

Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Hollywood



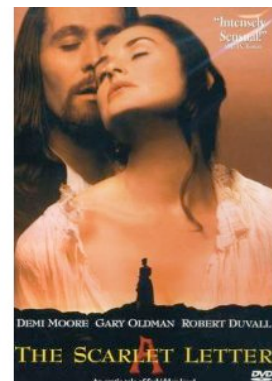
Investigating the “erotics of reading” in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), Roland Barthes once pondered why “we do not read everything with the same intensity of reading,” why “our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skim or to skip certain passages (anticipated as ‘boring’) . . . (no one is watching) descriptions, explanations, analyses, conversations.” Of course, no author, Barthes concedes, can predict in advance what will be skipped:

he cannot choose to write what will not be read. And yet, it is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read that creates the pleasure of the great narratives: has anyone ever read Proust, Balzac, *War and Peace*, word for word? (Proust’s good fortune: from one reading to the next, we never skip the same passages.)¹

Certainly, no two readers of *Moby-Dick* (1851), nor the same reader reading subsequently, nor two screenwriters preparing, forty years apart, to adapt the classic novel by Herman Melville (1819–91) for the film medium, skip the same passages or discover the same text. *Moby-Dick*, after all, is full-to-overflowing with “descriptions, explanations, analyses, conversations” inviting anything but the avid, easily bored student, the supposedly disinterested but often with an ax-to-grind scholar, and the medium-determined and cost-driven screenwriter to pass on by. But it is by no means certain, as with *Remembrance of Things Past*, that Melville’s text has been the beneficiary of these lapses. There are few great books more often misread or maladapted.

Adapting *Moby-Dick*

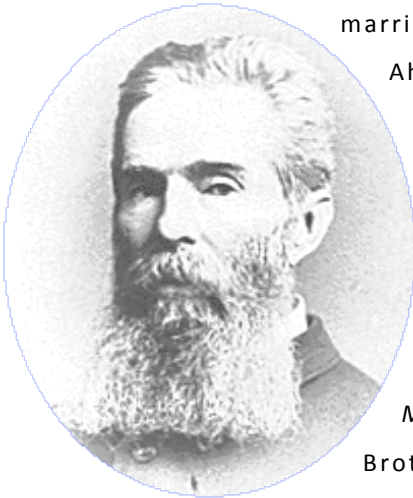
Soon after the release of *The Scarlet Letter* (Roland Joffe’, 1995), a film featuring Demi Moore as Hester Prynne that perverted Nathaniel Hawthorne’s original novel by supplying a happy ending, a cartoon appeared in



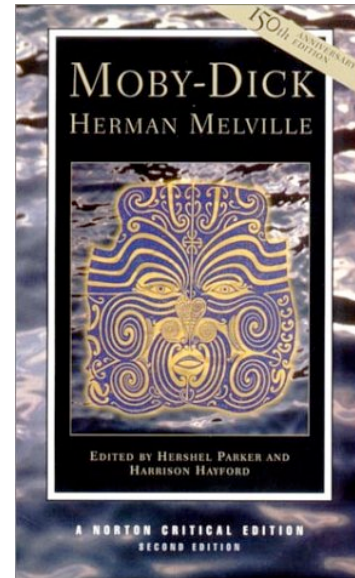
¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), pp. 10–11; italics in original.

the *New Yorker* that speculated on what might happen if she were to star in a new version of another classic novel of the American Renaissance. Over a caption which reads “Demi Moore’s *Moby Dick*,” we see the actress standing, like a competitor at a fishing contest, beside her prize catch: a giant, dead, white whale, hanging from a hook. So far, the Moore version of Melville’s classic novel *Moby-Dick* (1851) has not yet been made, but we need not wait for a movie *Moby-Dick* with a happy ending.

