C H A P T E R   T H I R T E E N

F I L M

Movies have become an important part of popular culture. Supplementing the role of literature, they give us new ideas, bring us entertainment and aesthetic pleasure, and serve a therapeutic function by stirring strong emotions as well as providing an outlet for them. An especially useful aspect of the study of film as an aid to literature is the clarity with which it can help us understand literary style. The cinematographic devices in film are much more deliberate than stylistic elements in literature. By looking at film cinematography (style), we can see the presence of at least some conscious design in literary style. Leo Braudy's words from *The World in a Frame* help us understand this point:

"When we are faced with a film, we should . . . assume everything has meaning because everything is the result of a choice – to write, cast, stage, act, shoot, edit, or score in a particular way – all dictated by formal necessities that in another art could seem disjunctive and fragmentary" (Braudy 9).

Enhanced awareness of the function of lighting, color, camera angles, close-ups, long shots, music, etc., in movies can bring us greater appreciation and understanding of similar and parallel functions of the elements of style in literature (discussed in Chapter Four).

This chapter will thus add film as a source to deepen your appreciation of literature. It will also suggest numerous film-based writing and discussion topics. Since literature is the primary focus of this book, the films chosen for discussion in this chapter are adaptations of well-known literary works or have screenplays of considerable literary merit. They can be easily rented in the form of DVDs or watched online. This narrowing of focus to literary films is necessary also because the study of film, in itself, is a vast and complex subject.

Movies can be enjoyed as cinematic art, and, at the same time, they can serve as a means of access to great books. We have no difficulty in perceiving the influence of literature on film, especially in the case of film adaptations of literary works. However, we seldom acknowledge the book-reviving influence of movies in instances where nearly forgotten literary classics regain popularity as a result of their film adaptations. Some examples are *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice* (based on Jane Austen's novels); *The Hours*, a modern interpretation of *Mrs. Dalloway* set against a reconstruction of Virginia Wolfe's final days; *The Wings of the Dove* (based on a Henry James novel); numerous film versions of *Hamlet*; Stephen Frears' adaptation of Choderlos de Laclos' eighteenth-century classic, *Dangerous Liaisons;* and many B.B.C.

productions of literary works. Lately some writers have become better known through film adaptations of their books. Patricia Highsmith, for example, has earned her well-deserved fame because her novel, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, was made into a movie, directed by Anthony Minghella.

Even though literary classics and their cinematic renditions are two different media, the principles of literary interpretation that have been presented throughout this book apply also to film analysis. In fact, film shares with literature the elements of theme, characters, and plot, covered in the first three chapters of this book. Even many elements of style, such as setting, point of view, atmosphere, imagery, dialogue, symbolism, allusion, understatement, irony, paradox, etc., are common to both media. Further strengthening the close connection between these two media is the fact that good movies create in the viewers a desire to go back to the literary source. Many times we are compelled to go back to the filmed literary work to see why the director's reading differs from our own. This kind of open-minded curiosity enhances our comprehension. A good film, moreover, allows us to benefit from the film director's extended involvement with the literary work. Like literature, film can also serve as a means to raise and answer some of the enduring questions and embody important themes. In a reading and writing course, therefore, combining the two media can lead to interesting topics and to a deeper appreciation of these potentially symbiotic forms.

Film Interpretation

The requirements of film and literary interpretation are quite similar. Since there is a tendency to regard movies as mere entertainment, it is all the more important for film appreciation to stress the same skills that are needed in literary interpretation:

1. An ability to understand the thought content is the first requirement. We demonstrate this capability through theme formulation by interpreting significant events, statements, occurrences, drawing a cause-and-effect connection between them, and by analyzing the values, hopes, fears, and aspirations of major characters.
2. The second skill needed in film interpretation is an ability to appreciate the stylistic accomplishments, which in film terminology are called cinematography and technical elements, including special effects. As in literature, some of the stylistic/technical aspects of film are intricately connected with themes, while other elements serve any number of the following ends: creating and sustaining a desired mood, building up emotion, startling the viewer into a new awareness (often with the use of special visual and sound effects), revealing a motive, developing a character, a motif, a sensation, a clue, etc.

Because of the complementary nature of the two media, this chapter will give you an opportunity to review some of the important points from previous chapters, such as your understanding of style in literature, and sharpen the skills needed to enjoy and interpret complex movies.

