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When Multigenre Meets Multimedia: Reading Films to Understand Books

BENJAMIN B. DZIEDZIC

There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method.

—Herman Melville

When in my first year teaching upper school English I was called on to create a third trimester elective for seniors, the idea of resorting to the careful, the ordinary, and the merely literary seemed foolhardy in the extreme. Only three months away from receiving the piece of paper that will prove that *they know it all*, third trimester seniors tend to roll their eyes when presented with such mundane and tired activities as making a thorough examination of a character or exploring the development of a theme in a novel. *I mean, come on, that's so junior year.*

In an effort to create a course both challenging and engaging, I decided to widen the net, drawing in texts of various literary genres *and* various media. My hope was that the richness and variety of the texts would foster an equally diverse and fruitful discussion among the members of the class about the way that the medium and genre of a text both enable and define how meaning can be created. At the heart of the course was a multifaceted question about the ways in which literary genres such as plays, short stories, and novels have influenced the development of the language of film.

In order to foster an innovative way of looking at film and literature, I wanted to call into question two common assumptions about books that are made into movies: (1) the idea that a movie never lives up to the book, and (2) the notion that in order to make a “good” movie you need to begin with a “bad” (i.e. popular, pulp, etc.) book. In their place I proposed the idea that film revisions of literature are just another means of critical interpretation, even—dare I say it?—kissing cousins of the notorious analytical essay.

Three important elements were vital to encompassing the diverse goals and texts of the class: learning to read film, focusing on a process of interpretation between texts, and writing across genres. Before we could begin to discuss how specific films interpret the works of literature on which they are based, the students needed a framework for interpreting film that would enable them to see movies as readable texts. Once this framework was in place, I turned the focus to the process of interpretation that happens when a book becomes a movie. In addition to classroom discussions and activities, multi-genre writing activities helped to make the point that interpretation and critique can come in various guises. Through studying diverse texts and exploring various writing styles, the course challenged students’ assumptions about what a text is, what analysis and interpretation look like, and what kind of creative and intellectual challenges are involved when a book is made into a movie.

In classroom discussions, I tried to highlight the importance of being open to discovering new kinds of texts and interpretation. The outcome of

this openness was a surprising unity, as our conversations in class returned again and again to a central theme: the connection between memory and identity. Though spontaneous in origin, this theme helped to bring together the many texts and ideas introduced in this class. The process of analysis, writing, and thematic connection that shaped this course is not limited to the texts chosen for this class. Rather, it gives testament to the value of an open, generous approach to texts that throws open the doors of interpretation and encourages students to engage with texts in new and exciting ways.

Approaches to Studying Film

Even before we began to sink our teeth into any of our texts, I took the class through a crash course in the terms and the framework they would need to analyze and digest film. In part, this took the form of learning the language of cinematic techniques: the varieties of camera angles (low, high, eye-level); the kinds of shots (close-up, medium, long); some basic camera movements (panning, crane shots, hand-held); as well as concepts such as editing, special effects, sound effects, and so on. After viewing and analyzing exemplary film clips as a class, the students began to internalize this language and apply it not only to the films we analyzed in the classroom, but also to TV shows, commercials, and music videos they encountered outside of it.

Once this language of film criticism was introduced, the class needed a framework in which they could use these terms to analyze film as a meaningful text. For this, I turned to Alan Teasley and Ann Wilder who, in their book *Reel Conversations*, provide a useful distinction between the “literary,” “dramatic,” and “cinematic” aspects of film. Teasley and Wilder provide an able description of this framework and a number of ideas for lesson plans, but this account does not attempt to recreate their discussion. Rather, I will focus here on the value that this framework had in the context of the essential questions and discussions of this course.

I used short film clips to help define the literary, dramatic, and cinematic in more concrete terms. Teasley and Wilder describe the *literary elements* of films as theme, dialogue, symbol, etc., elements that films have in common with novels, short stories, and even poetry. A useful example of this can be viewed in the prologue of William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Baz Luhrman, where

the statue of Christ interposed between the commercial buildings of the Capulets and Montagues sets up a symbol that is developed throughout the film. The *dramatic elements* of film are shared in common with the stage and include settings, costumes, and acting. For an example we can turn to the use of costume and setting in *Shakespeare in Love*. Finally, the *cinematic elements* of film include editing, sound and special effects, camera work, and camera movement. The effects of cinematic elements are quite familiar to students who have grown up in a media-rich environment, and the power of the cinematic comes to the forefront through analysis of any film that makes effective use of editing and camera movements such as the opening sequence of Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*. This framework of literary, dramatic, and cinematic elements of film provided students with the familiar context in which to think about film, and it was especially useful for this course, which set out to examine the relationship between fictional narratives, theater, and film.

