Short Story/Short Film
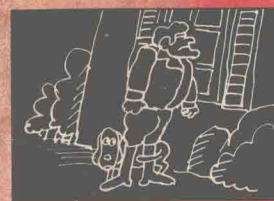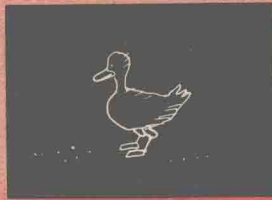
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SHORT STORY/ SHORT FILM

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To Edie

Preface

Short Story/Short Film reflects a phenomenon of the past decade. For many years, the motion picture industry ransacked literary storehouses seeking sources for feature films. Only during the last ten years, however, have short films adapted from short stories become numerous enough and attained the quality necessary to merit serious academic study. Of the fifteen films represented by stories in this volume, seven were produced in the 1970s, five in the late 1960s, and only three more than ten years ago.

Most of these adaptations are quite short. None runs over thirty minutes. Eight run under twenty minutes. They fit comfortably into conventional classroom modules. The shorter films, particularly, lend themselves to a useful pedagogic process: they can be shown, analyzed, and reshown within a single period. Short films are also economical for schools to purchase and rent. These films range in cost from $100 to $375. Most rent for $25 or less. (A complete survey of all fifteen films appears on p. 431.)

Why conjoin film and fiction? Fiction is a form of artistically structured language designed to produce reader involvement. Fiction allows readers to augment their own experiences; it offers vicarious experience otherwise unattainable. The detailed study of short fiction helps a reader to identify the key concepts and crucial incidents in a story. It gives him greater insight into the ways in which a writer can organize and express

the complexities of human behavior. The close textual study of fiction strengthens a student's ability to recognize important aspects of a writer's technique.

In essence, the study of film yields similar perceptual skills. For some contemporary students, watching a film may be more congenial than reading a story. Too often, however, viewing tends to be a passive activity. Learning *how* a film means may well be as original an experience as learning how to cope with fictional diversity. While students may float naturally and comfortably in the cinematic milieu, it does not follow that their aquatic thrashing has either fluidity or direction. But their usual willingness to shift from merely testing the waters to a purposeful charting of the stream augurs well.

Statistics published annually by the American Film Institute testify to the phenomenal growth of film courses and programs in colleges and universities. Nor is it surprising that English teachers increasingly link films to language and literature. Similarities between film and fiction as storytelling modes are apparent. Ironically, however, it is in the study of differences between the two media that students are most likely to learn more about how each medium works. Just as close textual study of a story is crucial to sharpening a student's literary perception, so close cinematic scrutiny is necessary to develop a student's sensitivity to the strategies and techniques of a filmmaker. The organization of *Short Story/Short Film* deliberately emphasizes and encourages close cinematic scrutiny.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1, "Film, Fiction, and Criticism," stresses some of the similarities of film and fiction as narrative modes. In addition, it examines the application of terms of literary criticism to the discussion of films. Chapter 2, "Film and Fiction: Contrasts in Media," analyzes significant differences between the two media. One part of this section focuses on how film and fiction express the passing of time. In Chapter 3, "Point of View and Tone in Film and Fiction," additional differences are discussed. In Chapter 4, "The Art of Animation," several short animated films illustrate key points. Chapter 5 contains five short stories but no film materials. The purpose here is to give the teacher and student greater flexibility. After the discipline of the earlier sections, the students may wish to develop their own film materials, using these stories as a basis. The final chapter, a series of appendices, adds information about the films studied in the book. One appendix lists awards received by the films; another lists the film distributors with their addresses. Still another suggests additional short films adapted from fiction. The final chapter is followed by a film glossary and a selective bibliography.

The first four chapters present ten short stories together with mate-

rials related to their film adaptations. There are six screenplays, four film continuities, two shot analyses, one storyboard, and two film treatments. Moreover, each of the ten story-film combinations is followed by questions and written exercises. The questions are intended to foster critical assessment of story and film details. They often focus on contrast-in-media examples and concepts, thus reinforcing the theoretical discussions that open each section. Suggestions for papers follow the questions for critical analysis. The writing calls for both critical and creative papers.