Two early twentieth-century incarnations of Melville’s book, both from Warner Brothers, the silent *Sea Beast* (Millard Webb, 1926) and the talkie *Moby Dick* (Lloyd Bacon, 1930) – both starring John Barrymore as “Captain Ahab Ceely” – had Ahab vanquishing the whale and living to tell about it. Both even added a love story, with Ahab battling his half-brother Derek (George O’Hara, Lloyd Hughes) for his fiancée, Esther Harper (Dolores Costello) in the first, Faith Mapple (Joan Bennett) in the second. In both films Ahab loses his leg to the whale after being pushed overboard by the scheming Derek and seeks revenge against the beast who, he fears, has ruined his



marriage prospects. In both Ahab not only slaughters his watery nemesis but returns from his mission to murder Derek and get the girl.²



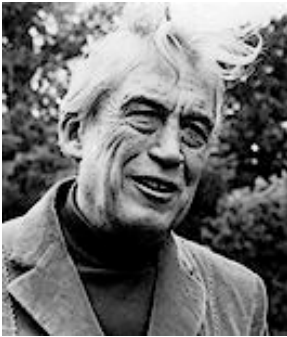
In two later, more authentic adaptations of *Moby-Dick*, a 1956 version (again from Warner Brothers) directed by John Huston from a screen-play by the science fiction writer Ray Bradbury, and a 1998 Hallmark Hall of Fame/USA Network made-for-television production directed by Franc Roddam, Ahab’s battle with the whale is finally fatal, and neither includes a love story. But neither do these more superficially faithful and ambitious films make the slightest attempt to render Ishmael as the novel’s central intelligence, nor capture even a trace of the book’s wicked, often blasphemous humor, nor fully engage Melville’s complex metaphors.

² I should note that I have not been able to screen either of these early versions of *Moby-Dick* and am indebted to Cahir’s and Tibbetts’s account of the films for my comments here. Their bad-faith distortions make them mainly of historical interest anyway.

The literary critic Charles Feidelson was perhaps thinking of decades of often uncomprehending literary readings of *Moby-Dick* when he insisted that “Certainly no interpretation is adequate which fails to take into account the multiplicity of possible meanings in the white whale and in *Moby-Dick* as a whole.”³ If the same standard is applied to film “interpretations,” both of the latter twentieth-century film adaptations of *Moby-Dick*, the focus of my attention here, must be judged failures. One of the greatest of all novels still awaits a film version that captures Melville’s novel in all its intricacy.

***Moby Dick* (1956)**

Speaking of his then recently completed *Moby Dick* to the film critic Arthur Knight, John Huston would recall that “Ray [Bradbury] and I tried to be as faithful to the meaning of the book as our own understanding and the special demands of the movie medium would allow.”⁴ Taking the director at his word, we might well



conclude, given the film they produced, that both their comprehension of the novel and their vision of the possibilities of cinema were imperfect and limited.

Huston, then an internationally known director of such films as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Key Largo* (1948), *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *The African Queen* (1951), and *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), with a penchant for adapting literary works and a larger-than-life personality, had been contemplating filming *Moby-Dick* since the early 1940s. He initially hoped to cast his father Walter Huston as Ahab. When he finally secured the funding to make the film in the mid-1950s and cast the usually mild-mannered Gregory Peck as the monomaniacal Ahab,⁵ he invited Bradbury, then

³ Charles Feidelson, quoted in Brandon French, “Lost at Sea,” in Gerald Peary and Roger Shatzkin, eds., *The Classic American Novel and the Movies* (New York: Ungar, 1977), p. 54. Further quotations from French will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Arthur Knight, “The Director,” *Saturday Review*, June 9, 1956, p. 29.

⁵ As Scott Hammen observes, responding to the wishful thinking of those critics of Peck’s performance that Huston had made *Moby Dick* a family affair, “if Huston had shot *Moby Dick* before his father’s death [1950], he would have done it at a time when he was under strict studio supervision and not a freewheeling international celebrity, able to marshal the resources of many nations to his personal ends” (Hammen, *John Huston* [New York: Twayne, 1985], pp. 77–78). Peck’s performance was often singled out by critics as the film’s weakest link, and the influential auteurist critic Andrew Sarris would suggest that Huston himself should have played the part, with

in his thirties, whose work, especially *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), he admired, to try his hand at writing the script. Huston, Bradbury would recall in self-congratulatory fashion, saw “the poet in my writing” (Atkins “An Interview,” 44).⁶

Bradbury claimed never to have read *Moby-Dick* before accepting Huston’s assignment, but under contract he would read and reread the book and turn out (by his own estimation) more than 1,200 pages of outlines and text in the process of generating 140 pages of screenplay (Atkins “An Interview,” 51). During a sojourn in London during the run-up to filming – at nearby Elstree Studios, in Wales, Ireland, and off the coast of Portugal – Bradbury even convinced himself that he was channeling *Moby-Dick*’s author: “I am Herman Melville,” he began to feel. “The ghost of Melville was in me” (46). Bradbury persuaded himself as well that the changes he made in Melville’s narrative would have been enthusiastically approved by the author (47).