Breaking Down Metacritical Interpretation

Having read and discussed Mario Puzo’s enjoyable novel *The Godfather*, we turned to analyzing Francis Ford Coppola’s film. Even with a critical framework firmly in hand, however, moving between in-depth analyses of both literature and film in order to understand how a director’s artistic vision provides a distinct interpretation of a story is a complicated, metacritical task. In order to accustom the students to film analysis and enable them to articulate the differences between texts of different media, I divided up the process of examining the film’s interpretation of the book into three stages.

Step One: Close Readings of the Film

Students were assigned to view the movie at home over the weekend, and, as part of their viewing, each student was assigned one scene from the film to look at in detail. (The DVD is conveniently divided into twenty-three chapters.) The next week, they each made an eight minute presentation that explained their critical interpretation of the scene for the class. We had done this kind of activity as a group, but now students had to analyze the cinematic, literary, and dramatic elements of film to make their *own* reading of a movie. The results were astounding. Almost every student, even those usually intimidated by

closely examining literary texts, stood up and wowed the class with their ability to analyze the texts looking for symbolism, camera movement, use of color, acting choices, and more.

Step Two: Writing the Close Reading

Rather than jump directly into analyzing how the movie differs from the book, I had the class follow up their presentations with papers summarizing the findings of their presentations. With evidence, support, and interpretation already lined up, the unfamiliar task of writing analytically about film did not seem so onerous. Rachel's essay is a good example of the kind of claims that students now felt comfortable making about film:

In the scene where Don Corleone returns home from the hospital, Ford Coppola chooses to make the viewer feel like an outsider. He feeds us information through newspapers and makes us feel distant with the camera perspective. He uses lighting and certain symbols to help us differentiate between family and business life.

Rachel went on to support these claims with specific details from the movie, but this quote gives a good sense of how she was able to use the framework of literary, dramatic, and cinematic techniques as a tool to enable her analysis.

Step Three: Making Connections

Finally, I assigned the students to go back to the novel and read over the section that inspired their scene. With a clearly articulated idea of the ways that Coppola recreated the scene fresh in their minds, the differences between film and novel were clear, as was Coppola's interpretive lens. Again, the product surprised me, as I saw students usually intimidated by literary writing coming into their own as analytical writers.

Writing across Genres

The *Godfather* assignment showed how centering a conversation on the process of interpretation that occurs between texts can bring a new level of depth and interest to classroom conversations. In line with the general impulse of the course to cross genres and challenge assumptions, I geared subsequent writing assignments to explore the ways that interpretation itself can come in various genres. In addition to the familiar analytical essay, writing assignments for the

class included persuasive rejoinders, screenplay writing, and film reviews. In this way the multigenre content of the course was reinforced by multigenre writing assignments.

One such assignment used a film review to encourage students to take a stand about the film version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The play is a complicated text that foregrounds questions about the process of literary interpretation, reimagining Shakespeare's play through the eyes of two minor characters. As we studied the literary and filmed versions of the story, our conversations moved toward questions about what makes an effective play or a film. Since Tom Stoppard wrote both the play and the screenplay and directed the film, questions of authorial intent are not central, and the ways that the form itself affects how the story is told come to the forefront.

Writing screenplays interpreting scenes from the novel forced the students to make their own choices and led to a new respect for the difficulty of creative interpretation.

In an effort to engage the students in a critical discourse about the film, I brought in Roger Ebert's review of the movie, which awarded the film zero stars. (This review—and all of Ebert's other reviews—are easily accessible online at www.suntimes.com.) The review asserts that "this material was never meant to be a film, and can hardly work as a film." Making a distinction between the play he saw on stage and the film, Ebert argues:

There was an audacity and freedom to the way Stoppard's characters lurked in the wings of Shakespeare's most perplexing tragedy, missing the point and inflating their own importance—they were the ants, without the rubber tree plant. The tension between what was center stage and what was off-stage was the subject of the entire evening.

There is no offstage in the movies. The camera is a literal instrument that photographs precisely

what is placed before it, and has trained us to believe that what we are looking at is what we should be looking at.

