Film & Literature: Parameters of a Discipline

Author(s): Robert T. Self

Source: *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 1987, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1987), pp. 15-21

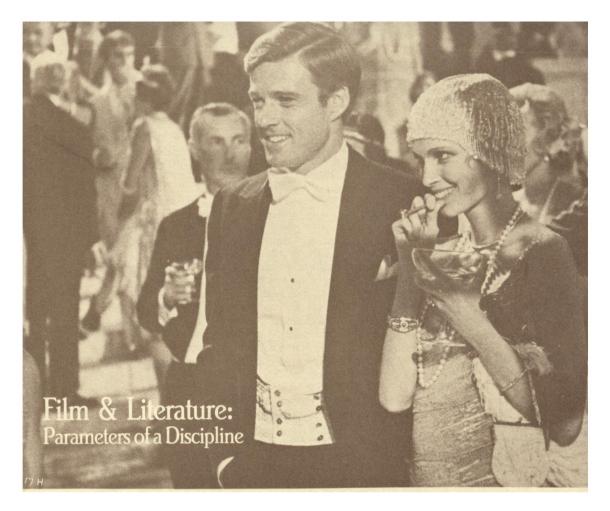Published by: Salisbury University

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43796287

Film & Literature:
Parameters of a Discipline

The imprimateur of English departments upon contemporary teaching and research in film is a function both of the many film scholars who serve on English faculties and teach in the English curriculum and of the literary features of central concerns in film study. Eleven years ago in his important essay "Literature and Film: Marking Out Some Boundaries" Harold Schneider wrote that, "insofar as language departments teach courses in the Art of Film, in Filmmaking, and in the History of Film, I believe they have wandered into alien fields, those best left to Speech and Drama, Film and TV, and Art Departments."[1] A lot has changed since then. Some 139 departments of English taught film courses according to the 1973 American Film Institute's *Guide to College Courses in Film and Television*; a decade later the AFI Guide set that number at close to 200—more than a 40 percent increase. Throughout the 1970s graduate programs in film began to graduate a significant number of doctoral students, many of whom found jobs in English departments. At the same time, many young literary scholars turned to film study as a natural extension of their research in literature. Many of this young generation of scholars have established research programs that are not only making the study of literature and film an increasingly sound and respectable discipline; their published research has given us a bibliography of secondary sources greatly expanded beyond the classic studies of George Bluestone and Robert Richardson.

Theory and practice in literature and film as a field have significantly developed and matured in the last decade. The context of scholarship which shapes the parameters of literature/film study is the current debate over the nature of texts, the nature of meaning, and the goals of interpretation. As an emergent academic field of research and teaching, defensive about its place in the curriculum, literature and film has shared

15

in that "crisis of criticism" which "has forced critics of all persuasions to make explicit the philosophical postulates that ground their activity—to be self-conscious about what they are doing."[2] This self-consciousness urges many perspectives: rhetorical and ideological, sociological and historical, formalist and aesthetic, psychoanalytical, phenomenological, structural, semiological. Certainly many of the major issues in film study are literary issues as well—point of view and the nature of identification with a fictional character or theme, the aspects of classical and modernist narrative structures, close textual analysis and reader-responsiveness, critical interpretation of the meanings of fiction or the deconstructive impossibilities of interpretation. Literature/ film teaching and scholarship encompass the literary modes of signification; the articulation systems and styles of fictional, poetic, and dramatic representation; the narrative structures of representation, the sociological rituals of literary discourse, and the mutually influential interaction between films and literature in adaptations.

