Film in the Literature Classroom

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Since the advent of the motion picture with sound in the late 20's and especially in the last two decades, film has become the most important popular medium by which the average citizen is exposed to the world of literature. One need only stop to think for a second to recall recent names of important works of literature that would have never been experienced by the vast majority of the population if not for the medium of film: The Remains of the Day, Portrait of a Lady, A Room with a View, Sense and Sensibility, Little Women, The Joy Luck Club, The Age of Innocence, and many others. Most of the important films visiting our local cinemas each week were first produced as novels. If not rendered into movies by the film industry, the audience of these novels is often limited to members of private book clubs, librarians, and students in specialized literature classes on college and university campuses.

We might well ask the question: Is the public really experiencing literature as it was intended when they see a film, or is the power of literature debased and diminished in the transition to film? This is a fair question, and I would answer, "Sometimes yes, and sometimes no, and in some cases, that is the wrong question." We all know examples of novels that have been beautifully translated into film. Norman MacLean's A River Runs Through It and Harper Lee's Southern novel, To Kill a Mocking Bird, come to mind. Yet we can also think of examples where the mystery and beauty of a novel does not translate. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby simply did not work on the giant screen despite the presence of excellent actors like Robert Redford and Mia Farrow. Demi Moore's portrayal of Hester Prynne in the Scarlet Letter was reported to be so bad that I was dissuaded from seeing the film.

Has anyone ever seen any of William Faulkner's stories or novels successfully rendered on film? Remember Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward in The Long Hot Summer? The film producers got right the heat and sweat of Faulkner's The Hamlet, but the epic power and mystery of Miss Eula and the rapacious conniving of Flem Snopes was lost in the glamour of Paul Newman's blue eyes and the coquettish smiles of Joanne Woodward. But still again, who could render Faulkner's conception of the pubescent Eula Varner into film, Eula whose "appearance suggested some symbology of
Dionysic times--honey in sunlight and bursting grapes. . . " (95), "a moist blast of spring's liquorice corruption" (113) who was like the land "rich and fecund and foul and eternal and impervious" (119), who looked not like "a girl of sixteen dressed like twenty, but a woman of thirty dressed in the garments of her sixteen-year-old sister" (132), who at the age of 18 drove the young men of Yoknapawtpha County crazy. After courting her at the Varner plantation under the watchful eye of her mother, they would sit around "leashed and savage and loud" and would afterwards "ride in furious wordless amity to the creek ford a half mile away and dismount and hitch the horses and mules and with bare fist fight silently and savagely and wash the blood off in the water and mount again and ride their separate ways, with their skinned knuckles and split lips and black eyes and for the time being freed even of rage and frustration and desire, beneath the cold moon, across the planted land " (131).

And then there is a third category where the films neither fails nor succeeds to accurately translate the quality of the fiction onto the screen. Is it really fair to say of Pat Conroy's The Prince of Tides that it was a failure because the movie producer was not able to get that entire sprawling multidimensional tale on film? And didn't they do a fair job on the parts they attempted to portray, if you discount the inordinate elevation of Barbara Streisand's role? (Didn't she produce the film)? Both novel and film succeed, but in different ways, almost as if they are different renditions of a similar experience. To ask the question does one imitate the other successfully seems unfair.

This consideration brings me to a series of questions that I think is more interesting than the ones about translation and imitation. Even though I frame it now for you, let me quickly say that I have never come up with an adequate answer. The question is this: What is the aesthetic difference between reading a novel and watching a film of the novel? What qualities of engagement do each require? What is happening in the subjective world of the viewer or reader during the experience of each?

The conventional answers to these questions have never satisfied me. People say reading is a more active process; viewing is passive. The reader is more engaged, having to use his or her imagination to make the literature come alive; viewers have everything worked out for them; they only receive images like a container being filled up with water from a pitcher.