The lack of an offstage is a clear problem for a play that takes place almost entirely in a murky offstage universe, and Ebert's critique strikes at the heart of the problem of cross-generic interpretation. After an energetic discussion of the material in class, I assigned the students to write a persuasive paper in response to the review and instructed them to use specific evidence from the movie to support their claims. The vitriolic nature of the review incited the students to equally passionate responses that ranged from enthusiastic agreement to indignant critique. Melissa disagreed with Ebert and concludes her essay with this paragraph:

Ebert's main excuse for trashing this movie is that Stoppard makes a huge error in judgment by choosing to make his dramatic piece into a cinematic one. He stubbornly clings to this as though all other aspects of the movie such as directing, casting, editing, visual choreography, and acting (much of which he actually seemed to enjoy) are all minor details. The film still works. . . . If it's the supposed lack of intelligence that Ebert has a problem with in this movie, then I find it hard to believe that this is the man who gave *Legally Blond[e]* a thumbs up.

Biting and opinionated, this essay also takes a strong analytical stand, basing its claims on specific details that challenge the grounds as much as the conclusions of Ebert's analysis.

Our discussion of Russell Banks's novel *The Sweet Hereafter* centered on questions about loyalty, family, and perspective. After we watched the film, we compared scenes from Atom Egoyan's screenplay to the novel to see how his vision was expressed both in dialogue and shot descriptions, but the students had mixed feelings about whether Egoyan's film adequately addressed the themes of the book. Some students objected to the way that certain characters (especially Dolores Driscoll) are moved to the margins of the film; others thought that the film lost the central focus of the book because it abandoned the technique of multiple perspectives or left out certain key scenes; others felt that the portrayal of incest in the movie was inappropriate, lessening its role in the plot and failing to depict the outrage and suffering seen in the book.

While I wanted to validate the students' visions of the story, I also encouraged them to move

past merely stating that the film did not live up to their expectations. Writing screenplays interpreting scenes from the novel forced the students to make their own choices and led to a new respect for the difficulty of creative interpretation. Using the format for Egoyan's screenplay as a model, with Syd Field's book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* on hand for reference, the students once again engaged in a writing exercise that was grounded in the "real world," where creative textual interpretation lives. Although the length of the screenplays makes reprinting one here unwieldy, an excerpt from the "Author's Introduction" to Karl's paper serves to clarify how this creative assignment helped to crystallize his understanding of the book:

Throughout the book and the film, it is the occupation of the observer to identify with Mitchell Stevens, as he is the relatively impartial mediator in the town, experiencing and learning all of the aspects of Sam Dent's story for the first time (not unlike us). Consequently, I found it important that Mitchell have the sweet hereafter explained expressly to him in terms he could understand or at least digest. In doing so I hoped that Dolores [Driscoll] could present to Mitchell as well as the viewing audience the concept of the sweet hereafter.

Karl's screenplay reflects his interpretation of the roles that characters play for the audience and his understanding of what themes are central to the book. To make a clear analysis of the film, he did not have to write an analytical paper, and his understanding of intertextual translation was gained firsthand as a result.

The next texts that we examined were a short story ("Memento Mori"), a Web site (otnmem.com), and a film (*Memento*), which tell the story of Leonard Shelby through different media. Leonard, a former insurance adjuster, loses the ability to make new memories after he receives a blow to the head from two assailants who have invaded his home. He believes that his wife was killed in the attack, but, because of his condition, he cannot even be sure of this. The frustration and agony of Leonard's search for vengeance under these circumstances are ably and powerfully brought to life in Christopher Nolan's film, which uses the disorienting and disturbing technique of telling the story backwards.

Since the film *Memento* was still in the movie theaters, I decided to have my students try their hand at writing a movie review. Before we met at

the local cinema to view the film, I broke down the format for writing a review that is commonly followed by journalists:

1. A catchy introduction that hooks the reader's interest
2. A succinct summary that explains the main concerns of the film without giving away the ending
3. An analysis of the film's techniques (literary, dramatic, cinematic)
4. The reviewer's assessment of the overall success of the film
5. A conclusion that wraps up the reviewer's take on the movie

I received many strong, thoughtful, and engaged reviews, but none more creatively analytical than that of Becky, who recreated the frustration of the film by writing her review backwards. Her concluding paragraph gives a good indication of the overall effect:

