17 Fiction Across Media: Film

Fiction is not limited to stories written to be read. The characteristics of prose fiction—character, setting, plot, narrator, point of view, theme, image, motif, style, tone, and structure—are also attributes of narrative fiction produced in such other media as film, television, comic books, and computer games. It is tempting to think of these media as interchangeable, especially if we only focus on plot, character, and setting. We might make little distinction, for example, among Ian Fleming's novel *Diamonds Are Forever*, the movie *Diamonds Are Forever*, and a computer game based on James Bond's exploits (such as *007 Nightfire*). Any comparison of the three would probably focus on differences in plot and characterization—the kind of critique we often hear when seeing a movie made from a book.

Although all of these stories about James Bond are fictional, they cannot be treated as if they are the same. The medium through which a story is presented, whether print, film, computer, or picture, makes a difference in what is told and how actions, characters, settings, and stories are rendered. It also makes a difference in the ways we consume, understand, enjoy, and evaluate it. We must understand and take account of the differences among media when we look at the film version of a story, such as the short film *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* filmed for the television show *The Twilight Zone* in 1962, or Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), adapted from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Movies based on stories written to be read are never simply "adaptations," or filmed versions, of a story. They are instead new interpretations that might be based on a specific story, but which are rendered into the terms of another medium. The complexity of this process and the differences in the media make the film text another story altogether. (See ▮▮▮▮.)

There are several stories included in this collection that have been made into movies. Some, such as Julio Cortázar's "Blow-Up" (1963), are better known in the film versions—Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966) and the later *Blow Out* (1981), which transforms the photographer protagonist of "Blow-Up" (and *Blow Up*) into a sound technician (see the case study of Antonioni's *Blow Up*, below). Some stories, such as Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), have inspired multiple film versions. "Usher" has provided material for at least seven screen versions, beginning with two silent films made in 1928. There have been five film versions of Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and even a version of Guy de Maupassant's "Paul's Mistress," transformed by avant-garde filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard in *Masculin/Féminin* (1966). (For an extended list, see ▮▮▮▮.)

Fiction Film

But what exactly is different in a filmic rendering of a prose fiction story? What should we take account of when thinking about fiction in film? Thinking about film fiction is never simply a matter of comparing how a film treats or changes a prose fiction story's plot, character, and setting; nor is it a matter of tracking what the film omits or judging its casting decisions. Rather, when looking at fiction in the medium of film, one needs to take account of the ways the film medium works as art, just as in looking at fiction we consider how language produces the art of prose fiction. This means understanding the ways film arranges events, relates character, establishes setting, conveys the passage of time, signals subjective experience (those wavy lines, for example), and produces the implication of a narrator. Though some aspects of film fiction correlate to the formal categories through which we begin our analysis of fiction (plot, character, setting, narrative, structure, and motif), film's set of tools also differs from that of prose fiction. When looking at film fiction, the action of the camera—of filming itself—is an integral part of the art of film. Film art is not merely a transparent mode of storytelling; it adds and shapes the meanings, impressions, and moods of a story. It addresses its consumer differently than prose fiction, appearing to provide a view of events instead of a description, seeming to have a window into a world of actual people and at the same time subtly directing and controlling viewer perspective and attention.

As a visual and aural medium, film differs from prose fiction in three major ways:

- It tells stories through realistic images and sounds (after the sound era).
- It combines images through a process called editing.
- It has no specific narrator.

Each of these aspects of film has its own vocabulary (see "Film Concepts," below). This vocabulary is useful because it represents concepts that ground the art of the cinema. Being familiar with the concepts and terms used in studying cinema makes it easier to think specifically about film art as well as about the differences between filmic and literary texts.

Films also often combine the ideas, characters, or plots from stories and novels with other issues, arguments, and approaches. For example, Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* borrows the idea of finding a mysterious charismatic figure in a jungle from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and combines it with a commentary about the problems of the Viet Nam War. The film's setting in southeast Asia, and the different cast of characters serve the film's different emphasis.