With Huston’s wholehearted approval (44), Bradbury decided to leave out the mysterious Fedallah and his infernal crew entirely. “He’s a bore,” Bradbury concluded. “He’s horrible. He’s the thing that ruins the whole book. I don’t care what the Melville scholars say, he’s the extra mystical symbol which breaks the whale’s back, and he would be unbearable on the screen” (44) He inserted early glimpses of Stubb and Flask and even Ahab, melodramatically lit by a lightning flash, during the arrival of Ishmael (a bland and unengaging Richard Basehart) at the Spouter Inn. He combined Chapters 28 and 36 (“Ahab,” “The Quarter-Deck: Ahab and All”) in his version of Ahab’s first appearance on *The Pequod*, fusing Ishmael’s and the crew’s first glimpse of their captain as “a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness”⁷



Orson Welles, who has a small but significant role in the film as Father Mapple, directing (cited by Thomas Atkins, “An Interview with Ray Bradbury,” in Gerald Peary and Roger Shatzkin, eds. *The Classic American Novel and the Movies* (New York: Ungar, 1977), p. 3. Further quotations from Atkins will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁶ Bradbury and Huston would later battle over Huston’s request for a screen-writing credit, Bradbury insisting that the director contributed nothing. The Screen Writers Guild found on behalf of Huston.

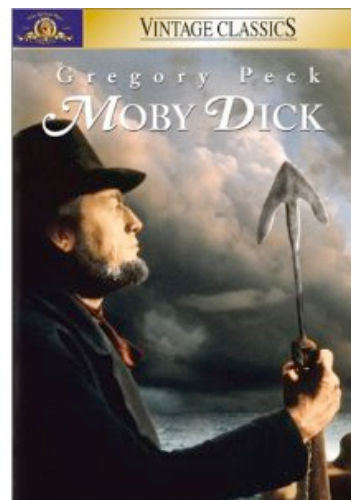
⁷ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, 2nd edn, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), p. 108. Further quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text.

with his initial stratagems (nailing the gold ounce to the mast; asking the crew to splice hands; crossing the lances) for entangling them in his quest, but delaying for a later scene below decks in Ahab's cabin his very public explanation to the skeptical Starbuck of "the little lower layer" (Chapter 36), the deeper, epistemological reasons for his vengeance.

Bradbury changed, too, the order of several key events, the better to enhance the drama, or so he thought. He moved the encounter with the British ship the Samuel Enderbey and its Captain Boomer, who remains jovial despite losing his arm to Moby Dick, from the final third of the novel ("Leg and Arm," Chapter 100) to the first hour of the movie and making Boomer sillier than in the book. He delayed Ahab's confrontation with the "clear spirit" of a storm at sea and his "I blow out the last fear" taming of the St. Elmo's Fire ("The Candles," Chapter 119) until after his refusal to aid the captain of The Rachel's hunt for his lost son ("The Pequod Meets The Rachel," Chapter 128).

Queequeg's realization of his coming death likewise departs substantially from the novel. Melville has the harpooner fall ill from a mysterious fever, which leads him to order the carpenter to prepare a coffin. When his fever breaks, his resignation ends as well. In the Bradbury version he reads the signs of his death while casting his bones, orders a coffin made, gives all his worldly possessions to Ishmael, and becomes a living statue, roused from his deathwatch only when his bosom friend's life is threatened.