When I first began teaching, as an English teaching assistant at the University of North Carolina in 1965, film was already accorded parity as a fourth literary genre in the freshman literature course along with drama, poetry, and fiction. This approach is similarly the basis of several introductory literary textbooks: *Literature: The Human Experience* by Abcarian and Klotz (St. Martin's, 1980, *Elements of Literature* by Scholes, Klaus, and Silverman (Oxford, 1982), *An Introduction to Literature* by Barnet, Berman, and Burto (Little Brown, 1977), and *To Read Literature* by Donald Hall (Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1981). The variety of texts developed to aid students in the writing of essays about literature further reflect the extent to which literature and film have become professionally and pedagogically linked: Sylvan Barnet's *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* (Little, Brown, 1979), Margaret Bryan's and Boyd Davis's *Writing about Literature and Film* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), and Edgar Roberts's *Writing Themes about Literature* (Prentice-Hall, 1977) all include major sections on film. And at least one literary handbook reflects this interdisciplinary merging: *A Dictionary of Literary, Dramatic, and Cinematic Terms* by Barnet, Berman, and Burto (Little, Brown, 1971). The aesthetic ground of this pedagogical perspective may be seen in Jean Cocteau's early assertion of his artistic craft as "poésie, poésie de roman, poésie de théâtre, poésie critique, poésie graphique, et poésie cinematographique."[3] John Harrington in *Film and/as Literature* delineates some key parameters of literature and film as a new professional field in literary studies: "Film *and* literature suggests the drawing of comparisons and contrasts between two artistic forms or between two media; film *as* literataure involves an examination of literature as an entity larger than the medium in which it appears. . . ."[4]

A major aspect of film as a sub-division of literary study involves its advent in the academy and its establishment of a canon. There is a story yet to be told in the history of film that recounts its struggle for acceptance in the schools; curiously that story parallels the fight for acceptance of American literature as an academic subject waged in the 1920s, though film scholars cannot yet claim the victory asserted by Howard Mumford Jones (as late as 1965!) "that literary research now takes American literature for granted, that scholarship has transcended the amateurishness too much evident in nineteenth-century work, and that the American field, especially since World War II, has conquered its place in the sun."[5]

The designation of major, as opposed to minor, American authors occupied much of the early scholarship in American literary studies. Similarly, auteur criticism, with its roots in the romantic idea of poetic genius, has played a significant part in the academizing of film. The search for film authors has been simultaneously a search for artistic authority and respectability, for a canon, and for a critical methodology. The success of auteurism is everywhere visible—in graduate film courses, in film festival retrospectives, in scholarly publishing, in the commercial press, even in mass media advertising. Yet the concept of authorship in literature and in film has been the subject of attacks from structuralism and materialism, semiology and psychology,

which would redefine author, self, and text in similar terms. John Caughie notes that the function of such criticism is "not to discover, or construct, the author, but to discover the history and the discursive organization which is foundational for the text, and which negotiates its relationship with its historical audience."[6] The crisis in the identity of the self in the twentieth-century and the disappearance of the author as a ground of literary analysis establish much of the twentieth-century intellectual and cultural climate common to literature and film and specifically allow for an analysis of the Hollywood production system as paradigmatic of a modern conception of creativity. In much current research the author, like the self, is no longer conceived as a unified ego but as a construct of socio-economic, linguistic, psychological, and biological potential situated by the belief systems of the culture; the authorship of the movies is similarly seen to reside in a production system that is woven together of conflicting personal visions, psychological drives, technologies, skills, and economics, unified and motivated by the dominant cultural values.

In addition to studies of authorship, current literature/film practice articulates (along the axis "kinds of representation" in literature) a material spectrum between the idea of "realism" on one end and issues of subjectivism in creation and reflexivity in media on the other. At one level this spectrum comprises what Scholes and Kellogg see as the ancient antecedents to fiction in Greek history and myth.[7] More particularly it involves an analysis of differing modes of signification: on one hand there are the codes of verisimilitude—of denotation, reproduction, transparency—and on the other codes of materialism—of production, formalism, reflexivity. Within, and as a part of, the aesthetic and historical context of nineteenth-century literary realism emerges the cinematic apparatus with its innate ability to render directly the actual world. On one hand it is asserted that "films built around the institutions of stories and characters do, in indirect ways, make reference to the real world or to an idea of the real world, and the understanding that they do make such reference is part of the way in which spectators themselves understand them." Yet on the other hand, as Stephen Heath remarks: "The *realism* of cinema, as that of the novel, is to be understood not in terms of some immediate mirroring of some reality . . . but in relation to the representation of 'reality' a particular society proposes and assumes."[8] In documentary and narrative film a major critical concern here, as in the novels of Flaubert, Thackeray, Dickens, Hawthorne, and Twain, is the special status of representation itself, and this status as a function of differing media. Judith Mayne points out that "as novelistic the cinema depends upon an unquestioned relationship between image and the real, as the novel depends upon a similar relationship between language and the real."[9]