Adaptation, Translation, Transliteration

Although many people think of films based on novels as "adaptations," it is sometimes more enlightening to think of these films as new texts. A prose fiction story and a film based on that story may indeed have much in common,

but thinking of a film only as an "adaptation" makes us miss much that is interesting and innovative about it. In other words, we tend to think of the film precisely as an adaptation—as the product of adjusting the very same story to the specific circumstances of film's visual and aural technologies.

Part of the ease with which we equate print and visual texts comes from our familiarity with narrative. For most viewers, films are about stories and characterizations, aspects of film that often do seem to be simple translations of a story. If we focus on comparing the differences between a prose story and the film that tells the same story, our understanding of the film version consists of the ways the film has "changed" the story—that is, the ways the film has in some way altered the order of events, omitting and adding *actions* and characters, and changing settings. Thinking of films as translations also encourages us to measure the effects of casting decisions to the point that discussing any film based on a novel becomes a matter of discussing whether or not Marlon Brando was a good choice to play Mr. Kurtz. These conversations can be interesting, but they tend not to tell us much about how a film text itself works as an integrated work of art.

For these reasons, it is most profitable to consider any film a text that stands alone with its own system and integrity. Thinking of films as stand-alone texts encourages us to see how the various elements of a film work together rather than only in reference to a print story. Films perceived as separate texts are at best "transliterations" of print stories—renderings of material made in a completely different "alphabet" and "language," and hence barely the same thing at all.

Of course, the relation between films and the stories that inspired them varies from film to film. Films are conceived in many different relations to stories. Some films are made for the express purpose of making a specific text consumable under different circumstances. This is true, for example, of many films made of Shakespeare's plays. Films made expressly for showing in literature classes, such as the film version of "A Rose for Emily," bear a close relation to the stories they present. Viewers are most often aware of the prose and perhaps the dramatic renditions upon which these kinds of films are based. Watching these films becomes a matter of mentally comparing the film to the story. Even if such films are intended to be simple adaptations, however, they still have their own system and art.

Other films have a more distant relation to the prose texts upon which they are only loosely based. These films—*Blow Up*, for example, or *Apocalypse Now*—capitalize and elaborate on particular aspects and relationships within a story. Such films do not worry about reproducing other aspects of the stories that have offered only a suggestion and often change settings, characters, historical era, and even the focus of the story. Viewers often consume these films without necessarily knowing the stories upon which they are roughly based.

Case Study: *Blow Up**

A fashion photographer who is also in the process of producing an artistic coffee-table book takes pictures of an unwary couple in a London park. He has been accompanied in his journey to the park by a group of reveling mimes. The woman in the couple notices him taking pictures and demands the roll of film. Thomas, the photographer, gives her his address and rushes off to photograph a fashion spread. Later, the woman appears in his apartment and he gives her the wrong roll of film. Curious, he develops his park pictures and, fascinated by something he sees, begins blowing up portions of a picture. He hangs these in the living room of his loft, and looking at them closely, sees what looks like the barrel of a gun poking through the bushes. He concludes that his photography has interrupted a murder and goes to a restaurant to tell his agent about his fabulous coup. He returns to his loft, is accosted by teenage groupies with whom he frolics, and while on the floor, sees a body lying on the ground in one of the pictures. He rushes back to the park and finds a body. He tries to get someone to go to the park, but everyone is busy partying. When he returns to his loft, the pictures are all gone, except one. He returns to the park, finds that the body has also disappeared, and begins to play mime tennis with the revelers.

