# 9

# Writing


*Writing is like prostitution. First, you do it for the love of it, then you do it for a few friends, and finally you do it for the money.*

—Moliére, French playwright

**Overview** The written word. Screenwriters: artists, craftspeople, or hired hands? Multiple authorship and the Hollywood studios. Evaluating the writer's contribution. Writer–directors: total control. Written script versus mise en scène: two different language systems. The screenplay. How people talk: levels of usage. Ideology and language. Period dialogue: How did people talk in olden days? *North by Northwest:* the reading version by Ernest Lehman. Figurative comparisons: motifs, symbols, metaphors, allegories, and allusions. Point of view: Who's telling the story? Why? First-person narrators. The omniscient voice. The third person. The objective point of view. Literary adaptations: How close to the original? Loose, faithful, and literal adaptations.

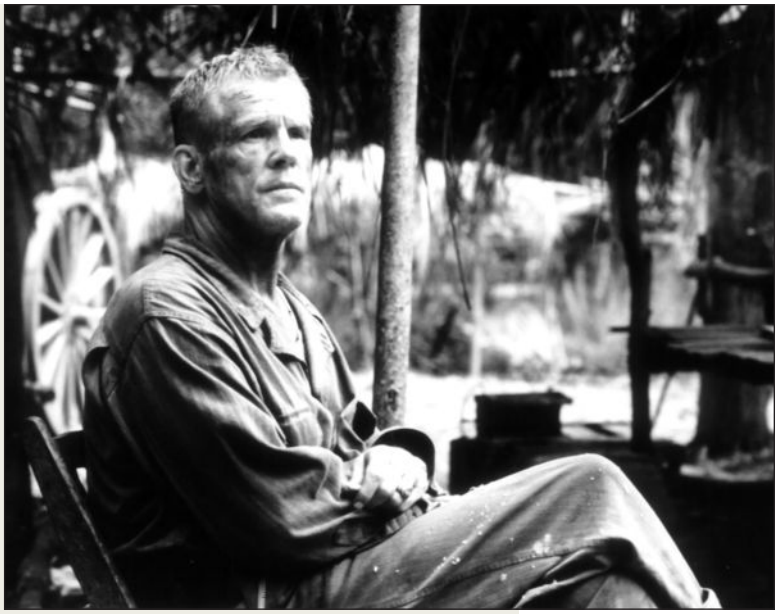
## THE SCREENWRITER

Perhaps more than any of the director's other collaborators, the screenwriter has been brought forward from time to time as the main "author" of a film. After all, writers are generally responsible for the dialogue. They outline most of the action (sometimes in detail). And they often set forth the main theme of a movie. But generalizing about the writer's contribution in the movie-making process is an exercise in futility because the writer's role varies immensely from film to film and from director to director **(9–1).** In the first place, some filmmakers have hardly bothered with **scripts.** Especially in the silent era, improvisation was the rule rather than the exception. Others used only the barest outlines.

Many of the greatest directors have written their own scripts: Cocteau, Eisenstein, Bergman, and Herzog, to name only a few. In the American cinema, there are also many writer–directors: Griffith, Chaplin, Stroheim, Huston, Welles, Mankiewicz, Wilder, Sturges, Woody Allen, and Coppola are among the most famous. The majority of important directors have taken a major hand in writing their scripts, but they bring in other writers to expand on their ideas. Fellini, Truffaut, and Kurosawa all worked in this manner.

The American studio system tended to encourage multiple authorship of scripts. Often, writers had a certain specialty such as dialogue, comedy, construction, atmosphere, and so on. Some writers were best at doctoring weak scripts. Others were good idea people but lacked the skill to execute their ideas. In such collaborative enterprises, the screen credits are not always an accurate reflection of who contributed what to a movie. Furthermore, although many directors such as Hitchcock, Capra, and Lubitsch contributed a great deal to the final shape of their scripts, they rarely included their names in the credits, allowing the official writer to take it all.

For many years, American critics were inclined to believe that art must be solemn—if not actually dull—to be respectable. Even in the heyday of the Hollywood studio system, a handful of intellectual writers enjoyed tremendous prestige because their scripts were filled with fine speeches dealing with Justice, Brotherhood, and Democracy. Not that these values aren't important. But to be



**9–1a.** ***The Thin Red Line*** **(U.S.A., 1998),** *with Nick Nolte, written and directed by Terrence Malick.*
Successful novelists rarely make good screenwriters because they tend to want the language to carry most of the meaning. But movies communicate primarily through images, and too many words can clutter the eloquence of the visuals. James Jones's famous World War II novel, *The Thin Red Line,* serves almost as an inspiration—rather than a literal source—for Terrence Malick's elliptical, poetic screenplay. The novel emphasizes soldiers in battle and among comrades, but the film is more concerned with philosophical ideas, a melancholy meditation on nature's exquisite beauty and how man defiles it. Like Malick's other movies, this film also explores the mythic idea of a lost paradise and man's corrupt nature, his original sin. *(Twentieth Century Fox)*

