiring.” The critic adds that such a portrayal of Maggie is a consequence of casting, “since Kate Beckinsale cannot express the mix of imaginative insight and quiet restraint that James invests in Maggie.” In conclusion, Mitchell asserts that: “The film makes it harder to see how she might be transformed from childlike naiveté into fearsome, even ruthless accommodation. And by focusing on marital drama rather than in interpretive dilemmas, the film no longer gives us a Maggie thinking and wondering, trying anxiously to possess others rather than be possessed by them.”11 It seems, however, that the critic is somewhat inconsistent in his assessment of the film’s Maggie Verver on the basis of her difference from the literary counterpart and, on the other hand, in his assessment of the film’s Charlotte, Amerigo and Adam on the basis of the logic of their presentation in the movie. From among the four *dramatis personae*, it is precisely Maggie who appears to be the closest to the character in the novel. Ivory evidently disambiguates the motivation behind the decisions made by Charlotte, Amerigo and Adam by endowing these protagonists with recognizably greater symbolic significance than they have in the novel. As for Maggie, conversely, Ivory does not come up with any effective method of turning her into a more symbolically meaningful presence. If the depiction of Maggie in the film is the least convincing or successful, as Mitchell suggests, it is not really a result
of Kate Beckinsale’s insufficient acting skills or of the director’s limited interpretative ideas, but, first of all, an indication of how radically a cinematic version of The Golden Bowl should diverge from the book if the film’s universe is to retain its coherence.

The film versions of the novels and short stories by Henry James prove, perhaps more evidently than adaptations of other writers’ works, that the making of a film based on a literary text is not just an interpretative attempt, but also an art of compensation. James consistently shows in his fiction that the success of any literary creation depends on the author’s ability to work out various textual proportions which manifest themselves as the principles of composition, in the combination of parts dynamizing the text and parts making it appear more static, or in the balancing of individualizing features of particular characters with their traits determined by the environment. A filmmaker should find proportions specific for a film narrative, instead of trying to reproduce those of a literary work. The two adaptations of The Golden Bowl discussed in this article are successful, each in its own way, especially in those aspects in which they depart from the literary text most visibly. Paradoxically, it is through such departures that the two films discover the hidden potential of Henry James’s novel: James Cellan Jones’s adaptation through re-inventing the book’s narrative substance, James Ivory’s through the exploration of its ideological subtext.

Films Based on Henry James’s The Golden Bowl


Other Works Cited