Whether called art film, underground film, or structuralist film, the poetic mode has also attracted considerable critical interest in the personal, the lyrical, the expressive, and symbolic. Scholarship here in literature and film—understands this mode to be motivated less to represent and naturalize some system of reality than it is to foreground the material features of the language itself, to dramatize meaning as the dynamic, rhythmic play of signifiers; to produce a plural text of what Eisenstein called "polyphonic montage." The poetic mode, like the "realistic," may be seen as a particular code of signification with historical dimensions, a code in which "the function of poetic language consists in the maximum foregrounding of the utterance," as well as in the individualistic expression of creativity in which "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination."[10] The poetic in literature and film characterizes the discourse of modernism and the avant garde just as well as it grounds the iconography and mythos of popular narrative genre in Hollywood and the pulp novel.

From this broader concern with signification, literature and film study further focuses on the lexical and syntactical levels of literacy. The analysis of differences between the "languages" of literature and film emerges from the insights of semiology; it compares the signifier/signified relationship as it varies in iconic, indexical, and sym-

bolic signs. While it may be said simplistically that the visual dimension of film conveys meaning largely through icons and that the linguistic dimension of literature carries meaning through symbols, both media find aesthetic power in the index. These signs also variously establish the range of metaphorical language—simile, metonymy, synecdoche, etc.—and are constituent of the textual structures especially of connotation. Dudley Andrew notes that "verbal and cinematic signs share a common fate; that of being condemned to connotation . . . where every signifier identifies a signified but also elicits a chain reaction of other relations which permits the elaboration of the fictional world."[11]

That fictional world is diversely captured in the two media. Thus Frank McConnell recently comes to a more sophisticated version of Robert Richardson's earlier distinction between the efforts of literature to make the significant visual and of film to make the visible significant:

> WRITING, beginning with a technology at once highly associative and personal, strives toward the fulfillment of its own projected reality in an ideally objective, depersonalized world, while FILM, beginning with a technology at once highly objective and depersonalized, strives toward the fulfillment of its own projected reality in an ideally associative, personal world.[12]

Yet, as McConnell goes on to analyze mythic structures common to fiction and film, he reinforces the conceptualization of these distinctions offered by Keith Cohen:

> Both words and images are sets of signs that belong to systems, and at a certain level of abstraction, these systems bear resemblances to one another. More specifically, within each such system there are many different codes (perceptual, referential, symbolic). What makes possible, then, a study of the relation between two separate sign systems, like novel and film, is the fact that the same codes may reappear in more than one system.[13]

Analysis at the syntactical level evolves from Christian Metz's famous argument that film is a *langage* without a *langage*; that is, its formal patterns of discourse are not reducible to an *a priori* grammaticity. But study of the development of narrative complexities in the history of film demonstrates the simultaneous development of a language system, of a "grammar" in the rule-governed models of narrative construction.[14] The "classical narrative cinema," whose rules are firmly in place by the 1920s, like the nineteenth-century English novel, operates on a psychologized cause-effect logic. The cinematic systems of time and space are carefully subordinated to the demands of the narrative system that concludes by naturalizing the homogeneity of middle-class values such as the family, ownership of private property, leisure, individual initiative, etc. The "international art cinema" has been presented as another model of cinematic practice with roots in Henry James and Sergei Eisenstein which blossomed dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s; like the modernist novel, it disrupts the clarity and efficacy of casual logic; it highlights ambiguity and naturalism; it troubles "the three major forms of exchange by which society reproduces itself," language, sexuality, and economics.[15] The avant garde film, on the other hand, at the more radical end of the spectrum, offers a materialist critique of film practice by interrogating the codes, the systems of production, the psychological sub-texts of narrative discourse. Thus films like *His Girl Friday, Persona,* and *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* may be said to represent a range of literary modes, of structural models that re-articulate, from another perspective, that realistic-poetic spectrum mentioned above. Additionally, when compared generally to the history of the novel, these modes suggest the biological metaphor "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." The history of narrative film in some 75 years reveals the same naive, critical, and sophisticated stages (diachronically and synchronically) that may be discerned in the two hundred years of the novel.[16]