**9–1b.** ***A Home at the End of the World*** **(U.S.A., 2004),** *with Robin Wright Penn and Colin Farrell, directed by Michael Mayer.*
On the other hand, some novelists slip into the screenwriter's role with ease. Pulitzer Prize–winning author Michael Cunningham wrote the script to this film, based on his own novel. It's a model of intelligent adaptation, allowing its actors considerable creativity in fleshing out their roles. Both the book and the movie explore a quintessentialy American theme—the need to build alternative social structures to replace the traditional (and often dysfunctional) family unit. *(Warner Independent Pictures)*

**9–2. *Howards End* (Britain, 1992),** *with Sam West and Helena Bonham-Carter, directed by James Ivory.*
Director James Ivory and writer Ruth Prawer Jhabvala have been making movies together for over thirty years. The best of them are classy adaptations of prestigious literary masterpieces, like E. M. Forster's *A Room With a View* and Henry James's difficult *The Europeans* and *The Bostonians.* Jhabvala is a respected author in her own right, but her literate screenplays are her main claim to fame, and deservedly so. Nowhere is her artistry more apparent than in this sensitive adaptation of Forster's great novel, *Howards End.* The problem with filming literary masterpieces is that they tend to come off as stilted and dead from the neck down. Jhabvala's screenplay is beautifully written, in addition to being faithful to the original, funny, and emotionally involving. *(Sony Pictures)*

effective artistically, ideas must be dramatized with tact and honesty, not parceled out to the characters like high-sounding speeches on a patriotic holiday. For example, in the novel *The Grapes of Wrath,* John Steinbeck frequently praises the toughness of the Joad family. They have been thrown off their farm during the Great Depression and are forced to seek a new life in California, where conditions are even worse for them.

In John Ford's movie version, there is no narrator, so the characters must speak for themselves. Nunnally Johnson's screenplay is not devoid of ideas, but the ideas are expressed in the words of the *characters.* A good example is Ma Joad's comments to her husband in the final scene of the movie. They are in their shabby truck, driving to a new job—twenty days as fruit pickers. Pa Joad (Russell Simpson) admits to his wife (Jane Darwell) that for a while he thought the family was finished. She answers, "I know. That's what makes us tough. Rich

**9–3. *Shoeshine* (Italy, 1946),** *with Rinaldo Smordoni and Franco Interlenghi, written by Cesare Zavattini, directed by Vittorio De Sica.*
Zavattini is the most famous screenwriter of the Italian cinema, and one of its most important theorists. (See the section on **neorealism** in Chapter 11.) His best work was done in collaboration with De Sica, including such important works as *Shoeshine, Bicycle Thief, Miracle in Milan, Umberto D, Two Women,* and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis.* Both Zavattini and De Sica were strongly humanistic, Zavattini from a Marxist perspective, De Sica from a Christian orientation. Like François Truffaut and Steven Spielberg, De Sica was a great director of children, but his sympathies extended to all people on the fringes: "My films are a struggle against the absence of human solidarity," he explained, "against the indifference of society towards suffering. They are a word in favor of the poor and the unhappy." *(Museum of Modern Art)*

fellas come up an' they die, an' their kids ain't no good, an' they die out. But we keep a-comin'. We're the people that live. They can't wipe us out. They can't lick us. We'll go on forever Pa, 'cause we're the people." (Quoted from Johnson's script in *Twenty Best Film Plays,* Vol. I, eds. John Gassner and Dudley Nichols; New York: Garland Publishing, 1977.) The final image of the film follows: a thrilling extreme long shot, in which the fragile Joad vehicle merges imperceptibly with a procession of other dilapidated trucks and autos, forming an unbroken river of traffic—Ford's visual tribute to the courage and resilience of the human spirit.

Generally speaking, students, artists, and intellectuals are the individuals most likely to discuss ideas and abstractions without a sense of self-consciousness. To be convincing, eloquent language must be dramatically probable. We must believe that the words aren't just the writer's preachments dressed up as dialogue.

But there are always exceptions. *Casablanca,* for example, features a traditional love triangle, in which Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) is torn between two men—her husband, Victor Laszlo (Paul Henried), a Resistance leader whom she deeply respects and admires, and Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), the man she loves and will always love. Throughout the movie, Rick's comments are generally terse, sardonic, and hard-boiled. He's not a man given to making pretty


**9–4a.** ***Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*** **(Britain, 2005),** *directed by Nick Park and Steve Box.* *(DreamWorks Pictures)*