What is it about Michelangelo Antonioni's film, *Blow Up* (1966), other than its title, that would suggest that it has any connection to Julio Cortázar's short story "Blow-Up" (1963)? On the surface, it seems quite different:

"Blow-Up" (story)	*Blow Up (film)*
Protagonist is a writer.	Protagonist is a photographer.
Set in Paris	Set in London
Protagonist enjoys photography.	Protagonist aggressively seeks to photograph.
Initial situation involves a woman and a teenage boy.	Initial situation involves a woman and an older man.
Third party is a man in a car.	Third party is a man in bushes with a gun.
Situation photographed involves a woman's attempt to seduce the boy on behalf of the waiting man in the car.	Situation photographed involves a woman's attempt to seduce a man to his death.
Both the woman and man in the car confront the protagonist.	Woman confronts the protagonist, visits his studio. Murderous third party remains a mystery.
Protagonist returns to his apartment with no further attempts to intercede.	Protagonist actively tries to solve the mystery of the park.

Story is written in a self-conscious, self-reflective manner.	Film has no consciousness of itself as a film.
Traces modest thoughts of the protagonist as he understands that the position from which one sees affects the story one contrives to account for events.	Traces the conceited heroism of the protagonist, who thinks he has prevented a murder and then thinks he has recorded one.
Story is framed by images of birds.	Film is framed by images of mimes and revelers.

Although these differences may seem to be substantial, producing what is in effect a completely different story, what is perhaps more interesting are the ideas the print and filmic texts share. Looking at similarities helps us see what differences a medium itself makes. The texts share three central ideas:

- The position from which one views an event influences how one sees the event.
- Observers inevitably produce stories to account for what they see.
- Art necessarily engages with life.

Both protagonists experience a revelation about the nature of seeing as they study the photograph they have blown up. Both attempt to account for the events they have caught on film by contriving stories to explain the relations among the characters. Those stories change, of course, when the protagonists change their positions in relation to the images. In both cases, the seemingly detached activity of taking pictures embroils the protagonists in a real-life dispute in which they reflect on their solitary pursuit of their respective arts.

How, then, to account for the differences between the texts? One way is to consider the ways in which the differences in details relate to the media through which the texts are presented. Cortázar's story is partly about writing. The medium reflects upon itself. (When a story is about writing, a play is about a play, or a film is about filmmaking, we call this preoccupation with the medium *self-reflective*). If that is the case in a print story, then we might expect that a self-reflective film would reflect upon modes of seeing. This is a way of matching the story to the medium. Both the story and the film are in some way about how we contrive stories to explain what we see, but because the story cannot reproduce the actual experience of seeing, it focuses much more on understanding how changing the position of the viewer changes the viewer's perspective. The film, on the other hand, because it can reproduce the experience of seeing, focuses more on the protagonist's study of the blowups. It also makes more central and complex the moment during which his literal change of position (he views the photos from the floor) changes what he sees.

Another way to account for differences (or really to account for how the same idea appears slightly differently in two different media) is to consider the scope and capabilities of the medium. Short stories can present interior thoughts and can move around in time much more easily than films, which are limited to some degree to the need to make thoughts and feelings visible in some way.

Blow Up's protagonist, however, must act out his insights, not only by looking like he has them, but by acting on them. Cortázar's story has an understated, self-reflective quality that, in focusing on the process of writing, partially obscures the moment of the writer's insight, even though the story moves toward such insight. To conform to the expectations of mainstream cinema, *Blow Up* makes the photographer's dilemma larger than life—a murder instead of a paltry attempt at seduction, action instead of reflection. In addition, the film adds several encounters with groupies not enjoyed by the modest writer.

Although "Blow-Up" and *Blow Up* are completely different texts, one can see that their differences depend partly upon the dictates of their media. For this reason, it is useful to consider the ways each works as a complete and artful text in itself. Just as it is necessary to understand something about the various elements of fiction to analyze it, so it is useful to understand the various elements of film. Although film is a complex topic that is itself the subject of an entire textbook, the following sets out some of the basic concepts to take into account when thinking about film as texts.

Film Concepts

Concepts Relating to Film

The shot   Film consists of recorded image and sound contained in units called shots. A shot consists of the length of film from the point where the camera is turned on to the point where it is turned off. Some shots may be as short as several *frames*; others may run as long as the roll of film. In the wisdom that declares that a picture is worth 1,000 words, film shots contain far more information than a verbal description in a story.