Bradbury inexplicably recasts the ending as well, having First Mate Starbuck decide to pursue Moby Dick even after the Captain's death. According to French, Bradbury's original screenplay even had Starbuck taking up Ahab's pursuit and killing the whale: "the most disturbing adaptative change," French argues, "is that Starbuck in the movie actually succeeds in killing Moby Dick. (The black blood in the film and a reference in the script to 'the dying whale' confirm the murder.) One can't kill the phantom of life in the novel, but evidently in Bradbury's estimation, Moby Dick was, after all, just a whale" (French, "Lost at Sea," 61).⁸



⁸ Although French may well be right about the wording in the script, which she had evidently examined first hand, I see no evidence whatsoever in

Bradbury also had Ahab, entangled in harpoon lines, go down with the whale – an idea which, more than any other, convinced him that Melville was his co-pilot.⁹ (This change, in turn, required a reformulation of Elijah’s prophecy to Ishmael and Queequeg earlier in the story so that it would be properly self-fulfilling.) But Bradbury’s “inspiration” was clearly, as Linda Costanzo Cahir and John C. Tibbetts hint (154), a case of what is now sometimes called “cryptonesia,” a clandestine creative theft, conveniently forgotten.¹⁰ We need not look far to discover the source of Bradbury’s scripted end for Ahab. In “The Chase – Third Day” (Chapter 135), the missing Fedallah – the character that Bradbury conveniently threw overboard – is found in a similar prophecy-fulfilling pose:

at that moment a quick cry went up. Lashed round and round to the fish’s back; pinioned in the turns upon turns in which, during the past night, the whale had reeled the involutions of the lines around him, the half torn body of the Parsee was seen; his sable raiment frayed to shreds; his distended eyes turned full upon old Ahab. (433)

Inspiration indeed.

“It’s a pretty good blend,” Bradbury would conclude after viewing the film that Huston made from his first screenplay: “It almost worked. The film is almost magnificent” (Atkins, “An Interview,” 50). An exaggeration, no doubt, but the film does get many things right. Orson Welles’s performance as Father Mapple, minister to the whaling industry, who sermonizes on Jonah from a pulpit in the shape of a ship’s prow accessible only by a rope ladder, could not be improved upon. The whaling scenes, combining studio work with actual whaling footage, are often quite gripping. Harry Andrews is completely convincing as “I know not all that may be coming, but be it what it will, I’ll go to it laughing” Second Mate Stubb. The opening credit sequence, utilizing contemporary paintings of whaling scenes; the film’s emphatic score, composed by Philip Sainton; its innovative cinematography (by

the film itself that Moby Dick has been killed.

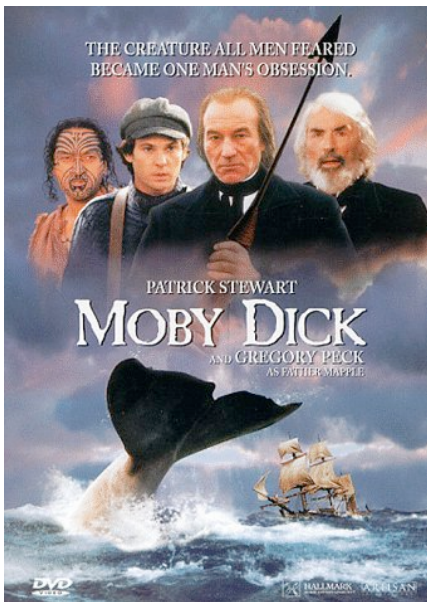
⁹ “I ran half way across London to Huston’s hotel and I threw the script [with the new ending] at him. I said, ‘There. I think that’s it.’ And he read it and said, ‘Jesus Christ, Ray! This is it. This is the way we’ll shoot the ending’” (Atkins, “An Interview,” p. 46).

¹⁰ Linda Costanzo Cahir and John C. Tibbetts, “*Moby-Dick* (1851),” in John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh., eds., *Novels into Film: The Encyclopedia of Movies Adapted from Books* (New York: Checkmark Books, 1999), p. 154.

Oswald Morris) that fused Technicolor and black-and-white prints of the same shot – all these factors succeed splendidly in establishing tone and mood and atmosphere.