It's true that as I read a novel, I have the distinct feeling of producing a movie in my head, but I hardly feel passive when seeing a film. It seems to me that my mind is just as active and my feelings just as much engaged when I view a significant film. But there is a difference, a big difference between
the two experiences. How does one explain it? The most promising answer that I have recently heard was from a young high school English teacher who said, "There is something special and private about the act of reading. When I curl up with a good novel on a rainy afternoon with a cup of hot tea by my side, I enter a special world that has an entirely different feel and texture from the world I see projected on a theater screen or my home television. I become so totally absorbed that I forget myself and my surroundings. I enter totally into that virtual world, and I experience the characters and events as if they are people that I know or parts of my own self. The world of the novel has the same immediacy and closeness as the dreams that I experience at night. They are private, personal, vivid constructions of my own consciousness" (Robbins). I don't have a definitive answer to the question of how reading and viewing are aesthetically similar and different, but that young teacher's comments seem to be pointing in the right direction.

The last point that I would like to consider before talking about how and why I work with film in the literature classroom concerns the relationship between film and cultural history. This year I was asked to teach an Honors course on the "Intellectual Traditions of the West," a rather daunting charge to briefly survey the history of ideas from the Greeks to the Modern Period. As I attempted to reconstruct what I remembered from high school and college courses in history, philosophy, art, and science, some taken over two decades ago, I was struck by the importance that film played in my understanding of Western culture. Each time I asked myself what I knew about the Greeks or Romans or early Judaic-Christian culture, images from Hollywood cinemas arose in my mind. I saw Kirk Douglas as Odysseus, Marlon Brando as Mark Antony, Charleston Heston and Ben Kingsley as a 50's and 90's Moses, Richard Burton and Victor Mature as, respectively, a Roman Centurion and slave. And how many times have I seen, with a catch in my throat, different actors, often with aquiline features and Nordic eyes, drag the heavy cross of humanity across the various sets of Metro Golden Mayer and Paramount.

If you drew up a list of all the films dealing with historical events and persons from the Age of the Pharaohs through the Middle Ages and Renaissance (don't forget Heston again as a rebellious Michelangelo to Rex Harrison's Julius II and Kirk Douglas as Vincent Van Gogh arguing with Antony Quinn as Pissarro), up to modern times, wouldn't you be as startled as I was at how much of the imagery in our mind concerning Western history had been placed there by Hollywood film directors? Then when I began to
think about all the television specials I had seen over the years: Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, James Burke's *Connections*, Kenneth Clark's *Civilization*, Jacob Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man*, not to mention all the PBS classics on *Masterpiece Theater*. I became despondent thinking how much of my understanding of the past had been shaped by celluloid and electronics.

After brooding for a couple of weeks on this "Closing of the American Mind," I detected a bright side to this bleak picture. Weren't my studies in history and philosophy actually enhanced by all these film? Didn't my university studies help me see the limitations of the Hollywood set: the melodrama, the overstatements, and the understatements? Weren't my academic studies the actual glue that held all these images together? Upon reflection, I came to see that film and reading had worked together to help me imagine the past and to understand the flow of events of history. I thought of all the millions of dollars that had been spent by Hollywood on historical research just to help me see a credible version of Cleopatra's Egypt, Mozart's Vienna, Caesar's Rome, and Gandhi's India. I must admit without these great film epics, my imagination would be impoverished. So today the realization that startled me and appalled me at first sight, sits a bit more comfortable with me today. Aren't we less than honest and candid if we do not admit the enormous role that film has played in our collective vision of the past?

Since film is so ubiquitous, it almost makes one think that if we studied film at the university with the same dedication and energy as we do literature, we would perhaps better serve the public interest. Certainly a good argument could be made that the history of film, the cultural influence of film, (how it reflects society and influences culture), the creative process of film making--in short, all the questions and issues that engage us in literary studies--could be applied to the study of film. Of course, this is being done, but one could hardly argue that the extent of film study and criticism in the academic world is one fifth the dimension and scope of literature studies.

Finally, I would like to turn our attention to the major pedagogical question of this paper: Why should a teacher of literature use film in a classroom and what teaching methods are available for such an approach? Part of my assignment in the English Department at Weber State University is to teach English methods course. These are courses that deal with the philosophy and methods of teaching literature, language, and writing in the secondary schools that English teaching majors are required to take, along with a student teaching internship, in order to certify as licensed public school teachers. So the remarks that I am about to make are typical of the subjects that I discuss with student teachers, high school teachers of English, and
sometimes beginning instructors of introductory literature courses at the college and university level.