A frame   A frame is a single image. Each frame consists of a still photograph. Films consist of a series of frames that run through both camera and projector at the rate of twenty-four frames per second. A frame is also a basic rectangular shape of the film's image.

Mise en scène (put in the scene)   Each film shot conveys information about what is in the scene. Everything in front of the camera is called the mise en scène. Mise en scène includes not only characters, settings, actions, costumes, makeup, and some special effects, but also the effects of lighting.

The camera   Everything we see in a film we see from the point of view of the camera. Each shot conveys information about where the camera was situated when the scene was photographed:

- *Height:* the camera's height from the ground in relation to the subject being filmed.
- *Angle:* the angle from which the camera views the subject. If the camera is below the subject looking up, it produces a *low angle* shot.
- *Distance:* the distance from which a scene is photographed measured by how

much of the human figure the image includes (for example, head only, as in a *close-up*, or a *long shot*, which includes the entire human figure).

- *Level*: whether or not the camera was parallel to the ground while shooting. If the camera is not level, the shot is *canted*. Cameras may moved while shooting, producing a *pan* (turning in a "no" motion, or along a vertical axis) or a *tilt* (turning in a "yes" motion, or along a horizontal axis), moving along a track or *dolly*, or sitting on a *crane*.
- *Filters*: may distort or soften shots, and lenses (wide angle, telephoto) may change our perspective.

In film studies there are sets of specific terms for each of these categories—height, angle, distance, and others. What is important is that all of this information is a part of what films display, and all is material not conveyed in prose except through description. Prose fiction could not possibly describe the detail film can present, which *indicates one reason film and prose approach the telling of their stories differently.*

Editing Shots are combined with one another through a practice called editing or montage. Film editing follows certain conventions by which the sense of continuous space and time is preserved. Sometimes films combine shots to produce certain effects: rhythm (as in MTV), disturbance, comparisons, and tension. Editing, like the camera's view, directs viewer attention to certain scenes and parts of scenes while at the same time seeming invisible.

Narrator and Point of View

In film, the camera automatically provides a point of view. This point of view is sometimes aligned with a particular character (that is, it seems to reproduce what a particular character would see). An example of this is when the camera peers through Thomas's camera lense in *Blow Up*. More often, a film is presented from a seemingly omniscient site we rarely think about. This gives us the sense that the world of the film is given for us to see and that we have the best view in the house.

The fact that we have such a view, however, does create difficulty in identifying any specific narrator like that which functions in prose fiction. Like the prose narrator, the camera provides our view to action, but the camera has no persona and is not, like the narrator, quite as much a character or presence. Sometimes films provide a *voice-over* narrator—the voice of someone who seems to be seeing or experiencing what the film presents (though very often such a person could not possibly see what the camera presents). Usually, however, the camera's operations seem almost invisible, or at least we pay little attention to them.

SOUND

Film sound is an important element in the ways films provide information and render atmosphere. Dialogue not only relates plot and feelings, it also characterizes the players. Music, often unnoticed, evokes emotion, sets tone,

and creates tension. To see exactly how much, try watching a horror movie without the sound. How scary is it? As mentioned above, voice-overs add the illusion of a narrator, who describes the film's action as an expert (as in documentaries) or as a point of subjective experience (as when the narrator is a character). Sound contributes to the film's illusion that we are present and that the scenes it portrays are real.

TOPICS FOR CRITICAL THINKING

1. What elements of fiction cannot be rendered in film and why?
2. What can film do that prose cannot?
3. What are the differences in the ways readers consume a printed text and viewers consume a visual text?
4. What are the purposes of comparing a prose fiction story with a film that borrows its ideas?

TOPICS FOR CRITICAL WRITING

1. Produce a "treatment," or outline, of how you would make a film from a particular short story.
2. Use the mode of analysis employed here to compare *Blow Up* with "Blow-Up" or to analyze another film derived from a story. (For a list of such films, see ███████.)