Technical and Stylistic Elements in Film

To access emotions and ideas in a movie, you can use the same advice that was given to discover and formulate themes in literary works in Chapter One. The purpose of this part of the chapter is to introduce you to something that has not been covered so far: technical and stylistic elements – also called cinematography – in film. The following glossary of technical terms will help you acquire an appreciation of this challenging part of film art while also helping to review, with sharper understanding, the elements of setting, imagery, symbolism, irony, etc., which were also covered in the chapter on style. As you will see, in film these elements serve important cinematographic functions.

In spite of the obvious similarities of stylistic features between film and literature, we need to be aware that movies give literary devices a cinematic form. Approximate equivalents can be found in literature for various camera angles, lenses and filters for image manipulation, many forms of nonverbal expression, use of light and color, and numerous varieties of shots (close-up, long shot, etc.). To appreciate film art, you may wish to supplement your knowledge of literary style with those terms that are distinctly cinematic.

A glossary or a dictionary of cinematic terms is a good companion to study the motion picture's technical elements. One good source of information is *The Glossary of Film Terms* compiled by John Mercer. Both Louis Giannetti's *Understanding Movies* and Thomas and Vivian Sobchack's *An Introduction to Film* also have glossaries of cinematic terms. You will notice that film style and literary style are quite similar, as the following explanations of various elements will demonstrate.

Definitions and examples of the following elements of film style are given on my website:

1. Setting
2. Dialogue and soliloquy
3. Stream of consciousness, flashback, and flash forward
4. Montage
5. Camera
   a. The long shot in film and the omniscient, cosmic perspective in literature
   b. The close-up in film and minute detail in literature
6. Composition
7. Camera angles in film serving as tone and point of view
8. Music
9. Imagery
10. Symbolism
11. Irony

TOPICS FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION

Having learned from Chapter Seven how to write on themes from literary works, you should have no difficulty writing on prominent themes from movies. As in fiction, important topics that surface in a movie's narrative are often developed into themes. Tracing and proving such developments is an interesting exercise in critical thinking, which also enhances interpretive skills. An essay on film appreciation may be organized the same way you organized your essays on themes and stylistic elements in literary works, remembering that you always have the freedom to vary organizational strategies to suit your style.

Topic Suggestions

In addition to writing on themes, movies offer other interesting topics, some of which are listed and explained below. With the exception of the first sample essay on a movie's themes (included for the purpose of contrasting simple with complex movies) almost all sample essays of this chapter are on new tasks that have not been covered in previous chapters. Because of space limitations and prior coverage, not all assignment topics are accompanied by a sample essay.

I. **Writing on dominant ideas and emotions in a movie**: This option may include a plot summary, the movie's general subject, and interrelated, complementary themes. A specific version of this assignment could be worded as follows: *Demonstrate in an essay how a movie presents conflicts in personal relationships together with their resolutions through growth and self-awareness.* The sample essay on Satyajit Ray's *Two Daughters* is on this topic.

II. **Interpreting a complex movie**: The sample essay on Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* exemplifies the completion of this assignment.

III. **Writing a plot summary** with emphasis on the movie's subject and characters. The sample essay on William Wyler's movie *Wuthering Heights* demonstrates completion of this assignment.

IV. **Focusing on just one prominent topic from the movie**. After identifying and exemplifying the topic, you should try to uncover the director's feelings on that topic, thus leading to the movie's theme. The sample essay on Stephen Frears' *Dangerous Liaisons* is in response to this topic.

V. **Comparing the film adaptation with the literary work** on which it is based to do any or all of the following:

1. Showing the changes made by the filmmaker and pointing out the artistic merit of those changes.

2. Adding depth to the viewer's understanding of the movie by citing important passages from the book which the film could not fully accommodate.

3. Pointing out those subtleties in the book that the film was incapable of conveying.

VI. **Character-related topics**: Since these will be the same as in literary works demonstrated in earlier chapters, only one sample essay – on character-theme connection in Ken Russell's *Women in Love* – is included.

VII. **Plot-related topics**: These will also be the same as in literary works shown in the preceding chapters. A sample essay in Chapter Three exemplifies Faulkner's plotting skill in "A Rose for Emily."

VIII. **Style-related topics**: a movie's technical elements/cinematography. Analyzing a movie's technical elements to demonstrate their effectiveness in communicating themes and expressing characters' feelings. The sample essay on Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* and a review of Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* exemplify this option.