One major function of the first four chapters is to clarify the creative evolution of a film adapted from a short story. For example, Chapter 1 opens with Hawthorne's short story, *Young Goodman Brown*. This is followed by two screenplays written by the film director prior to shooting the film. After reading the screenplays, the student should view the film. Finally, there is a series of questions and suggestions for papers followed by a sample critique. There are five such sample contrast-in-media critiques; they not only shed light on the creative and critical processes of adaptation but also illustrate the kinds of writing expected of students. All but one of the critiques were written by students taking a contrast-in-media film/fiction course.

The creative process is viewed from another perspective in Chapter 2 which opens with *The Upturned Face* by Stephen Crane. After seeing the film, the student can refresh his memory of its details and sequences by referring to the shot analysis, a detailed description of the individual shots and dialogue of the film. Finally, the student reads an unproduced screenplay. He can then compare the film adaptation with the original story and assess the relative merits of the actual film with a proposed film which was never produced. Finally, there are again questions for critical evaluation and suggestions for papers. In Chapter 3, two sequential screenplays preceding the making of *The Open Window* allow students to see the director's mental processes *en route* to the filming. In Chapter 4, students read *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, examine two very different treatments proposed for the film, study an early storyboard, and then see the film itself. Once again, there are questions, suggestions for papers, and a sample of a student critique.

As indicated in the paragraph above, screenplays, treatments, and storyboards precede the making of a film. Film continuities and shot analyses are prepared after the film is complete. A film continuity describes the sequences of the finished film and includes the dialogue. A shot analysis is even more detailed; it describes each individual shot of the film. Both film continuities and shot analyses are very helpful in recalling a film to the mind's eye. They are verbal representations of the film. Because a motion picture moves so rapidly, it would probably be

impossible for even a practiced viewer to reproduce its shots in exact sequential order. A shot analysis allows us to read a description of the skeleton of a film and to recall specific details. Film continuities and shot analyses serve another function. While a screenplay is a blueprint for a director, actual shooting of a film frequently results in changes from the screenplay. Therefore, a screenplay approximates the final picture; a shot analysis is usually a more accurate final description of the film itself.

The first four chapters all begin with discussions of theory and then present two or three short stories supplemented by film-related materials. Chapter 1 also contains three critiques of live-action films while Chapter 4 contains two contrast-in-media critiques of animated films. The discussions which begin each of the chapters are illustrated by many specific examples of film adaptations of fiction; most of these examples are drawn from the fifteen film and story combinations represented in this book. While *Short Story/Short Film* reproduces the fiction from which the film adaptations stem, it is important to recognize that the motion pictures themselves, if they are effective works of art, must necessarily be able to stand entirely on their own. It is, therefore, interesting to note that most of the films—ten out of fifteen—are multiple prize-winners, earning film festival acclaim both here and abroad. Two have won Academy Awards in the category of best live-action short films.

Throughout the book, the aim has been to engage the student's creative and critical powers to the end of discovering how films and fiction function as storytelling modes. To further assist the student, each story/film unit is prefaced by brief editorial comments on the story and the specific film adaptation linked to it. Thus, while more than one film-maker has adapted Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* or Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, the materials in those units relate specifically to the 1972 Bosustow/Pyramid version of the Irving story and the 1969 adaptation of Melville's story by Encyclopaedia Britannica.

The heterogeneous materials gathered in this volume might have been assembled under an alternative title, *From Story to Screen: The Art of Adaptation*, to reflect one significant text function: the gathering together of materials that begin with a short story and culminate in a short film. Since many young filmmakers lose interest in the prefatory materials once the film exists, some desirable items could not be located. For example, it was not possible to obtain a screenplay for *The Upturned Face*; it would have been interesting to compare the screenplay of this film with the unproduced screenplay by Jim Stinson. In addition, limitations of space forced other deletions. In lieu of screenplays for *Bartleby* and *The Lady or the Tiger*, it was more expedient to substitute film continuities, which are appreciably shorter.

