

Katharina Hacker

A Tangled Web of Happiness. Complexity and Film

It is a great thing to tell stories, vivid, alive, stories that are surprising or would be lost, if they were not told, and there are narrators whom I admire for this. Personally, however, the desire to narrate does not motivate me to write, and I find other possibilities of literature fall behind too easily. The plot and emotions interest me much less than images, settings, sketches and thoughts. Presumably some readers find my books complicated for this reason, even the novel, which I thought out simply, disciplined and with a clear plot, *Die Habenichtse* (*The Have-Nots translated by Helen Atkins*).

The film version of the novel, condensed and clear as it is, is not composed more vividly and more easily than the novel. The film *The Have-Nots* offers no interpretation of a novel, *The Have-Nots*, but takes it to extremes. It shows, unfolded, exaggerated, wide open, the potential complexity of the characters in the novel by using the artistic means of light and flesh. Light and pictured flesh. Skin, whose sight can so deeply irritate, like a successful line. The movement of a body that stops like a sentence.

In the novel, there is a minor character who is essential like the saint in a story of saints' lives. He is the striking, exaggerated figure, with a body, which is starkly more differentiated than the intellectual souls around him, more alert, brighter, more passionate, more desperate. In the novel it is Jim, in the film his actor Guy Burnett in the light of the camera work and direction, his flesh that is trained and at the same time soft like a chubby child's body, hesitant, irritated, ready to go. The black-and-white film lets the viewers imagine the body. He is the visualization – for in the film the body is the filmed body of an actor who wants to embody a role – of what in Augustine's *Confessions* is called *distentio animi*, the distention of the soul between memory, present and future, the turmoil of a painful experience, perseverance, longing, the wild regret and the gigantic hope, the vapid Now, the shining moment of peace.

Jim is the soul-traveller and spiritual guide in the novel and in the film, all the more.

He is the one who knows and dulls the light.

He is the position, as Isabelle is its privation – that's why they are attracted. However, he only appears to be the extreme, while she is the vague, the ambiguous one. She seeks the extreme. He seeks salvation, *Sha'ath Chesed*, the aspect of grace, as we say in Hebrew. In the film, stronger than

in the book, there is an index for salvation, which two don't grant each other, yet can suggest, it's the same for both.

Jim is the first to enter a door. So, he opens the door for Isabelle to London life. With force.

You know, I don't want to interpret the film for you.

I would like to share with you what it has given me as a gift.

This large, trained man enters the door, here she can go into the flat that her husband rented.

The lock is no good, he says to her then. 'You'd better be careful.'

From the very first second, he is disturbing, from the first moment. A child is watching them both, a six-year-old, who because of Isabelle writes her name for the first time: Sara.

Freedom lies not in the fact that Jim decides for Isabelle and Isabelle against Jim, it lies in seeing the contingency of the decision, keeping what one has rejected, without playing it off against what one chose, without denying what remains as the shimmering quarter of the decision that has been made. People are more possibility than actuality. They breathe with what is imaginable, they feel what might happen, they reach into the sphere of their dreams.

Our dignity lies in our power of imagination.

However, the possible is not the indefinite, it is potency. And while Isabelle perhaps believes she is swimming in the possibilities of her life and for this reason longs for clarity, she still has no idea of who she could and wants to be.

Completely unlike Jim. Jim dreams. Jim dreams of the garden in which in the shade of a cherry tree he sits with his beloved Mae and drinks tea; the passage in the book has more space. Jim longs for peace, Jim imagines a love affair, and he resists whatever blocks him and deforms and hems in. Perhaps this is why Isabelle, as Julia Jentsch plays her, appears erratic, unrequited (without clear longing), imprecise, and without the impulse that one notices in Jim.

For the novel, I borrowed a simple form from film, namely, cut and reverse cut. First, there is a scene in London, then one in Berlin. Different locations, different people. One can easily think that they meet at the initial described location, and one can easily think that it doesn't go well.

The film narrates the one after the other, first, when Isabelle arrives in London, the street in Kentish Town comes into shot, and the child Sara (not her brother) and Jim, the drug dealer.