IX. **Film as a catalyst for reform: Writing on a movie that concerns a pressing racial, cultural, or social issue**. Among numerous relevant movies, a few are *American History X* (directed by Tony Kaye), *House of Sand and Fog* (directed by Vadim Perelman), *The Color of Fear* (directed by Lee Mun Wah), *Crash* (directed by Paul Haggis), and *Pieces of April* (written and directed by Peter Hedges). Students Andrew Keller and Allan Fisher's essays, titled "The Sinister Side of the American Dream" and "Colliding American Cultures" show possible ways to complete this assignment.

X. **Film-literature connection: similarities and differences**. The sample essay on Resnais' movie *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and Keith Douglas's poem 'Vergissmeinnicht"shows one possible way to complete this assignment.

XI. **Film as a means to know an unfamiliar culture**.

XII. **The complete movie review/critique**: This comprehensive topic covers theme, characters, plot, and the movie's technical aspects. Detailed guidelines for writing this review precede the sample review on Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List.*

Topics relating to themes, characters, plot, and style in literature have already been covered in Chapters One, Two, Three, and Four respectively. You can use that same knowledge, enhanced significantly by this chapter's opening section on "Technical and Stylistic Elements in Film," to generate meaningful discussions of the film-related topics listed above. Since you know the steps and have already seen their implementation in numerous interpretation and analysis samples, only new information is included in this chapter.

SAMPLE ESSAYS

My website has sample essays on many of the above-mentioned topics.

Exercises to Test Your Mastery of Chapter Thirteen

1. Take a critical comment on a film, identify the source, and either support, amplify, and clarify its thesis, or write a carefully supported refutation of the critic's interpretation. Choose any thematic statement from any movie review, such as this one from Edward Guthmann's review of *American Beauty*: "*Beauty* acknowledges the absurdity and desolation of contemporary lives, and ultimately forgives and loves its cast of seekers." Another thematic statement by Guthmann describes this movie as "a dazzling tale of loneliness, desire, and the hollowness of conformity." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, September 17, 1999, page C-1). If interested, you can read the complete article on SFGate.com.

2. After watching the movie *American Beauty* and after reading its review by the film critic Edward Guthmann (mentioned in No. 1 above), add a section on any aspect of the film that the critic left out.

3. The following synopses of movie plots try to introduce readers to the movies' essential themes. After viewing any of these movies, add to the synopsis two or three analytic/interpretive sentences, followed by supporting details to capture the movie's thematic depth.

    A. *Bartleby*: "Director Jonathan Parker does a superb job of adapting the Melville story to modern times, with Crispin Glover as a worker who would prefer not to do anything and David Paymer as the boss whose heart is reopened by coming into contact with this strange and troubled man. Parker knows exactly where to place the camera and sustain a mood" (M. LaSalle, *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 11, 2003, page D-14).

    B. *The Hours*: "Undoubtedly one of the year's best films, this adaptation of Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel is in many ways an improvement over the book. Playwright David Hare takes placid scenes and dramatizes them in ways that don't compromise the author's intention but bring out its colors. And the cinematic form is well suited to the novel's aim to show parallel movements in the lives of three women in different eras. Meryl Streep and Julianne Moore are fine, but Nicole Kidman takes acting honors for her transformation into an utterly convincing Virginia Woolf. Directed by Stephen Daldry" (M. LaSalle, *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 11, 2003, page D-14)

4. Using as your sample this chapter's discussion of remarkable thematic resemblances between a poem ("Vergissmeinnicht") and a movie (*Hiroshima Mon Amour*), compare a poem with a movie to point out their thematic similarities. You may consider comparing the movie *Tom and Viv* with any of T. S. Eliot's poems, such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Wasteland," and "The Four Quartets." The first of these poems is in Chapter Twelve. The remaining poems can be accessed online, or you can read them in a book. The movie *Tom and Viv* chronicles some scenes from the lives of T. S. Eliot and his wife Vivian.

5. Write only a thesis paragraph of about 150 words for a 750-word essay on the technical devices in a movie of your choice. After identifying a few prominent devices, state their functions and effectiveness in the movie. One sentence naming the devices and three more sentences to state their functions would be enough.

6. Write an essay on notable technical features of any movie. Relate at least one of the technical elements to a theme or topic in the movie.

7. Write a brief evaluation of the use of dramatic irony or any other device from literary style in a film of your choice. The use of this form of irony is demonstrated in the review of *Dangerous Liaisons* in this chapter.