Finally, no collection of materials such as this ever comes into exist-

ence without owing a great deal to those who have cooperated in various ways. My greatest obligation must be to David Adams of Pyramid Films; his concern for quality films is revealed by the awards his films have garnered at film festivals everywhere. I also owe a substantial debt to Larry Yust whose adaptations and productions for Encyclopaedia Britannica launched their "Short Story Showcase" in 1969 and precipitated a major breakthrough for short films adapted from short stories. To my students, whose infectious enthusiasm never waned, I owe thanks, particularly since they were the first to sharpen their critical faculties on these contrast-in-media materials. Six of them are represented here. Four wrote contrast-in-media critiques, and two others, Bernadette Kornfeld and Patsy Sirrine, were largely responsible for the shot analyses and one of the film continuities. I am also indebted to Steve Bosustow, as fine a producer as one can find in the specialized field of film animation. For her encouragement and confidence, I am grateful to Marilyn Brauer. I also want to thank Fred Bernardi and Cynthia Miller for their highly professional editing of the manuscript. Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to those critics who read the manuscript so scrupulously and whose suggestions proved so valuable. They will find evidences of their insights throughout the book.

Pasadena, California

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Contents

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chapter 1

Film, Fiction, and Criticism

Fiction precedes film. This assertion is valid in two senses. First, fiction is a considerably older art form. Second, the very notion of adaptation necessarily presupposes the existence of a story. Despite fiction's greater maturity and more established role in the cultural mainstream of our society, studies reveal the primacy of pictures over print when both are measured quantitatively. The average American high school graduate has seen more than fifteen thousand hours of television and over five hundred films. He has spent less than twelve thousand hours in class.[1] How many books has a high school graduate read?

Given our image-oriented society, it is important that film be accorded a place with fiction as a serious art form. Fortunately, the two lend themselves to a study in tandem. Filmmakers consistently seek out literary sources for film adaptation. Film critics delight in comparing movies with their literary predecessors. Despite many significant differences between motion pictures and fiction as story-telling modes, their similarities deserve attention.

[1]John M. Culkin, "Film Study in the High School," *Catholic High School Quarterly Bulletin*, Vol. xxii, No. 3 (October, 1965), p. 1.

Film and Fiction: A Look at Likeness

The similarities of film and fiction far surpass those of film and drama. Unlike the fixed vantage point of a playgoer, the reader and filmgoer have views ranging from panoramic vistas to close-ups of exquisitely detailed particulars. The cameraman can focus on a leaf; the writer can describe its veining. But a playwright must resort to having an actor describe the leaf to the audience. In the film adaptation of "The Lottery," the camera focuses on the crowd from above and then zeroes in on a close-up of a tightly clenched fist gripping a piece of paper. Both writer and film director can alter our angles of vision or change the distances and perspectives from which we perceive the action.

Even the play's structural units, the scene and act, are substantially larger building blocks than the filmmaker's shots and sequences or the writer's sentences and paragraphs. Film and fiction can change locales more rapidly and more frequently than can a play. The stage curtain is a more cumbersome method of shifting scenes. While the stage director can increase flexibility by using separate areas of the stage as different "settings," he cannot risk confusing his viewers with too many rapid changes. His medium is subject to conventions which are different from those of film or fiction. In the manipulation of space, both film and fiction have greater flexibility. Film and fiction can also depict physical events in a way unavailable to the play. In "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," Ambrose Bierce describes Peyton Farquhar freeing himself underwater. The film adaptation graphically shows us the underwater sequence.

Neither the filmmaker nor the writer is limited by real space or real time. When a stage actor must cross from left to right, he is bound by physical laws of space and time. In "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson, a single sentence whisks the reader through changes in space and time without the slightest discomfort:

> The night before the lottery, Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves made up the slips of paper and put them in the box, and it was then taken to the safe of Mr. Summer's coal company and locked up until Mr. Summers was ready to take it to the square next morning.