If a comedy makes us laugh, then it has succeeded, at least in its primary aim. But there are different ways to make us laugh, some subtle and sophisticated, like the Wallace & Gromit claymation films of Nick Park. Others are crude and raunchy, like the gross-out comedies of the Farrelly brothers. Park's sensibility is rooted in character, and most of the comedy results from the witty movie references. As the director points out: "You know, the Wallace & Gromit movies have always referenced other film genres, and we thought a great genre to borrow from would be the classic Universal horror movies. But, in our movie, instead of a werewolf, we have a Were-Rabbit, and instead of devouring flesh and blood—in Wallace & Gromit's world, it's got to be something more absurd—we made it vegetables. It's a vegetable-eating monster so, in effect, "The Curse of the Were-Rabbit" became the world's first vegetarian horror movie." The Farrelly boys are more joke-oriented, the grosser the better. Examples: racist gags, anti-jock jokes, fart jokes, yelping dog gags, anything involving genitals, especially male genitals that are attacked, whacked, or otherwise abused, cruel gags about deformities, jokes about old or fat people, and anything involving bodily fluids. In short, their style of comedy revels in all subjects that are likely to shock or disgust respec-table citizens. Their comedy is also laugh-out-loud funny, usually. Gross and funny. Sometimes *really* gross.

**9–4b.** ***There's Something About Mary*** **(U.S.A., 1998),** *with Cameron Diaz, written and directed by Peter and Bobby Farrelly.* *(Twentieth Century Fox)*

speeches. But in the airport scene at the end of the film **(9–5b),** his remarks to the woman he loves—and must give up—are overtly ideological:

> Inside of us we both know you belong to Victor. You're part of his work, the thing that keeps him going. If that plane leaves the ground and you're not with him, you'll regret it. . . . Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life. . . . Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you'll understand that. Here's looking at you, kid. (Quoted from *Casablanca Script and Legend,* script by Julius and Philip Epstein and Howard Koch; Woodstock, N.Y.: The Overlook Press, 1973.)

Some filmmakers are at their best with talky scripts—provided it's scintillating talk, as in the best movies of Wertmüller, Bergman, and Woody Allen. The French, Swedish, and British cinemas are also exceptionally literate. Among the important writers who have written for the screen in Britain are George Bernard Shaw, Graham Greene, Alan Sillitoe, John Osborne, Harold Pinter, David Storey, and Hanif Kureishi.

Despite the enormous importance that the script can play in a sound film, some directors scoff at the notion that a writer could be the dominant artist in the cinema. Antonioni once remarked that Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* was a rather ordinary crime thriller—the genius of the novel lies in *how* it's told, not in the subject matter per se. Certainly, the large number of excellent movies based on routine or even mediocre books seems to bear out such a view.

Movie scripts seldom make for interesting reading, precisely because they are like blueprints of the finished product. Unlike a play, which usually can be read with pleasure, too much is missing in a screenplay. Even highly detailed scripts seldom offer us a sense of a film's **mise en scène,** one of the principal methods of expression at the director's disposal. With characteristic wit, Andrew Sarris has pointed out how the director's choice of shot—or the way in which the action is photographed—is the crucial element in most films:

> The choice between a close-up and a long-shot, for example, may quite often transcend the plot. If the story of Little Red Riding Hood is told with the Wolf in close-up and Little Red Riding Hood in long-shot, the director is concerned primarily with the emotional problems of a wolf with a compulsion to eat little girls. If Little Red Riding Hood is in close-up and the Wolf in long-shot, the emphasis is shifted to the emotional problems of vestigial virginity in a wicked world. Thus, two different stories are being told with the same basic anecdotal material. What is at stake in the two versions of Little Red Riding Hood are two contrasting directorial attitudes toward life. One director identifies more with the Wolf—the male, the compulsive, the corrupted, even evil itself. The second director identifies with the little

**9–5a.** ***Twentieth Century*** **(U.S.A., 1934),** *with John Barrymore and Carole Lombard, directed by Howard Hawks.* *(Columbia Pictures)*

During the big studio era in Hollywood, most film scripts were written by committees rather than a single author. For the most part, these collaborative scripts were like patchwork quilts—some romance for the ladies, some action for the guys, a touch of comedy for the kids. Nonetheless, in some cases, collaborative writing produced excellent results, like *Twentieth Century* and *Casablanca*.

The legendary wit and ex-newspaperman Ben Hecht was perhaps the most admired screenwriter of his era. His specialty was comedy—the more outrageous, the better. *Twentieth Century* was adapted from his stage play (co-written by Charles MacArthur), with additional touches by director Hawks. Hecht delighted in satirizing American hick values and conventional morality, which he thought was as hypocritical as it was boring.

*Casablanca* was written by Philip and Julius Epstein and Howard Koch, three of Warner Brothers' ace writers. They agonized about how to end the movie until the final moment, when they decided that the Bogart character had to give up the woman he loves. Unwittingly, the writers struck a responsive public nerve: *Casablanca* was released during the darkest days of World War II, when Americans and their allies were being called on to make personal sacrifices for a higher cause. One critic has suggested that the movie is not a portrait of the way we were, but of the way we wanted to be.