“Our biggest problem,” Huston would recall, “was to turn Melville’s expositional passages into characteristic dialogue.”¹¹ Bradbury would, in turn, characterize the challenge the filmmakers faced as a fusion of “the Shakespearean approach which is sheer language and the cinematic approach which is pure image” (50). Much was lost in the process. As French argues, the film eliminated “most of the documentary (whaling as a commercial occupation) and the philosophical dimensions,”¹² and “these deletions cut the story loose from its moorings as ‘the real living experience of living men’ in Ishmael’s words” (French, “Lost at Sea,” 53; Ishmael’s words are from *Moby Dick*,” Chapter 41).

***Moby Dick* (1998)**



Directed by Franc Roddam (*Quadrophenia* [1979], *The Lords of Discipline* [1983], *K2* [1992], *Cleopatra* [1999]) from a screenplay he co-authored with Anton Diether (*Night Games* [1980], *Cleopatra* [1999]), the television version of *Moby Dick* was filmed in Australia at an air force base near Melbourne and off the coast. Although graced, thanks to its broadcast format, with an extra hour of narrative time in which to render Melville’s 200,000-plus word novel (the film was aired as a three-part mini-series) and the beneficiary of more than forty years of advances in cinematic art and science since the Huston/Bradbury version, the

1998 *Moby Dick* remains an uninspired disappointment.

As “‘Thar She Blows!’ The Making of *Moby Dick*,” a behind-the-scenes video included on the DVD of the 1998 version, makes abundantly clear, the filmmakers behind the most recent attempt to get the story of Ahab and the white whale right were driven by high ambitions. Patrick Stewart, best known at the time for his role as

¹¹ Knight, “The Director,” p. 29.

¹² As French observes, “whether *Moby Dick* is good or evil is not clear in the film any more than it is in the novel. The difference is that this ambiguity is largely ignored as unimportant in the movie, whereas it is the central focus of the novel” (“Lost at Sea,” p. 54).

another captain (Jean-Luc Picard on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) and, later, as Professor Charles Xavier in The X-Men franchise, spent eight months immersed in the world of Herman Melville preparing for the “role of a lifetime” as Ahab. Piripi Waretini, the Maori who plays Queequeg as part of the film’s more international, more multiethnic cast, wrote his M. A. thesis on Melville. Those responsible for what the narration calls the film’s “state of the art” special effects and “totally believable whales” reveal the secrets of their trade. Peck, who narrates the documentary and turns in a unmemorable performance as Father Mapple in the film, insists that this new version, unlike the one in which he himself starred, is more faithful to both Melville’s philosophy and his “great Victorian rolling prose.” Despite such pretensions, it would be difficult to argue that the film that resulted is a pronounced improvement in any respect.

Closer in age than Peck to Ahab and suitably scarred and wizened,¹³ Stewart is certainly adequate as *The Pequod’s* captain, yet he never succeeds in convincing us of the character’s high purpose, his proximity to madness, or his power to exercise his will over the crew. In response to contemporary criticism of Peck’s performance in his film, Huston had insisted that the “next generation will appreciate it more than the last.”¹⁴ Stewart’s understated but hardly exemplary turn helps to confirm Huston’s prediction: his Ahab only enhances our estimate of Peck’s work.

Once again, Ishmael, played this time by Henry Thomas, sixteen years after starring in Spielberg’s *ET* (1982), is barely developed as a character. On “‘Thar She Blows!’” director Roddam insists that the film is really all about his journey, his great adventure, his learning, but in fact he is, from beginning to end, a humorless, dull, pessimistic cipher.¹⁵ As in the 1956 film, we learn almost nothing about him; we are seldom invited to see the wonders of whaling through his eyes. The filmmakers choose instead to devote a sizable portion of their additional time to Ishmael and Queequeg’s relationship, now reduced to buddy film clichés, and to Ishmael’s initiation as a “new pup” sailor. We must endure several scenes of the novice’s hazing by his shipmates (pouring grog over his blistered hands, for example). As both the novel and the Huston/Bradbury version make clear, Ishmael is a veteran sailor, though not an experienced whaler; Roddam and Diether make him a neophyte,

¹³ The book suggests that Ahab is in his late fifties, as was Stewart (born 1940) at the time of filming. Peck (1917–2003) was only forty when he played the role for Huston.

¹⁴ John Huston, *An Open Book* (Boston: Knopf, 1980), p. 258.