This sentence contains three different locales and several different points in time. Its context is also revealing; it occurs in the story immediately *after* the description of Mr. Summers stirring the papers inside the box on the morning of the lottery. In cinematic terms, the writer has given us a flashback.

A filmmaker has similar flexibility. In one shot, we see the actor board an airplane; the subsequent shot shows him exiting from his plane at some distant airport. Only within a single shot is the actor bound to real time and place. Through the editing process, time can be compressed or expanded. In *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, we have shots of Peyton Farquhar swept over a waterfall, we see him emerging as a tiny speck on the screen further downstream, and we see him within easy reach of land in what seems to be a shallow bywater of the river. The cinematic time consumed by the sequence can be measured in seconds; real time for the events would be appreciably greater.

The units of a film are frame, shot, scene, and sequence; the elements of fiction are word, sentence, paragraph, and chapter (for the novel). Both the filmmaker's shot and the writer's sentence take on additional meaning from their contexts. In *The Late George Apley*, one sentence reads,

> I called on your Uncle William yesterday, who is very poorly; he asked after you particularly, and surprised me by saying that he liked you.

The full irony stems from the following sentence.

> His mind has been wandering a good deal of late.

Humor by judicious juxtaposition of shots is also available to the filmmaker. In *Modern Times*, Chaplin's opening shot shows a flock of sheep rushing across the screen. In the following shots, groups of workmen hectically run past the camera. The juxtaposition makes an analogy which is pointedly humorous.

Because film depends primarily on images and fiction depends on words, the two modes handle the concept of connotation differently, but both make extensive use of connotative techniques for shaping an audience's responses. In Ambrose Bierce's short story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," Peyton Farquhar is described as assenting to "the frankly villainous dictum that all is fair in love and war." The tonal quality of "frankly villainous" is negative. But it is the voice of the story's narrator, an omniscient voice undoubtedly reflecting Bierce's bias, that makes the judgment. By using this pejorative tone, Bierce has diluted any sympathy his readers might have for the protagonist. In film, techniques of lighting and angles of shooting serve similar edi-torial functions. Thus, in the screen adaptation of "The Unicorn in the

Garden," the wife is always shown in the dark while her husband always appears in the light; this is consistent with the filmmaker's attitudes toward the two characters.

Film and Fiction: The Language of Literary Criticism

Probably the most important similarity between film and fiction is the fact that both are storytelling modes. As a result, the language of literary criticism is readily adapted to the discussion of motion pictures. While the inherent limitations of a solely literary analysis of films must be avoided, the benefits of an existing and useful critical language cannot be ignored. In the following five paragraphs, you will find specific critical observations of short stories and films adapted from those stories. Common literary terms are italicized to show how easily such terms lend themselves to film criticism.

1. In the film adaptation of *The Masque of the Red Death*, many changes in *plot* occur. While Poe devotes only a single paragraph to a description of the Red Death's impact upon the lower classes before turning to Prince Prospero and the nobility, the filmmaker devotes a substantial segment of his film to lower-class victims. We see the plague ravaging the countryside; it destroys farm workers, craftsmen, and members of the clergy before sweeping on to the castle. Probably the most dramatic *plot* change occurs in the personification of Death as a woman. Despite the *plot* alterations, both story and film contain common *themes*. In each, we learn that death is no respecter of rank, and we note the inexorable march of time. While the short story utilizes the *symbol* of an ebony clock as the harbinger of death, the filmmaker uses the *symbol* of a pendulum for the same purpose.

2. In the film adaptation of *Bartleby*, the story's first-person *point of view* changes to a primarily third-person, omniscient camera *point of view*. The greater subjectivity of the story shifts to a more objective *point of view*. As a result, the *characterization* of Melville's lawyer-narrator is modified. It becomes easier for a film viewer to sympathize with the lawyer's difficulty in coping with Bartleby. Both film and short story make use of *symbols* to suggest Bartleby's isolation and alienation. However, the filmmaker neglects a