**9–5b.** ***Casablanca*** **(U.S.A., 1942),** *with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, directed by Michael Curtiz.* *(Warner Bros.)*

**9–6a. *Best in Show* (U.S.A., 2000),** *with Christopher Guest and friend, directed by Guest.* In modern times too, collaborative authorship is far from rare. Though the screenplay to this movie is officially credited to Guest and Eugene Levy, in actuality the film was improvised by Guest's friends, who, like Guest and Levy, happen to be among the funniest people in movies, including Catherine O'Hara, Michael McKean, Parker Posey, and Fred Willard. The movie has been described as a "mockumentary," about a group of pampered canines and their eccentric owners entering a prestigious dog show. Guest employed this Grand Hotel formula in his other ensemble comedies as well, including *Waiting for Guffman* and *A Mighty Wind.* *(Castle Rock Entertainment/Warner Bros.)*

**9–6b. *jackass the movie* (U.S.A., 2002),** *directed by Jeff Tremaine.* A spinoff of an MTV series, *jackass the movie* was not really written so much as thrown together by a bunch of guys who apparently all graduated from the Farrelly Brothers School of Dramatic Art. They cheerfully admitted that they were drunk or stoned or both when carrying out their outrageous stunts, many of which involved subjecting their genitals to catastrophic peril. Director Jeff Tremaine claimed that the "script" ideas came from anyone with a suitably sick and twisted mind. After an MTV executive viewed the finished film, he muttered, "We're all going to hell." *(Paramount Pictures/ MTV Networks)*

girl—the innocence, the illusion, the ideal and hope of the race. Needless to say, few critics bother to make any distinction, proving perhaps that direction as creation is still only dimly understood. (Quoted from "The Fall and Rise of the Film Director," in *Interviews with Film Directors;* New York: Avon Books, 1967.)

## THE SCREENPLAY

A film script is rarely an autonomous literary product, otherwise they would be published with greater frequency. The screenplays of a few prestigious filmmakers, like Woody Allen, Ingmar Bergman, and Federico Fellini, have reached print. But even these are merely linguistic approximations of the films themselves. Perhaps the worst kind of literary by-products of movies are "novelizations"—commissioned novel versions of popular films that are usually written by hired hacks to cash in on a movie's box-office popularity.

Screenplays are often modified by the actors who play the characters. This is especially true in scripts written for personality **stars.** Naturally, their roles will usually include the qualities that make the star popular. For example, screenwriters who wrote for Gary Cooper knew that he was at his best when he said the least. In our own time, Clint Eastwood is famous for his terse one-liners: "Go ahead—make my day." Eastwood's characters, like Cooper's, are usually suspicious of people who are smooth-talkers.

On the other hand, a good talker is a joy to hear. Joseph L. Mankiewicz was one of the most admired writer–directors of the Hollywood big-studio era. His finest work, *All About Eve* **(7–5b),** features several brilliantly written roles. One of the best is the acid-tongued theater critic, Addison Dewitt, played with bitchy sang-froid by George Sanders. Late in the movie, Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter), a young actress who has lied, cheated, and slept her way to the top, tries to brush off Dewitt, her current companion, because he's no longer useful to her. Dewitt sees right through her and has no intention of playing her fool. She huffily walks to the door and opens it. "You're too short for that gesture," he dryly observes. "Besides, it went out with Mrs. Fisk." He then proceeds to destroy her pretentions by exposing all of her lies. "Your name is not Eve Harrington. It is Gertrude Slecynski," he begins. "It is true that your parents were poor. They still are. And they would like to know how you are—and where. They haven't heard from you for three years."

Eve finally collapses as he finishes his withering diatribe: "That I should want you at all suddenly strikes me as the height of improbability. That, in itself, is probably the reason. You're an improbable person, Eve, and so am I. We have that in common. Also a contempt for humanity, an inability to love or be loved, insatiable ambition—and talent. We deserve each other." (Quoted from *More About All About Eve;* New York: Bantam, 1974; which contains Mankiewicz's script and a lengthy interview.)

**9–7a. *Pride* & *Prejudice* (Britain, 2005),** *with Keira Knightly and Matthew Macfadyen, directed by Joe Wright.*
*(Focus Features)*

**9–7b. *Chasing Amy* (U.S.A., 1997),** *with Ben Affleck and Joey Lauren Adams, written and directed by Kevin Smith.*
*(Miramax Films)*

Apples and oranges. Judging the merits of these two excellent screenplays requires a certain literary flexibility. Each is skillful, but in its own way. Deborah Moggach's adaptation of Jane Austen's most famous novel preserves much of the book's 1813 literary style. To modern ears, the dialogue sounds rather formal and polite. Stylized period dialogue requires first-rate performers like these, actors who can infuse the language with a sense of suppressed passions. The screenplay of *Chasing Amy* is profuse with slang, jive, and four-letter words galore. These people love to talk and talk and talk. The dialogue is funny, sexy, filled with surprises. A revisionist romantic comedy, the story centers on two comic book artists (pictured) and their odd relationship. She's a lesbian. He falls in love with her anyway. But surprise: She also falls in love with him. Until he screws up. . . . Critic Stephen Farber noted: "The scene in which Alyssa explains to Holden that she fell in love with him not because she was programmed by society but because she chose him as an individual is one of the most stirring testaments to the mystery of love that the movies have ever offered." Both screenplays are strongly "literary" in the sense that there is a genuine sense of pleasure in demonstrating the intellectual precision, wit, and emotional richness of the English language. One is stylistically complex, feminine, and imbued with idealism; the other is raunchy, quicksilver funny, and emotionally powerful.