8. "What matters most in a setting is how it embodies the essence of the story materials and the artistic vision of the filmmaker" (Giannetti 278). Apply Giannetti's words to any movie that you have seen to show how the setting accomplishes the functions stated by him.

9. Bernard Dick has defined voice-over as the "off-camera narration or commentary" (Dick 57). Besides narrative purposes, voice-over can also serve as the counterpart of soliloquy in drama. As in a dramatic soliloquy, a film character may think aloud, letting the audience know his or her thoughts with no other characters listening. Cite one or two examples of the use of voice-over from the films that you have seen. Do you find this device as effective in cinema as soliloquies and a narrator's words are in literature? Give a reasoned response.

10. The problem in adapting a great play to the screen is that "the verbal metaphors are stronger than the visual accompaniments." But a good film's images "do not merely duplicate the verbal metaphors; rather . . . the images match the metaphor" (Sobchack 319). Discuss this problem of screen adaptation of any great play that you have read. Demonstrate how the director transfers the play's verbal metaphors to the screen.

11. In film as in literature, the use of symbolism can range from simplistic to subtle. Analyze effective use of symbols in any film of your choice. Identify the symbols, explain what they symbolize, and show their effectiveness as a means of intensification, compression, and enrichment of the movie's emotional and/or intellectual content. Talib Ali's review of *American Beauty*, for example, contains a perceptive interpretation of the rose symbolism.

12. Some movies' densely symbolic texture is like the condensed language of poetry. Discuss the effectiveness of a filmmaker's poetic, symbolic, and imagistic approach – in a cinematographic sense – in any movie of your choice.

13. Just as some authors become associated with certain stylistic features (Hemingway's matter-of-fact prose, Faulkner's symbolic and complex style, and Fitzgerald's rich, metaphoric language), film directors also have their characteristic elements of technique. David Lean, for example, is famous for using vast natural settings (the desert in *Lawrence of Arabia*, snowscape in *Doctor Zhivago*), Woody Allen for using the ordinary, daily urban existence, and Fassbinder for using glass as his favorite visual material. Discuss any film director's favorite technical tool and its accomplishment.

14. In some movies, such as Fellini's *Amarcord*, filmmakers are interested in capturing feelings, not facts. To achieve this end, Fellini views "the cinema . . . [as] a way of interpreting and remaking reality through fantasy and imagination" (Giannetti 274). Fellini relies mostly on the studio to create his magical fantasies. For this brief interpretation exercise, apply Fellini's words to his film *Amarcord* or any similar movie to demonstrate his feelings, not facts theory.

15. "Herzog depends entirely on the poetic sensations and evocations of his visual imagery, invariably distinguished by its intense silence, its haunting stillness, its mysterious impenetrability, its hypnotic slowness" (Mast 370). Gerald Mast has used these words to describe the German filmmaker Werner Herzog's technique of visual imagery in his films like *Land of Silence and Darkness*, *La Soufriere* (a documentary whose setting is the island of Guadaloupe threatened with an imminent volcanic eruption), *Signs of Life*, and *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (set in the Amazonian jungle, in which the Spanish conquistador seeks the fabled city of El Dorado).

    After viewing any of Herzog's films, give examples to demonstrate and support Mast's claim about Herzog's masterly use of imagery. You may choose any movie by Herzog or by any other filmmaker to evaluate the artistic use of imagery in it.

16. This question concerns casting. Each one of us has an idea as to what a character from a movie script should be like on the screen. Some literary classics have offered this seemingly insurmountable difficulty: the filmmaker's casting conflicts not only with the viewer's concept of a character but runs counter also to the author's own vision. The film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, directed by Jack Clayton, illustrates this point about poor iconography. Daisy in Fitzgerald's novel has an almost hypnotic voice. In fact the author makes Daisy's voice an important part of her appeal. However, Mia Farrow, who plays the role of Daisy in the movie, does not have that magical voice. Complaints have also been heard about the casting of Gatsby with Robert Redford. It is inconceivable, the critics believe, that someone as good looking as Robert Redford would pine for a plain-looking woman (like Mia Farrow). Had the infatuation been the other way around (Mia Farrow obsessed with Redford), the casting would have been believable. You may wish to counter this argument with your own. Or you may discuss any movie whose casting left you dissatisfied. Give reasons for your discontent.