¹⁵ “‘Thar She Blows!’: The Making of *Moby Dick*,” written and produced by Russ Patrick, *Moby Dick* DVD, Hallmark Home Entertainment, 1998.

completely “at sea,” all the better to abuse him.

Roddam and Diether take other liberties. Elijah (Bruce Spence) is made at once more prominent – we see him stalking Ishmael upon his first arrival in New Bedford – and less ominous: more a crazy street person than a mad prophet. The Spouter Inn is populated with prostitutes; Stubb (Hugh Keays-Byrne) is seen exiting with two in tow. (In a continuity error, Ishmael will soon run into Stubb and his women again in an upstairs hall.) Precious time is frittered away transforming *Moby-Dick* into *Mutiny on the Bounty*: both Starbuck (Ted Levine) and the crew contemplate a hostile takeover of the ship, and at one point Ahab puts an end to such plotting with a rifle. While being more politically correct in casting Queequeg (Huston, after all, had used his Austrian friend Frederick Ledebur), Roddam and Diether rob him of nearly every ounce of dignity, having him behave more like a Polynesian party animal than a prince and giving him a full head of hair (he is bald in the novel). They take Perth, in the book the ship’s blacksmith and an interesting minor character whom Ahab subjects to philosophical monologues, and transform him into a rowdy, grog-loving sailor who falls to his death off the rigging. In this version of *Moby-Dick*, the enigmatic Bulkington, whose willingness to put to sea again almost immediately after his last voyage perplexes Ishmael (“The Lee Shore,” Chapter 23), inexplicably steals one of the ship’s invaluable long boats and takes off for home and family – with Starbuck’s permission!

Starbuck, himself, as played by Levine, best known as the serial killer in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), is both more conspiratorial – he is convinced that Ahab has sold his soul to Satan and is guilty of the crime of “usurpation” – and antagonistic. Roddam and Diether even have Ishmael and Starbuck sit down for a preposterous heart-to-heart about the fate of the ship. In the end, they have the First Mate stay behind with *The Pequod* during the final pursuit of Moby-Dick, and the ship goes to the bottom after being consumed in a fire, not sucked below, as it is in both the novel and the Huston/Bradbury version, in the whirlpool of the white whale’s wake.

Like the Huston/Bradbury version, this *Moby Dick* also alters the ends of both Queequeg and Ahab. This time Queequeg’s resignation to his own death follows Ahab’s refusal to assist *The Rachel*. Disavowing his Captain’s obsession, he is tied, catatonic, to the mast and nearly washed overboard in the storm scene (from “Candles”), coming back to life after Ahab tames the St. Elmo’s Fire, groveling at his feet, and proclaiming him his god. Ahab’s demise owes more to the 1956 film than to

the novel. Indeed, Roddam and Diether must have been impressed with Bradbury's alternate ending, for they, too, have Ahab die entangled in harpoon lines and drowned by his nemesis, though this time Ahab later floats free.

To its credit, the Hallmark version does offer us in an early scene a glimpse of Ahab's briefly mentioned young wife and child ("The Ship," Chapter 16); does restore Fedallah and his men to the crew of *The Pequod*; does cast Pip, Ahab's black cabin boy, overboard ("The Castaway," Chapter 93) and show his later madness. It even includes a taste of some of Ahab's Shakespearean speeches: his "swerve me" railing at the gods ("Swerve me? Ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves!" ["Sunset," Chapter 37]), for example; and Ahab's description, in conversation with the carpenter, of the perfect man ("fifty feet high in his socks . . . a quarter of an acre of fine brains . . . a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards" ["Ahab and the Carpenter," Chapter 108]). Despite the claims of superiority on "'Thar She Blows!,'" the whaling scenes, however, are especially unsatisfactory.¹⁶ Every time we see a "whale" when a harpoon or lance pierces it and unconvincing blood spews, we are immediately aware of the artifice. Whether it is the faux whale models we watch or the CGI Moby Dick who breaches Fedallah's boat before crushing it and smashing into *The Pequod*, we are never for a moment able to suspend our disbelief.

The Unmade *Moby-Dick*

Will there ever be a faithful movie version of *Moby-Dick*? Putting aside the obvious, and perhaps grave, problem of the commercial viability of such a film, we can nevertheless stipulate some essential prerequisites.