**9–8a.** ***My Beautiful Laundrette*** **(Britain, 1985),** *with Gordon Warnecke and Daniel Day-Lewis, written by Hanif Kureishi, directed by Stephen Frears.*
One of Britain's most outspoken writers (plays, fiction, and autobiography as well as screenplays), Hanif Kureishi enjoys shocking the staid literary establishment. His themes characteristically revolve around conflicts between cultures, races, classes, and sexes. Most of his characters are funny as well as bright. Despite being from different classes and ethnic backgrounds, the two leading characters in this film (pictured) are business partners and lovers. They're totally unapologetic about their sexuality, which is not treated as a big deal. Kureishi, who is half English and half Pakistani, is especially interested in minorities, people outside the English mainstream, which is male, white, and heterosexual. "Gay men and black men have been excluded from history," Kureishi has said. "They're trying to understand themselves. Like women, black people and gay people have been marginalized in society, lacking in power, ridiculed." *(Orion Pictures)*

**9–8b.** ***Tokyo Story*** **(Japan, 1953),** *directed by Yasujiru Ozu.*
Ozu's screenplays, usually written in collaboration with his longtime writing partner, Kogo Noda, are lean and unadorned. They were frequently published, and were appreciated as realistic literature. The Japanese are among the politest people in the world. It's considered rude to really speak your mind, so people often communicate indirectly, by hinting rather than stating outright what they want. The full meaning of the dialogue, then, remains largely unspoken—between the lines—even among family members. To Western ears such dialogue might seem rather ordinary, even banal. But to those sensitive to the nuances of Japanese culture, the writing is understated, eliptical, charged with suppressed emotion. Fearful of offending or appearing selfish—the ultimate social sin in Japanese society—Ozu's characters are generally tactful, oblique in their remarks. What's left unsaid is just as important as what is said. *(New Yorker Films)*

**9–9a. *Sylvia* (Britain, 2003),** *with Gwyneth Paltrow, directed by Christine Jeffs.*
One of the problems of dealing with famous literary figures, like Sylvia Plath, the great American poet of the 1950s and 1960s, is that writing is usually a solitary activity, and hence not very cinematic or visually compelling. In this case, however, the drama focuses on the mentally unstable heroine (Paltrow) and her tense, troubled relationship with her husband, British poet Ted Hughes. At this time, he was the more famous writer, she a struggling novice. Plath eventually committed suicide, leaving behind two small children. *(Focus Features)*


**9–9b. *Some Like It Hot* (U.S.A., 1959),** *with Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis, screenplay by Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond, directed by Wilder.*
Billy Wilder was one of the most respected writer–directors of the post–World War II era. He was regarded as a master of the well-made scenario: Each detail has a precise interlocking function. "In a good script, *everything* is necessary or it ain't good," he insisted. "And if you take out one piece, you better replace it with a different piece, or you got trouble." He was able to mine comedy from the unlikeliest sources, like transvestism. Forced to disguise themselves as women while on the lam from the mob, the musician heroes of this film join an all-girl band to escape detection. Most of the gags revolve around the incongruity of two virile men trying to cope with the agony of womanhood. Lemmon, for example, keeps losing one of his chests. In a recent critics' poll of the greatest American film comedies, *Some Like It Hot* placed first. *(United Artists)*

Most of the characters in *All About Eve* are well educated and literate. Those in *On the Waterfront,* which was written by Budd Schulberg, are working-class longshoremen. Such characters usually attempt to conceal their emotions behind a macho façade. But in scenes of intense emotions, the words, though simple, are powerful. The famous taxi scene between the Malloy brothers, Charley (Rod Steiger) and Terry (Marlon Brando), is a good example. Charley, the older and shrewder of the two, once convinced his brother to throw an important boxing match. Terry is no longer a boxer, but a stooge for the same union racketeer that Charley works for, Johnny Friendly. Charley tries to blame Terry's manager for what happened. Angry, Terry answers:

> It wasn't him! It was you, Charley. You and Johnny. Like the night the two of youse come in the dressing room and says, 'Kid, this ain't your night—we're going for the price on Wilson.' *It ain't my night.* I'd of taken Wilson apart that night! I was ready—remember the early rounds throwing them combinations. So what happens—This bum Wilson he gets the title shot—outdoors in the ball park!—and what do I get—a couple of bucks and a one-way ticket to Palookaville. It was you, Charley. You was my brother. You should of looked out for me. Instead of making me take them dives for the short-end money. . . . I could've been a contender. I could've had class and been somebody. Real class. Instead of a bum, let's face it, which is what I am. It was you, Charley. (Quoted from *On the Waterfront: A Screenplay;* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980.)