17. In *Understanding Movies*, Louis Giannetti says that some filmmakers are like those poets who write sonnets (a highly demanding 14-line poem). They choose this "rigid form precisely because of the technical challenge it presents. Much of the enjoyment we derive from reading a sonnet results from the tension between the content and the form . . . . When technique and subject matter are perfectly fused in this way, our aesthetic pleasure is heightened. The same principle can be applied to framing in film" (Giannetti 44).

    Compare any tightly structured poem (like a sonnet) with a similarly wrought film to elucidate the point made by Giannetti in the preceding quotation. Talib Ali's review of *American Beauty* comments on the thematic function of the movie's compositional frames.

18. Watch the one-hour PBS program (check PBS.org) that has interviews with Arthur Miller (the screenwriter of *The Misfits*), John Huston (the director), photographers, and some of the actors. Incorporate the interviewees' relevant views to write an interpretation and an assessment of the movie's themes. The movie that was made in 1961 stars Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, Montgomery Clift, and Eli Wallach.

19. Keeping your focus on character analysis and theme, write a response to the movie critic Mick LaSalle's following critique of Arthur Miller's screenplay for the movie *Misfits*, written while Miller was married to Marilyn Monroe. Finding in the movie a

lot more than "a veiled glimpse into a doomed marriage," LaSalle points to its multiple themes:

"[It] was written for Marilyn and is ostensibly a celebration of her beauty, her spirit, her gentleness and her humanity. But other things come through, such as the difficulty of living with an emotionally erratic woman and the nightmare of constantly having to fend off other men. . . . While seeming to extol Roslyn's [Marilyn's] beautiful spirit, Miller depicts the awfulness of being in a relationship where only one person gets to be the sensitive one, and the other's job is only to respond. . . . One person sets the mood, and the other arranges his features accordingly. . . .

"Miller created *The Misfits* out of an arresting mix of brilliance, social concern, misery and an unconscious desire to reveal some mundane truths about his personal life. Probably a lot of art gets created that way, but what should we make of this? Of the three men vying for Roslyn, the one who is most like Miller – the intellectual played by [Eli] Wallach – is revealed as the villain. And the end of *The Misfits* has Marilyn hooking up with [Clark] Gable, the capable, elemental man who's most like Joe DiMaggio [whom Marilyn Monroe also married]." (LaSalle E-1)

Similar interpretive comments are found throughout Mick LaSalle's review. Point out with supporting reasons which of his character and theme interpretations are valid and which questionable. You can read his complete article on *The Misfits* on the internet. Log on to SFGate.com. The date of the article in *San Francisco Chronicle* was February 18, 2005.

20. Compare Ruben Santiago-Hudson's one-man memory play *Lackawanna Blues* with its adaptation for the screen. What is gained and/or lost by this play-to-film creation? Read on the internet Ruthe Stein's movie review titled "Dancing is steamy, sorrow's intense, love is abundant in *Lackawanna Blues*." Log on to SFGate.com for *San Francisco Chronicle*. The date of the article was February 12, 2005.

21. When asked what he thought was the best book-to-film translation, Michael Crichton, who scripted the famous *Jurassic Park* and *The Andromeda Strain*, named the Japanese film *Shall We Dance*. The film is based on a novel by Masayuki Suo, who also directed the movie. After first reading the novel and then viewing the film, discuss why Crichton regards *Shall We Dance* as the finest example of paper-to-celluloid translation.

22. *Elegy* is a movie with a rich literary script. It is based on Philip Roth's novella *The Dying Animal.* Directed by the Spanish director Isabel Coixet, it stars Ben Kingsley and Penelope Cruz. Assess the gain and loss to the book in this book-to-movie transition.

23. *Rashomon* is another movie that is based on rich literary text of two stories – "Rashomon" and "In a Grove" – by Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Directed by Akira Kurosawa, the movie stars Toshiro Mifune. Write a comparative analysis of the movie and the short stories.

24. Read Judith Ortiz Cofer's poem "Quinceanera" online. Compare it with the movie of that title to point out their similarities and differences. Cofer also wrote an essay titled "Quinceanera." You can read it online.

25. Do you agree with the film critic Ruthe Stein's following criterion to judge a movie:

"A test of a film's merit is if it can overwhelm you and chase away the memories of everything else you've seen that day. A compelling story is the best way to accomplish that. There's no substitute for becoming caught up in the lives onscreen" (Stein 26).

Discuss these qualities in a film of your choice.