As with every film adaptation of literature some things are dropped, the whole thing is slimmed down and simplified and translated into the visual. Even easier, you might think, to project yourself into it.

It's not the case with Hoffmeister's film, which is why I owe the film something that I suspected and attempted while writing the novel, yet over the years I could not get to the point: where namely, despite everything, the characters' dignity is manifested.

The black-and-white film is more complex than the book because of how it uses its film techniques. It shows how the ambivalence, the depravations, the frayed character of the protagonists is physical. It shows the skin. Of course, every film shows faces and almost every film shows skin. In the shots of the cameraman Robert Binall, together with the narrative plot, the soundtrack and so on, one sees from the bodies how they have absorbed the past, feel in the present and reach into the future. Jim's body is exemplary. Although the shoulders and arms, the neck, the torso are those of a muscular man, the flesh falters, his movements get lost in memory or hope. The firm body is not stable and straight. Nor is it a sensitive soul that shines through.

The interplay (and juxtaposition) of reflection, light, mirroring, manoeuvrability, gesture, facial expression, gleam of very pale skin, bodies in water, gaze is as complex as only a soul could be with its emotions.

What is the soul? Expression and sensation, memory and hope and fear.

Augustine's description (as Ricoeur captures it) of the soul's relationship to time is ingenious, I want to repeat it again. *Distentio animi*, the distention of the soul, stretched or riven between the presence of the past and the anticipation of the future, while the moment always disappeared and can neither firmly grasp itself nor past nor future. Therefore, longing is the *intentio animi*. Peace. The felicitous and joyous gathering of one's own times, for Augustine in the vision of God. *Intentio animi*, the attention, which neither hurries, nor loses something. The soul, too, which can afford to feel because it must not fear its own destruction in pain or in fear. The soul which is allowed to keep watch because what it will see is not so terrifying that it would destroy it. That is the soul and that is what the body is too that reaches out for something filled with longing for something, recoiling full of fear. Hoping.

The film shows that Jim's body is the most versatile, shocked and shockable. It shows Sara's face in its strangely trapped infiniteness.

But what does "Jim's body" mean?

It is the body of the man Guy Burnet who is filmed as he goes about portraying a character in a novel that is translated into a film script.

And you also see that, the film makes no secret of it. It keeps its perspective and doesn't suggest, well, you might see people yourself. It is black and white. There are a few scenes where the actors are filmed in the mirror, the camera takes the two-dimensional mirror image and relays it.

However instantaneous the impression may be, which I take with me from the film, however moving and persistent, it never is like this because I think: here is life itself.

Therefore, I would like to vary a phrase of Adorno's, Mimesis to the existing (*Mimesis ans Bestehende*), that is, in a realistic novel, if I may adopt this as a label, to the natural.

One feels close to oneself, that is the funny thing about it and fantastic. And where perhaps one's own life is devoid of happening or much love, one eagerly absorbs what is written, so that one doesn't forget life. Well, there are times when life hides away.

What I accredit to the film *The Have-Nots* (obviously, I cannot be a good reader of the book) is the contrary, a Mimesis to the artificial, to the artefacts. The word fits better here when I treat it as originating through art or as a fact of art and artistry.

As a spectator, I am not captivated because I forget that I am watching a film. I remain conscious that it is a film, I see by suffering with it, hoping, desiring that I am watching something produced carefully. That is far more than the workmanship or an artistic expression that I see here. It is the subjective thoughtfulness and the creative intent of the director, screenwriter, cameraman and actors.

In their dignity, the characters seem to comprehend their own contingency, in that each one of their decisions – merely as one among many conceivable – is never final, never lets itself be ultimately defended against others. They are actualised, everything else remains potentially possible and perhaps in the past, yet it remains visible and does not fade away to nothing.

They are never final, they cannot be convincing in the sense of: But nothing else would have been possible! – this insipid proclamation of much art.

So one understands that it is precisely this, which constitutes human dignity, namely, how one behaves towards it, not to be essential, but contingent, accidental, putting in effort. Freedom amounts to having decided and still seeing everything else.