Good dialogue is often the result of having a good ear—for catching the correct rhythms of speech, the right choice of words, the length of people's sentences, the jargon, slang, or swearing people use. The foulmouthed characters in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* **(5–35)** speak in torrents of four-letter words, the linguistic equivalent of the violence of their lives. In contexts such as these, polite or laundered prose would constitute bad writing.

One of the pleasures of Nicholas Meyer's screenplay (adapted from his own novel) of *The Seven Per-Cent Solution* is the way he captures the elegantly literary nineteenth-century prose style of his protagonist, Sherlock Holmes. Here's Holmes when he's first tricked into meeting a foreign doctor at the physician's home in Vienna:

> Beyond the fact that you are a brilliant Jewish physician who was born in Hungary and studied for a time in Paris, and that some radical theories of yours have alienated the respectable medical community so that you have severed your connections with various hospitals and branches of the medical fraternity—beyond this, I can deduce little. You are married, with a child of five; you enjoy Shakespeare and possess a sense of honor. (Quoted from *Film Scenes for Actors,* ed. Joshua Karton; New York: Bantam Books, 1983.)

The doctor turns out to be none other than Sigmund Freud. Naturally, he's astonished that Holmes can deduce so much upon merely entering a room.

**9–10.** ***Brokeback Mountain*** **(U.S.A., 2005),** *with Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger, directed by Ang Lee.*

A movie's central theme is often first articulated by its writer, or, as is the case with this film, its various writers. Originally appearing as a short story in *The New Yorker,* America's most prestigious literary publication, "Brokeback Mountain" was written by Annie Proulx, a Pulitzer Prize–winning author. The story was optioned by another Pulitzer Prize winner, Larry McMurtry (author of *The Last Picture Show* and *Lonesome Dove,* among other works) and his writing partner, Diana Ossana. She was also one of the film's producers. They expanded the original material by adding scenes and new characters, without losing the stark, understated poetry of the short story.

McMurtry and Ossana hired Taiwan-born, American-trained filmmaker Ang Lee to direct because they believed he would be sensitive to the movie's outsider themes. "One of the things Ang brings to all of his projects is his deep sense of being a double exile, an outsider's outsider," McMurtry observed. "It allows him to connect with other exiles and outsiders."

The story is about two young westerners—one a ranch hand (Ledger), the other an aspiring rodeo rider (Gyllenhaal). A drunken night of revelry morphs into a passionate sexual encounter, which soon becomes a furtive love affair in the isolated, pristine mountains of Wyoming in 1963. Over the next 20 years, they marry women and father children, but the men's love affair continues sporadically, urgently, secretly. The toxic homophobia of their culture ultimately destroys the relationship and the story ends on a note of poignant loss, missed opportunities, and wasted lives.

To Ang Lee, the material was a dramatic example of two conflicting American worldviews, as embodied by his actors:

> One is the tough, Western, macho conservative character, played by Heath. The elegiac mood that you find in literature, that melancholy, he anchors that. Jake functions as the romantic—dreamy, adventurous, and more brave in love. They are the opposite of each other and the complement of each other. *(Focus Features)*

Most screenplays are businesslike and practical. Because they are not meant for publication, the action sequences are usually described simply, with no literary flourishes. There are a few exceptions to this rule, however. One of them is John Osborne's polished screenplay of *Tom Jones,* based on the eighteenth-century English novel by Henry Fielding. The fox hunting scene in the movie is magnificently effective, thanks to Tony Richardson's skillful direction. But Richardson obviously got his inspiration from Osborne's screenplay:

> The hunt is no pretty Christmas calendar affair but a thumping dangerous vicious business, in which everyone takes part so wholeheartedly that it seems to express all in the raw, wild vitality that is so near to the surface of their lives. It is passionate and violent. Squire Western howls dementedly as he flogs his horse over the muddy earth. The curate kicks his beefy heels in the air, bellowing with blood and pleasure. Big, ugly, unlovable dogs tear at the earth. Tom reels and roars on his horse, his face ruddy and damp, almost insensible with the lust and the cry and the gallop, with the hot quarry of flesh in the crisp air, the blood and flesh of men, the blood and fur of animals. Everyone is caught up in the bloody fever. (Quoted from *Tom Jones, A Film Script,* by John Osborne; New York: Grove Press, 1964.)

## *NORTH BY NORTHWEST:* READING VERSION

Ernest Lehman's screenplay for Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* has considerable fluidity as a piece of writing. Its excellence consists not of its literary distinction so much as its clearly defined actions, providing the director with the raw materials for the **shots** of the movie. The following is a lengthy excerpt from the screenplay. How Hitchcock translated this literary description into the individual sequence of shots in the movie can be seen in Chapter 4, "Editing."