A large part of literature/film investigation is devoted to these "minute particulars" at the level of signifying systems, of lexical meaning, of grammatical structure. As

such, it provides a formal and phenomenological basis for considering another major aspect of literature and film as a field of study—that is the nature and significance of popular generic formulas. The mass production/mass consumption of the movies make film an art that raises questions about the interaction of elite and popular literature: What do we signify by these terms? What aesthetic distinctions do they entail? What value judgments do they presuppose? Despite the fact that they constitute a minority of works in both literature and film, the popular genre have thrived in the mass media. And whatever their claim to aesthetic evaluation, they have attracted analysis of function in a sociological and psychological sense. Research here defines the particular vocabulary, syntactics, semantics, and historical evolution that differentiate the various genre (detective, horror, western, science fiction, romance, etc.) and that make any one example of a genre meaningful. Thomas Schatz describes a central objective of this effort: the recognition that as popular genre reveal the essential features of social ritual, they are crucial voices of contemporary mythmaking, "a basic human activity which structures human experience—whether social or personal, whether physical or metaphysical—in a distinct and consistent fashion. . . . [It] represents society speaking to itself, developing a network of stories and images designed to animate and resolve the conflicts of everyday life."[17] An important distinction emerges here between genre intrepretation on one hand, which examines a film or novel in terms of its re-enactment of a formulaic deep structure, and ideological analysis on the other hand which examines the way a text works to naturalize or to disengage the social systems, situating the individual in a position of intelligibility, action, and responsibility.

The cinematic adaptation of fiction and drama has traditionally been the major focus of literature-film study, and so it continues currently. But adaptation study has changed under the impact of such critical investigations as already described. Rhetorical, semiological, and historical analyses urge a complex understanding of the kinds of meta-textual readings each adaptation works on its literary source. A recent issue of *Film Comment* devoted a whole section to "Novels into Film" which indulges itself throughout in such banal and subjective observations as this: "In trying to recapture the spirit of a book, a movie is crippled by any number of compromises."[18] On the other hand, a recent issue of *Screen* contained a section on "The Literary Adaptation" which demonstrates the exciting potential of psychoanalytical, historical, and structural analysis of film adaptations; Frank Krutnik's study "Desire, Transgression and James M. Cain" traces the formal and emotional trajectory of Cain's plots, the ideological process that reworks these plots in Hollywood during the 1930s and 1940s, and the sociological/aesthetic implications of the new adaptions of Cain in the 1980s.[19]

A variety of such critical perspectives—whether of particular aspects of fiction like first-person point of view or larger phenomena like narrativity[20]—focus other theoretical issues central to recent studies of adaptation. Analysis of *Citizen Kane* may delineate the aspects of comparative narrativity and evidences the claim "that each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated." The film also demonstrates the adaption not of a particular novel, but of an archetypal American plot represented in works like *The Great Gatsby*.[21] Analysis of Pier Paoli Pasolini's *Gospel According to St. Matthew* significantly reveals the differences between cinematic and literary effects that derive from the thematic presuppositions of a text. Pasolini's film, in his words, sets out "to do the story of Christ plus two thousand years of Christian translation, because it is the two thousand years of Christian history which have mythicized this biography." Both the film and the Book of Matthew evoke an intertextuality of historical chronicles, moral exempla, and folk tales; and both reveal the work of ideology as the naturalization of Jesus according to different theological and aesthetic values.[22] *Last Year At Marienbad* illustrates the collaborative process of filmic creation and the relationship between

script and film. In conjunction with the fiction of Alain Robbe-Grillet, it raises the question not merely of the influence of fiction on film but the influence of film on fiction as well. The film further demonstrates the avant-garde refusal of mimesis in the post-modernist effort "to go beyond the ironic self-consciousness of the modernist to create a work of meta-narration that can account for its own unfolding."[23] Michaelangelo Antonioni's adaptation of Julio Cortazar's story "Blow Up" extends this distinction between literary modernism and post-modernism. Antonioni and Cortazar evidence a rhetoric of ambiguity common to both literature and film, and they both aggressively address the issues of narrative point of view which undermines the position of a stable subject and the inscription of viewer or reader within the text.