It must be humorous. Although many readers, including Bradbury and Roddam and Diether, seem oblivious to Melville's sense of humor, the book is in fact filled with hilarious, often scatological, sometimes sacrilegious, comic touches never capitalized on by either the 1956 or 1998 films. The ideal movie *Moby-Dick* might focus greater attention on the "marriage" of the "cosy loving pair," Ishmael and Queequeg, with which Melville has a great deal of fun ("A Bosom Friend," Chapter 10). It would not spare us, as both films do, any knowledge of the flatulence of our fellow mammal the whale, hilariously depicted in "*The Pequod Meets The Virgin*," (Chapter 81). It might even want to include some reference to Ishmael's discussion, in one of those cetology chapters ("The Cassock," Chapter 95) that students and

¹⁶ The 1956 version, as mentioned above, was of course able to make use of actual whaling footage, while the 1998 *Moby Dick* had to rely solely on special effects.

screenwriters skip, of the use of the skin of a whale's penis as a much-prized, waterproof rain garment or, as our "wicked" narrator suggests,¹⁷ in one of literature's greatest puns, as a liturgical garment for an "Archbishoprick." It is true that the censors of the 1950s or at the Hallmark Hall of Fame might well never have permitted such ribald humor, but was not Melville himself able, in the heart of Victorian America, to include just such obscenities in a book he himself knew to be blasphemous.¹⁸

It must make Ishmael a prominent character and tell the story from his point of view. As critics such as Robert Zoellner (and before him Charles Olson) have definitively shown, *Moby-Dick* is really Ishmael's tale, told by him and, ultimately, about him. Although both films retain Ishmael, at least in a cursory fashion, as the story's narrator, in neither film do we see through his point of view. What French says of the Huston/Bradbury version is true of both: "[Ishmael's] role as the mediating consciousness, which can accommodate contradictions and identify paradoxes, is eliminated along with most of his charm, wit and humor" (French "Lost at Sea," 57). She continues:

It is as if Melville is striving to create a new language out of the old one by means of contradictory juxtapositions, a language in which paradox is the central fact, the rule, a language which accommodates Melville's vision of the universe. Huston, in the film version of *Moby Dick*, provides no equivalent for this dialectic. And without Ishmael, without a universal language, whatever contradiction and complexity Bradbury chooses to retain in his script seems forced, heavy-handed, out-of-place, ideas spoken but not visually nor even narratively intrinsic." (58)

Did the screenwriters, perhaps mistaking them for more cetology, skip over as well all those passages in which Melville with great care and brilliant prose delineates Ishmael's growing disillusionment with Ahab's vendetta? That astonishing scene, for example ("A Squeeze of the Hand," Chapter 94), in which Ishmael joins his shipmates in the task of squeezing the lumps out of a large tub full of whale sperm:

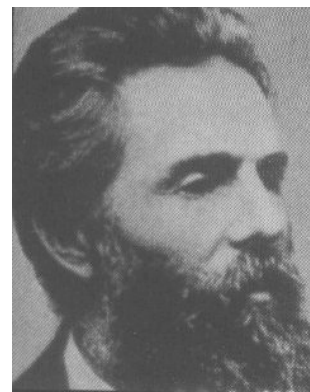
¹⁷ "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb," Melville wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne on November 17, 1851 (Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 545).

¹⁸ "This is the book's motto (the secret one), – Ego non baptiso te in nomine – but make out the rest yourself," letter to Hawthorne, June 29, 1851 (ibid., p. 542).

as I bathed my hands among those soft, gentle globules of infiltrated tissues, woven almost within the hour; as they richly broke to my fingers, and discharged all their opulence, like fully ripe grapes their wine; as I snuffed up that uncontaminated aroma, – literally and truly, like the smell of spring violets; I declare to you, that for the time I lived as in a musky meadow; I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it. (322)