Like many of Hitchcock's movies, *North by Northwest* revolves around the wrong-man theme. The protagonist is an innocent man accused of and persecuted for a crime he didn't commit. In this film, Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant), a glib but charming advertising executive, is accidentally mistaken for a government agent named Kaplan. Thornhill is abducted by enemy agents, almost murdered by them, then fatefully implicated in the murder of a U.N. diplomat. Pursued by both the police and the enemy agents, he flees to Chicago in desperation, hoping to discover the real Kaplan, who presumably will establish Thornhill's innocence. When he arrives in Chicago, he is told that Kaplan will meet him alone at a designated location. The following excerpt relates what then takes place.

> ***Helicopter Shot—Exterior, Highway 41—Afternoon***
>
> WE START CLOSE on a Greyhound bus, SHOOTING DOWN on it and TRAVELING ALONG with it as it speeds in an easterly direction at seventy

mph. Gradually, CAMERA DRAWS AWAY from the bus, going higher but never losing sight of the vehicle, which recedes into the distance below and becomes a toylike object on an endless ribbon of deserted highway that stretches across miles of flat prairie. Now the bus is slowing down. It is nearing a junction where a small dirt road coming from nowhere crosses the highway and continues on to nowhere. The bus stops. A man gets out. It is THORNHILL. But to us he is only a tiny figure. The bus starts away, moves on out of sight. And now THORNHILL stands alone beside the road—a tiny figure in the middle of nowhere.

***On the Ground—with Thornhill—(Master Scene)***

He glances about, studying his surroundings. The terrain is flat and treeless, even more desolate from this vantage point than it seemed from the air. Here and there patches of low-growing farm crops add some contour to the land. A hot sun beats down. UTTER SILENCE hangs heavily in the air, THORNHILL glances at his wristwatch. It is three twenty-five.

In the distance, the FAINT HUM of a MOTOR VEHICLE is HEARD. THORNHILL looks off to the west. The HUM GROWS LOUDER as the car draws nearer. THORNHILL steps closer to the edge of the highway. A black sedan looms up, traveling at high speed. For a moment we are not sure it is not hurtling right at THORNHILL. And then it zooms past him, recedes into the distance, becoming a FAINT HUM, a tiny speck, and then SILENCE again.

THORNHILL takes out a handkerchief, mops his face. He is beginning to sweat now. It could be from nervousness, as well as the heat. Another FAINT HUM, coming from the east, GROWING LOUDER as he glances off and sees another distant speck becoming a speeding car, this one a closed convertible. Again, anticipation on THORNHILL's face. Again, the vague uneasiness of indefinable danger approaching at high speed. And again, ZOOM—a cloud of dust—a car receding into the distance—A FAINT HUM—and SILENCE.

His lips tighten. He glances at his watch again. He steps out into the middle of the highway, looks first in one direction, then the other. Nothing in sight. He loosens his tie, opens his shirt collar, looks up at the sun. Behind him, in the distance, another vehicle is HEARD approaching. He turns, looks off to the west. This one is a huge transcontinental moving van, ROARING TOWARD HIM at high speed. With quick apprehension he moves off the highway to the dusty side of the road as the van thunders past and disappears. Its FADING SOUND is replaced with a NEW SOUND, the CHUGGING of an OLD FLIVVER.

THORNHILL looks off in the direction of the approaching SOUND, sees a flivver nearing the highway from the intersecting dirt road. When the car reaches the highway, it comes to a stop. A middle-aged woman is behind the wheel. Her passenger is a nondescript MAN of about fifty. He

could certainly be a farmer. He gets out of the car. It makes a U-turn and drives off in the direction from which it came. THORNHILL watches the MAN and takes up a position across the highway from him. The MAN glances at THORNHILL without visible interest, then looks off up the highway toward the east as though waiting for something to come along.

THORNHILL stares at the MAN, wondering if this is George Kaplan.

The MAN looks idly across the highway at THORNHILL, his face expressionless.

THORNHILL wipes his face with his handkerchief, never taking his eyes off the MAN across the highway. The FAINT SOUND of an APPROACHING PLANE has gradually come up over the scene. As the SOUND GROWS LOUDER, THORNHILL looks up to his left and sees a low-flying biplane approach from the northwest. He watches it with mounting interest as it heads straight for the spot where he and the stranger face each other across the highway. Suddenly it is upon them, only a hundred feet above the ground, and then, like a giant bird, as THORNHILL turns with the plane's passage, it flies over them, and continues on. THORNHILL stares after the plane, his back to the highway. When the plane has gone several hundred yards beyond the highway, it loses altitude, levels off only a few feet above the ground and begins to fly back and forth in straight lines parallel to the highway, letting loose a trail of powdered dust from beneath the fuselage as it goes. Any farmer would recognize the operation as simple crop-dusting.

THORNHILL looks across the highway, sees that the stranger is watching the plane with idle interest. THORNHILL's lips set with determination. He crosses over and goes up to the MAN.