.minute every relishing and complacent fearfully us leaving, scene each intensifies perfectly cut Every.Hollywood of policy all-tell the to pandering not,have would filmmakers other few that risks takes Nolan.director-writer the,Nolan Christopher to belongs *Memento*,truth in But.strong equally are (*Matrix The* of both) Pantoliano Joe and Moss Carrie-Anne including,cast supporting The.memorably,impeccably Leonard plays ,fame *Desert the of Queen,Priscilla* and *Confidential A.L.* of ,Pearce Guy.confusion utter create to perfectly together comes (writing ,filming, acting) movie the of component every,Paradoxically.time some in seen have I movie original most the is *Memento*

Interestingly, this review was not only a success in the context of this course; Becky submitted it to her college paper and now reviews movies regularly for the *Daily Pennsylvanian*.

All of these assignments were successful, I believe, because they brought a fresh perspective to textual interpretation and allowed the students to explore for themselves how the constraints of a genre of writing (the difference between a critical rejoinder, a creative screenplay, and a critical review) enable and define the expression of their ideas.

Memory: The Combination of Narrative and Image

These writing assignments demonstrate the focus on the process of interpretation in its many guises that was central to the course. Although I had not

planned to couple this with any kind of thematic framework, as we worked our way through this diverse group of texts, our discussion came back again and again to patterns of imagery and incarnations of character that were centered around the connection between *memory* and *identity*.

In both *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, memory is a central problem for the main characters. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's helplessness and confusion are exacerbated by the fact that they were conjured up to play a role in *Hamlet* but lack any memory that precedes their being summoned to Elsinore. Nichole Burnell, the central figure in *The Sweet Hereafter*, is a survivor of a deadly bus accident who cannot remember the details of the accident and must struggle to find a sense of self and strength in a world and community whose innocence has been taken away. The transience of memory (and therefore identity) seen in these two texts arose repeatedly as an important theme in the texts for the course. In our analysis of *Memento*, moreover, the thematic connection of memory and identity was connected to an understanding of the power of images, framing a fascinating set of questions that would center our discussions through the rest of the course.

Teaching this perplexing, narratively convoluted, and troubling film presented some unique challenges, but despite these challenges—if not because of them—our discussions of the film helped to galvanize the class's sense of purpose and enthusiasm. In an effort to start a discussion of *Memento*, I had the class form groups to perform the simple exercise of reconstructing the events of the film in chronological order. To my great surprise, the exercise took the majority of the class period. The fact that the film presents the events in reverse order made it almost impossible for us, even working in coordination, to construct a cohesive memory of them. What I had thought would be a preliminary exercise led to a revelation about the importance of narrative for the functioning of memory. Despite an enormous handicap, Leonard attempts to reconstruct his memory and, ultimately, his identity through an assiduous system of maps, photographs, notes, and tattoos. Photographs in particular are the foundation of Leonard's attempts to manufacture a normal existence, but he is ultimately unable to accurately place them in a narrative context. Without the ability to create an accurate narrative in which

to place the images he clings to, his attempts to make sense of his life are doomed from the start, just as was our attempt to put the events of the film in chronological order. Leonard's inability to create a system to replace his memory speaks volumes about the fragile foundation of image and storytelling on which our sense of who we are, what we want, and how we can act is based.

Suddenly, studying film—a *genre whose essence is the combination of narrative and image*—took on a new significance as we considered how important photos, film, and storytelling are to the construction of our own sense of identity. Film creates meaning in a profound and unique way. In the cinema, the cohesive power of *narrative* and the credibility of the *visual image* are united in the fleeting flickering of light and dark on a silver screen. The resulting unity of solidity and evanescence is akin to the way we imagine our own memories. It is not surprising, I suppose, that these directors were drawn to books that brought to the foreground the fragile connection between memory and identity. The constellation of memory, image, and identity that was seen in the course of our discussions of *Memento* would continue to resonate through the rest of the term.

Another powerful example of the construction of identity through memory aided by the power of the image was provided in the film *Bladerunner*, which liberally interprets Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* In the context of our analysis of *Bladerunner*, we discussed how Ridley Scott's film reflects Dick's idea that the function of science fiction is to question reality. Scott uses the film to pose questions about what is "normal," "human," and "real," through the subtle suggestions that the main character, Deckard, might be an android, a "replicant."

