

ADAPTING LITERARY TEXTS FOR THE MOVIES

We will focus on narrative literary texts and movies. With the exception of the graphic autobiography *Persepolis*, which some people call a comic book, all the literary texts and their film adaptations are fiction.* The transformation from literary text to movie seems simple enough, but in actuality it involves complex issues and so raises many questions, some of which we will explore.

- *What is the relationship of a literary text or the performance of a play to a movie based on it?* Should we expect fidelity to the original text, or is the adaptation an independent, original work? After all, we may see the movie adaptation because we have a deep attachment to and familiarity with the literary text. Do the actors and settings have to look like their descriptions in the written text or even to the way we imagine they look? Is an adaptation that ignores the plot or characterizations of the written source to focus on a theme, an effect, or some other elements in the source an acceptable adaptation? What if all the adaptation uses is the title and the names of some characters?

- *What do literary texts, performed plays, and movies have in common?* All these media include theme, character development, structure, imagery, style, use of language, aesthetic distance, theme, motif, story line or plot. Theater performances and movies have mise en scene (lighting, sound, actors, props, and setting). Written literature relies entirely on language; movies and theater add visual elements and sound to the language, and these images and sounds may be more important in the movie's effectiveness than language.

- *How do written texts, performed plays, and movies differ?* In other words, what can each of these media do that the others can't because of the way they communicate? For instance, novels, short stories, and play scripts rely completely on language to communicate and on the reader's imagination to create the material and fill in gaps. Performed plays and films share an aural or spoken element, but stage performances are limited in time and space, a limitation which films overcome with editing, camera work, and special effects. Thus, performed plays rely primarily on language and the actors' ability to project the language; movies, on the other hand, are primarily a visual medium and depend on the image. (An exception is a film of a stage performance exactly as acted.) The film director controls completely what the viewer sees and knows by selecting what appears or is framed in each shot. A staged performance, being three-dimensional, has depth, but a movie performance has only two dimensions; consequently, what movie-goers see on the flat screen is the same no matter where they are sitting, but this is not true of play-goers, whose view of the actors and stage is determined by where they are sitting. More important is the fact that a film performance is fixed forever or always the same; in a live performance, however, the same actor's performance can vary from night to night, and different actors can provide different interpretations.

- *How do these similarities and differences affect the adaptation?* What has to be added and what cut? Most novels are too complex and long to be adopted in their entirety, a short story may not have enough material for a two hour film, and some plays are set in the same location.

- *Who is the author of the work?* For modern novels, short stories, plays, and autobiographies, the answer is almost always straightforward. Not so for films, which are a collaborative enterprise involving dozens of people ranging from the director and screenwriter to the cinematographer, photographer, editor, producer, and studio executive. The screenwriter might seem an obvious choice, but often no one writer produces a screenplay, and then the screenplay may be drastically changed by the director, the producer, or even the studio executives when the film is shot or edited or it may be changed by all of them in turn.

- *How much is an adaptation affected by popular taste, cultural stereotypes, and audience expectations or by the marketplace, the drive to make as large a profit as possible?*

The decisions we make about these issues will affect, if not determine how we judge or evaluate a movie adaptation and answer the question, how successful is the movie, based on its genre, style, theme, and use of cinematic resources? It is the question we will try to answer in this course, though we will probably come up with different answers, as there is no one right answer.

* Movies are generally categorized as fictional narrative, documentary, and avant garde or experimental.