Were they not even tempted to include it, at least for its visual potential if not for what it tells us about *The Pequod's* sole survivor? That amazing flashback in “A Bower in the Arscides” (Chapter 102), in which Ishmael recalls his epiphanic visit years ago to the enormous skeleton of a whale hauled ashore and left to rot, overgrown with jungle vegetation on a South Sea island in which he finds the imaginative means to see beyond “the material factory” of nature and transcend the fear of death, would have made for visually astonishing cinema while giving us an unforgettable entrance into the mind of Ishmael. And that moment, just before the final, lethal, chase of *Moby Dick* (“The Symphony,” Chapter 132) when Ishmael imaginatively marries, as prelude to his own survival, the “firmaments of air and sea,” “the gentle thoughts of the feminine air,” and “the strong, troubled, murderous thinkings of the masculine sea”:

But though thus contrasting within, the contrast was only in shades and shadows without; those two seemed one; it was only the sex, as it were, that distinguished them. Aloft, like a royal czar and king, the sun seemed giving this gentle air to this bold and rolling sea; even as bride to groom. And at the girdling line of the horizon, a soft and tremulous motion – most seen here at the Equator – denoted the fond, throbbing trust, the loving alarms, with which the poor bride gave her bosom away. (404)



How could they not have included that as well?

It must be faithful to *Moby-Dick's* metaphoric structure. As any careful reader of the novel knows, the novel is an intricate weave of fact and imagination. It begins

with a chapter called “Loomings”; when Pip is thrown overboard and plunges to the bottom of the sea he sees “God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad.” The word “loom” appears no fewer than forty times in the book. And when, as we have just seen, Ishmael recalls his transcendent moment in the presence of that whale skeleton in “A Bower in the Arsacides,” only a weaving metaphor will do:

Now, amid the green, life-restless loom of that Arsaclidean wood, the great, white, worshipped skeleton lay lounging – a gigantic idler! Yet, as the ever-woven verdant warp and woof intermixed and hummed around him, the mighty idler seemed the cunning weaver; himself all woven over with the vines; every month assuming greener, fresher verdure; but himself a skeleton. Life folded Death; Death trellised Life; the grim god wived with youthful Life, and begat him curlyheaded glories.

Moby-Dick is a book, a poem really, with a 500-plus-page controlling metaphor. The films made from it are prosaic, literalist glosses.

Moby-Dick has not fared well at the movies. In hindsight, one of its adaptors, John Huston, would write, “Looking back now, I wonder if it is possible to do justice to *Moby-Dick* on film.”¹⁹ *Moby Dick*, it seems, could not be killed; but we should not so readily conclude that *Moby-Dick* cannot be adapted by some future imaginative writer/director with a more expansive conception of film’s possibilities, who has actually understood the book, and is ready to proclaim “Call me Ishmael.”

Works Cited

- Atkins, Thomas, “An Interview with Ray Bradbury,” in Gerald Peary and Roger Shatzkin, eds. *The Classic American Novel and the Movies* (New York: Ungar, 1977), pp. 42–51.
- Barthes, Roland, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975)
- Cahir, Linda Costanzo, and John C. Tibbetts, “*Moby-Dick* (1851),” in John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh., eds., *Novels into Film: The Encyclopedia of Movies Adapted from Books* (New York: Checkmark Books, 1999), pp. 152–155.
- Feidelson, Charles, “Introduction,” in Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Library of

¹⁹ Huston, *An open book*, p. 251.

- Literature, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill), 1964.
- French, Brandon, "Lost at Sea," in Gerald Peary and Roger Shatzkin, eds., *The Classic American Novel and the Movies* (New York: Ungar, 1977), pp. 52–61.
- Hammen, Scott, *John Huston* (New York: Twayne, 1985).
- Huston, John, *An Open Book* (Boston: Knopf, 1980).
- Kaminsky, Stuart, *John Huston: Maker of Magic* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).
- Knight, Arthur, "The Director," *Saturday Review*, June 9, 1956, pp. 29–30.
- Melville, Herman, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, 2nd edn, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002).
- Olson, Charles, *Call Me Ishmael* (New York: Grove Press, 1958).
- "'Thar She Blows!': The Making of *Moby Dick*," written and produced by Russ Patrick, *Moby Dick* DVD, Hallmark Home Entertainment, 1998.
- Zoellner, Robert, *The Salt-Sea Mastodon: A Reading of Moby-Dick* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1973).