I have found in the past that one of the major differences between good and poor readers is that good readers have a wonderful capacity to lose themselves in a work of literature because their imagination (the power to make images) is so strong that they create vivid worlds from the pages of the books they read. Poor readers, on the other hand, have a very difficult time seeing anything in their minds as they plod their way through the pages of a work of fiction. Consequently, the work of fiction is never able to work its magic and engage the mind of the poor reader. They never lose themselves in the narrative; never enter completely into a vividly rendered and compelling alternative world. One technique that I often use in my introduction to literature courses and which I recommend to student teachers is called "Collaborative Imagining," which is based on a belief of Benjamin Demott, a professor of literature at Amherst College. Demott says, "Bringing works of literature to life almost invariably means entering quickly into another person's thoughts, and feelings. We step outside ourselves, and seem--for a short stretch of time--as close to another's nerves, moods, shifts of mood as we are to our own (13). In bringing works of literature to life, we are nearly always concerned with evoking [visualizing] characters, situations, and feelings (2). The good reader of a poem, story, or play is a full partner with the author of the work. Good readers work with authors to bring poems and stories to life" (1).

With these goals in mind, I sometimes ask a class of students to divide into groups of four or five and to sit in a circle, like storytellers have done from the beginning of time. They are asked to choose a student who enjoys reading aloud to act as a narrator. As the narrator reads the story, he or she stops at predetermined places that I have marked in the text. During the pause in the storytelling, I ask the students to talk about the events that have transpired up to that point in the story. But more important, I ask them to share with each other what they are seeing. What do the characters look like, how are they acting, what style of clothing are they wearing, how do they hold themselves and interact with each other? If the group were asked to make a film of the story, what would the set look like, how would the characters be dressed, how would they act? In other words, I ask them to collectively imagine the narrative, to share the movies that they are creating in their heads.

I am always surprised and pleased with the success of this teaching method. The good readers enjoy sharing the images and ideas that they are
creating as they listen to the story unfold, and I am convinced that poor readers, who at first are amazed that so much can be created out of words on a page, begin to gain facility and confidence in these processes of visualization as they learn how to be more active and engaged readers.

Another technique in reading improvement and visualization that I use is to work directly with film. I use a film rendering of a short story or novel to help students construct in their minds the setting and the appearance of the main characters. Just this week, one of the student teachers that I am supervising this quarter began her study of Harper Lee's To Kill a Mocking Bird with a 15 minute viewing of the first part of the film. After the film, the students were actually anxious to begin reading the first two chapters that she had assigned. I am convinced that the poor readers had a better chance of becoming involved in the novel now that they knew what Scout, Jim, and Dill looked like and had a feel for the dusty streets of a small Southern town in the 1920's. I can not help but believe that these visualizations, these concrete images of how the people and situations in the novel look, will not help them in their reading of the rest of the novel. The student teacher plans to play the rest of the film after the students have finished the novel.

Far too often teachers of literature feel like they are cheating if they allow students to see a film version of a novel that they are reading. Teachers of literature who have a love of language have a built in bias toward print, but I think we should not lose sight of the fact that often their students do not. For me it is the aesthetic experience that is important, the coming to terms with a significant human event. I think that film is as valid a medium as print, and when the two can work together to heighten the experience and aid the poor reader, I do not hesitate to use both. Sometimes in my heretical musing, I wonder how many more plays, with how much more enjoyment and understanding high school students could experience if literature teachers were willing to show the film versions of plays, studying closely only the most important passages, say of a Shakespearean drama, rather than plodding day by day through scene by scene of complex Elizabethan language.

A film that I personally like to work with in my college Introductory to Fiction course is Robert Geller's adaptation of Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" from the PBS series The American Short Story Collection. The short story is a very difficult narrative for college freshmen and sophomores to read and understand because it is told from a stream of consciousness point of view. Granny is in her late 80's and has recently become weaker and sicker due to heart problems and a stroke. She knows that her time is short, but she is uneasy about her approaching death. She has
unfinished business to deal with, issues that she has avoided during the rush of her busy life. She wants to get things right before she dies. She seeks in these last few days to come to terms with the meaning of her life.