That is the great good fortune of this film and a gift for me as a writer, because shooting the film teaches me to understand what was one of the passionate motivations of writing.

In short, or as we say in Hebrew: summarized on one leg: the exuberant, shudder-inducing complexity of our lives must not be clarified and reduced so that we breathe again and can be happy, on the contrary, it is the *locus* of our dignity and freedom and generosity.

And so, I understand what constitutes human dignity: not making decisions freely and absolutely that determine one's own life, but living with the chance, incidental, fallible, without having to deny that it could have been different, that it can be different, that there is no certainty of right and wrong, but possibilities and rejected possibilities, things, which one is still refused, such things that one has not taken into consideration. And that it essentially belongs to being human, extended,

stretched or riven between the presence of the past, the fleeting present and the presence of the future.

The *intentio animi*, the attentive, sentient soul, which inwardly holds all three forms of time, is exemplified by Augustine in music, in song, that while it strikes up the melody, already knows the continuation and the end of the piece and the past, while it sings (and was sung).

A person who lives with his (or her) own life as given and inwardly encapsulates it, in attentiveness towards the world, cannot be the judge of others. He will remain compassionate, even towards himself.

One of the strongest scenes in the film is set in the water, in the bathing pond in Hampstead Heath. Unlike in the novel it is Jim and Isabelle, who are there, and go into the water. He holds her, lying in the water, in his arms. They don't speak, there is no music. You only see, hear the water, see its movement, the lightness of the gestures that are nonetheless solemn. It is the possibility of kindness and trust: a possibility of the bodies that are slow and yielding.

Perhaps one must say: Isabelle, who has so many opportunities in life, still doesn't feel and understand it, neither in herself nor in others. She cannot afford to despair and be in turmoil, she is unsatisfied, therefore she is cold-hearted – that is what she learns through Jim and Sara.

Generally, it is assumed that what directly touches you humanly is the authentic, the simple, genuine.

I cannot do anything with the idea of the authentic and I mistrust its apologists. Therefore, in art it is not the so-called genuine, true, which moves me but the artificial, the thing which is visibly made and manufactured, which finds a creative form that could also be different, yet is beautiful and valid, without overwhelming me. I prefer what leaves me in my place, perhaps enthusiastically, yet also with a distance, with the space between feelings, impressions, amazement, allowing questions, in other words: alternative descriptions.

Of course, one can strive to find the singular correct description. However, descriptions are always flexible, multifaceted, they are extendable to the infinite, being spun together on a point. Finding a right sentence – yes. But the right, the only right sentence? What a sad object that would be.

There are sentences that try to encompass, to encircle a subject, perhaps to make a conclusive judgement. There are sentences that try to open the view of a matter and to elicit thoughts about it.

The way in which words are then used is different because they must not be such a good fit as resonate, and they are, while they are used, simultaneously the spectacles with which the thing is viewed, by connotations, similar sounding words, related words and preceding uses humming along and perhaps having something to contribute.

A word, which wants to fit its subjects, must be conclusive, sometimes it is fatal.

A word, which wants to skirt around or trace its subject, can open itself.

So it is too for books and films.

From this perspective things and relationships and people become much more complex.

Complexity is usually regarded as not so desirable. People ask me why I don't write more simply –.

Would the books not then be clearer, going more to the heart?

But I am moved by what is complex and what unfolds, reproduced under my description and becomes unmistakable. It moves me and comforts me. I can trust what is complicated, contradictory and fuzzy. It does not want to lecture me about where my own life is unformed and confused, but rather highlight what would still be possible and conceivable. It also teaches me that desires are not forerunners of their prompt fulfilment, but carriers of dreams, trailers of melancholy, agents of longing and of my compassion.

In other words: complexity makes me happy. Sometimes one can easily cut out something and be glad about it. One can greatly delight in something simple, undoubtedly.

Whether for a long or only short while is a question of temperament and of taste, I suppose.

However, where something must be and remain simple, it is soon constraining and simple-minded.

Literature is not here for this. And fortunately, too, not always film adaptations of literature.

Translated by Suzanne Kirkbright