All of these films and stories permit the investigation of representational and self-reflexive codes; of the limits and flexibility in iconic, indexical, and symbolic signification; of the modes of denotation and connotation; of narrative, spatial, and temporal systems; and of the ritual or ideological effects made visible in the formal move from literature to film. A central motivation in much of this research is to re-think the study of literature and film in light of issues currently central in both literary and cinematic history, theory, and criticism. John Ellis argues that "adaptation into another medium becomes a means of prolonging the pleasure of the original representation, and repeating the production of a memory."[24] But the global perspectives encompassed by the increased sophistication of adaptation studies in literature and film is more aggressively expressed by Dudley Andrew in his essay "The Well-Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory." He argues that "its distinctive feature, the matching of the cinematic sign system to a prior achievement in some other system can be shown to be distinctive of all representational cinema. . . . The study of adaptation is tantamount to the study of the cinema as a whole."[25]

Certainly there is much in the critical enterprise of both arts which has a life of its own in isolation from the other. But the dialog between the two disciplines is dynamic and progressive. The vital dependency of the arts through the centuries—music and drama, opera and painting, architecture and poetry—is nowhere more apparent than in the remarkable symbiosis between literature and film in the twentieth-century. Literature/film theory and criticism cultivates the fertile field between high brow and low brow, between scholar and fan, between classical and technological, between art and entertainment.

<div style="text-align: right">

Robert T. Self
Northern Illinois University

</div>

NOTES

[1] Harold W. Schneider, "Literature and Film: Marking Out Some Boundaries," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 3 (Winter 1975), p. 32.

[2] Susan R. Suleiman, "Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism" in *The Reader in the Text*, Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism" in *The Reader in the Text*, eds. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 38.

[3] Quoted by John Harrington, *Film and/as Literature (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), p. xii.*

[4] *Harrington, p. xii.*

[5] *Howard Mumford Jones, The Theory of American Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965), p. 198.

[6] John Caughie, ed., *Theories of Authorship* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 1.

[7] Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 69ff.

8   Christopher Williams, ed., *Realism and the Cinema* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 10; Stephen Heath, "Film/Cinetext/Text," *Screen*, 14 (Spring-Summer 1973), p. 110. The literary background here is seen in Eric Auebach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

9   Judith Mayne, "Meditation, the Novelistic, and Film Narrative" in *Narrative Strategies: Original Essays in Film and Prose Fiction*, eds. Syndy Conger and Janice Welsch (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University Press, 1980), p. 88.

10   Jonathan Culler, quoting J. Mukarovsky and Roman Jacobson in *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 56. Simply stated: "The clearest connection between poetry and film may be found in the basic similarity between metaphor, the essential stylistic trope of the former and montage, the fundamental structural technique of the latter." Barry Grant, "Tradition and the Individual Talent: Poetry in the Genre Film," in *Narrative Strategies*, p. 94.

11 Dudley Andrew, "The Well-Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory" in *Narrative Strategies*, p. 14. See also James Monaco, "The Language of Film: Signs and Syntax," in *How to Read a Film* rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 119-192.

12   Frank McConnell, *Storytelling and Mythmaking: Images from Film and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 5. Cf. Robert Richardson, *Literature and Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 68.

13   Keith Cohen, *Film and Fiction, The Dynamics of Exchange* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 3.

14   Christian Metz, "The Cinema: Language or Language System?" in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 31-91. See also David Bordwell, Janet Steiger, Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema, Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York University Press, 1985).

15   Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 58.

16   David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," *Film Criticism*, IV (Fall 1979), pp. 56-64, and Peter Wollen, "Counter Cinema: VENT D'EST," *Aftermage*, 4 (Autumn 1972), pp. 1-10, describe the key features of these three models. The stages of the novel are described by James M. Mellard, *The Exploded Form: The Modernist Novel in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

17   Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 262. See also John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

18   Lawrence O'Toole, "Now Read the Movie," *Film Comment*, November 1982, p. 35.

19   Frank Krutnik, "Desire, Transgression and James M. Cain," *Screen*, (May-June 1982), pp. 31-44.

20   As in Robert Scholes, "Narration and Narrativity in Film and Fiction" in *Semiotics and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) or Bruce Kawin, *Mindscreen; Bergman, Godard, and First Person Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

21   Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 19; Robert Carringer, "*Citizen Kane, The Great Gatsby*, and Some Conventions of American Narrative," *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (Winter 1975), pp. 305-326.

22   Oswald Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 83.

23   Allen Thiher, *The Cinematic Muse: Critical Studies in the History of French Cinema* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979), p. 170.

24   John Ellis, "The Literary Adaptation, An Introduction," *Screen*, 23 (May-June 1982), p. 4.

25   Andrew, pp. 9, 14.