In the film, Harrison Ford's character Deckard has the job of hunting down and retiring "replicants." This task becomes increasingly difficult as his prey become increasingly sophisticated, with programmed memories to make them seem more human—memories complete with corroborating family and childhood photographs. As Deckard gets more embroiled in the moral complications of his job, Scott presents a scene in which Deckard looks through the many photos that fill his own apartment. The similarity between the foundation and "proof" of Deckard's remembered identity in a photographic record and that of the

replicants subtly plants a kernel of doubt in the mind of the reader about *Deckard's* humanity, which is reinforced by a dream sequence that shows a unicorn running through a forest.

After a spirited debate in class, I asked students to write a persuasive essay on whether Deckard is a replicant or not (Ridley Scott claims that he is, while Harrison Ford insists that he is not). Brad's essay analyzed the literary and cinematic elements of the scene referred to above:

The most stunning piece of evidence in favor of Deckard's inhumanity is the unicorn dream. Early in the movie Deckard, in a drunken collapse at his piano, has a dream of a white unicorn running through the forest. On its own, a clearly artificial mythical creature running through a real natural forest is symbolic of being a replicant. However, at the end of the movie when Deckard returns to his apartment and decides to sneak away with Rachel, he steps on a silver origami unicorn. The unicorn, clearly left by Gaff, triggers the memory of Gaff saying "It's too bad she won't live! But then again who does?" This clearly shows that Deckard is a replicant. When Rachel [a replicant] first visits Deckard's flat, she says she cannot be a replicant because she has memories. Deckard proceeds to recite Rachel's memories as if they are his own. He knew the content of these dreams for they were implanted. . . . The fact that Gaff left the unicorn clearly suggests that Gaff knew Deckard's memories because Deckard was in fact a replicant and had implanted memories.

This paper topic empowered Brad to engage in a debate that existed outside the walls of the school, and it elicited a logical, persuasive textual analysis from a science-oriented student.

As we watched the scene together in class, we discussed the similarity of the yearning to establish memory through the seeming security of a photo seen in *Bladerunner* to Leonard's struggle in *Memento*. One forward thinking student, Nick, aptly noted how the theme of memory was continually arising in these texts and proceeded to ask the probing question, "Aw, man, we're not gonna have to write an essay about memory in all of these books, are we?" Needless to say, I knew a perfect final exam question when I heard one, and this insight proved prophetic as the theme of memory continued to arise in and through the texts we read for the course.

For the class, the pattern Nick noticed opened the door to many interesting questions and conversations about how memory works with the word, images, and stories to create identity. I cannot

help but think that the difficulty in establishing identity outside of the context of a reliable memory resonates strongly, also, with the process of education in which we are engaged, a process that is built on making connections within a context of history, ideas, and culture that is larger than any one person or perspective. In a related way, casting a wide net to gather texts across genres and media can provide an opportunity to examine ourselves and our world from a new perspective.

Conclusion

In this course, the process of reading and remembering a group of heterogeneous texts provided a model for a parallel process of coming to understand the way we create meaning and, perhaps, a more subtle sense of identity through art. Beginning with an introduction to reading film, we broadened the range of our interpretive lens, breaking down the distinction between the serious texts available to study in school and the popular texts we find outside the walls of the school. In writing, too, we broke out of the ordinary models of interpretation, reinforcing the lesson that interpretation of art and the world comes in many different forms. What surprised me was the way that this wide open approach to choosing and examining texts helped to open our eyes to new thematic connections centering on memory and identity. What is memory, after all, other than a way of interpreting events (images) into a narrative that enables us to act as more or less whole individuals in the world? And what better place to look to than art to provide convincing narratives that enable us to confront our fractured and fragile foundation of memory and identity and find meaning in an increasingly complex world?

In *Remembrances of Things Past*, Marcel Proust talks about the way that the smell of the madeleine is powerfully evocative of an entire set of experiences from his childhood. As I walked into my classroom again this year, greeted by the unique combination of the smells of burnt coffee and dry erase markers, my memory was similarly stirred to a recollection of how, over time, a series of discourses about a set of seemingly unrelated texts slowly took

shape and meaning, ultimately resulting in the formation of a fascinating constellation of ideas and reflections on memory, image, and identity. The memories describe the curve of an elective, recalling a profound educational experience about the capacity of an idea to reveal itself through conversation and inquiry and proving the importance of giving a varied mix of students, as well as texts, the ability and opportunity to find their own path to meaning.

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