As she lies in bed, slipping in and out of consciousness, she reviews her life. She has worked hard, had a good husband, and raised four children. The one event in her life that she finds hardest to come to grips with is her jilting. As a young woman she was jilted on her marriage day by her fiancé George, who did not show up for the wedding. In the story we are never told why George ran away, yet when we come to see how strong willed and single-minded Granny is we can begin to guess that George is escaping from the suffocating influence of a powerful personality. After reading the story, the students and I watch the film together.

The film version of the play takes great liberty with the story, but in retrospect one feels that the integrity and intent of the story have not been violated. Instead of beginning the film with Granny in bed, the film allows us to see her moving about the farm a few days before her stroke. The film's director lets us see how much George is on Granny's mind by having him appear as a specter or imagined person in Granny's daytime reveries. The film begins with a mysterious, handsome man dressed in black, riding a spirited stallion toward a country home. As the rider approaches, he stops at a distance from the house, stares toward it with an anguished look on his face. Suddenly, he violently reins the horse away from the road and spurs him into a gallop away from the country home. Now 80 years later, on the last day of her life, Granny waits once again for the man dressed in black who is both her lover and the phantom Death.

George, the anguished lover, returns twice more to the film, once immediately before Granny's stroke and again moments before she dies. On a summer evening, Granny's daughter and husband, with whom she is living, have a few friends over for a small party. As the guests listen to music on the old Victrola, Granny prepares to cut a large white cake that she has baked for the occasion, a cake exactly like the one she had prepared on her wedding day. As she begins to cut the cake, she sees George by her side standing in his black wedding suit. She says to him, "I want [you] to know I had my husband just the same and my children and my house like any other woman. A good house too and a good husband that I loved and fine children out of him. Better than I hoped for even. . . . I was given back everything [you] took away and more. Oh, no, oh, God, no, there was something else besides the house and the man and the children. Oh, surely they were not all? What was it? Something not given back . . . "(Porter 173). At this point as she
reflects on what was not given back, George vanishes, leaving her abandoned once again. Her anger rises to such a pitch at his disappearance that she stabs the wedding cake, staggers backwards and falls unconscious to the floor.

Later on her deathbed, Granny continues to review the moments of her life. Her children are called home to say their last good-bye and the priest gives her the sacrament of the last rites. Often I like to show the students scene by scene how the narrative translates from print into film, and we talk at length about which film scenes enhance the story and which diminish it.

I use the film for several reasons. Because the narrative is stream of consciousness, it is hard for students to imagine and to follow. The film helps students see how Granny's mind is working. In the film, it is clear when she is dreaming and when she is fully conscious; it's not so clear in the written story. Nearly all the changes that the producer makes in the story actually enhance, in my opinion, the power of the narrative. So much so that the best question becomes not how closely does the film imitate the story, but how does each medium enhance the other. It's as if the real narrative were a Platonic archetype in the mind of Katherine Anne Porter and the film and printed story were each legitimate attempts to give that idea a material form.

After my students have seen the film, I like to ask them to name the images that come to their mind when they think of the story. I ask them to write about those images and scenes, for they seem to be the ones that create special significances in their minds. After they describe the scenes, I ask them to explain what they contribute to our understanding of the characters and to the meaning of the story. I am always surprised at the variety of images that students choose to talk about. For some, it will be the dialogues with the phantom bridegroom; for some, it will be Granny preparing her wedding cake like a priestess at a high mass; for others, it will be Granny digging in the flower garden as if she is preparing her own grave. The discussions that follow these citings of images are always powerful.

I would like to conclude by emphasizing that I work with the film in much the same manner that I work with fiction, asking the same types of questions that I would in a course on the novel or short story, starting with an examination of images and details and working upward to higher level questions that deal with artistic construction and design. After we have worked hard with the details and design of both the film and the short story, I invariably begin to ask larger philosophical questions. What do the story and film have to say about culture, values, living, dying, family relationships, and growing old? I generally finish by asking the students to relate the issues in the story to their personal lives. Have they had similar experiences with
friends, family, parents, grandparents, and relatives in nursing homes? Both the film and the story work together for me. One helps the other. Each contributes in its own way, with its own special powers, to the rendering and examination of human values and the human experience. I believe that the selective use of film can be a powerful tool for those of us looking for ways to make literature come alive in our classrooms.

Works Cited


Robbins, Ann. WSU Student Teacher. Personal Interview. 5 Jan 1996.