THORNHILL: Hot day.
MAN: Seen worse.
THORNHILL: Are you . . . uh . . . by any chance supposed to be meeting someone here?
MAN (still watching the plane): Waitin' for the bus. Due any minute.
THORNHILL: Oh . . .
MAN (idly): Some of them crop-duster pilots get rich, if they live long enough . . .
THORNHILL: Then your name isn't . . . Kaplan.
MAN (glances at him): Can't say it is, 'cause it ain't. (He looks off up the highway). Well—here she comes, right on time.
THORNHILL: looks off to the east, sees a Greyhound bus approaching.
The MAN peers off at the plane again, and frowns.
MAN: That's funny.
THORNHILL: What?
MAN: That plane's dustin' crops where there ain't no crops.

THORNHILL looks across at the droning plane with growing suspicion as the stranger steps out onto the highway and flags the bus to a stop.

**9–11. *North by Northwest* (U.S.A., 1959),** *with Cary Grant, screenplay by Ernest Lehman, directed by Alfred Hitchcock.*
Much of the success of this movie is due to Grant's engaging performance as Roger O. Thornhill (the "O" stands for nothing), who's a little too slick for his own good. Only an actor of Grant's great skill could handle the comedy of his role without sacrificing credibility as a person who is being put through a living hell. *(MGM)*

THORNHILL turns toward the stranger as though to say something to him. But it is too late. The man has boarded the bus, its doors are closing, and it is pulling away. THORNHILL is alone again.

Almost immediately, he HEARS THE PLANE ENGINE BEING GUNNED TO A HIGHER SPEED. He glances off sharply, sees the plane veering off its parallel course and heading toward him. He stands there wide-eyed, rooted to the spot. The plane roars on, a few feet off the ground. There are two men in the twin cockpits, goggled, unrecognizable, menacing. He yells out to them, but his voice is lost in the NOISE OF THE PLANE. In a moment it will be upon him and decapitate him. Desperately he drops to the ground and presses himself flat as the plane zooms over him with a great noise, almost combing his hair with a landing wheel.

THORNHILL scrambles to his feet, sees the plane banking and turning. He looks about wildly, sees a telephone pole and dashes for it as the plane comes at him again. He ducks behind the pole. The plane heads straight for him, veers to the right at the last moment. We HEAR two sharp CRACKS of GUNFIRE mixed with the SOUND of the ENGINE, as two bullets slam into the pole just above THORNHILL's head.

THORNHILL reacts to this new peril, sees the plane banking for another run at him. A car is speeding along the highway from the west. THORNHILL dashes out onto the road, tries to flag the car down but the driver ignores him. He dives into a ditch and rolls away as another series of SHOTS are HEARD and bullets rake the ground that he has just occupied.

He gets to his feet, looks about, sees a cornfield about fifty yards from the highway, glances up at the plane making its turn, and decides to make a dash for the cover of the tall-growing corn.

SHOOTING DOWN FROM A HELICOPTER about one hundred feet above the ground, WE SEE THORNHILL running toward the cornfield and the plane in pursuit.

SHOOTING FROM WITHIN THE CORNFIELD, WE SEE THORNHILL come crashing in, scuttling to the right and lying flat and motionless as WE HEAR THE PLANE ZOOM OVER HIM WITH A BURST OF GUNFIRE and bullets rip into the corn, but at a safe distance from THORNHILL. He raises his head cautiously, gasping for breath, as he HEARS THE PLANE MOVE OFF AND INTO ITS TURN.

SHOOTING DOWN FROM THE HELICOPTER, we see the plane leveling off and starting a run over the cornfield, which betrays no sign of the

**9–12.** ***The Shape of Things*** **(U.S,A., 2003),** *with Paul Rudd, Rachel Weisz, Gretchen Mol, and Frederick Weller, written and directed by Neil LaBute.*
Neil LaBute is a prominent stage dramatist as well as a strongly literary filmmaker. This movie, a faithful adaptation of his own stage play, features the same cast as the New York theater production. Like most of LaBute's works, the tone is pessimistic about human nature, a harsh vision of the perverse human heart. *(Focus Features)*

hidden THORNHILL. Skimming over the top of the cornstalks, the plane gives forth no burst of gunfire now. Instead, it lets loose thick clouds of poisonous dust, which settle down into the corn.

WITHIN THE CORNFIELD, THORNHILL, still lying flat, begins to gasp and choke as the poisonous dust envelops him. Tears stream from his eyes but he does not dare move as he HEARS THE PLANE COMING OVER THE FIELD AGAIN. When the plane zooms by and another cloud of dust hits him, he jumps to his feet and crashes out into the open, half blinded and gasping for breath. Far off down the highway to the right, he SEES a huge Diesel gasoline-tanker approaching. He starts running toward the highway to intercept it.

SHOOTING FROM THE HELICOPTER, WE SEE THORNHILL dashing for the highway, the plane leveling off for another run at him, and the Diesel tanker speeding closer.

SHOOTING ACROSS THE HIGHWAY, WE SEE THORNHILL running and stumbling TOWARD CAMERA, the plane closing in between him, and the Diesel tanker approaching from the left. He dashes out into the middle of the highway and waves his arms wildly.

The Diesel tanker THUNDERS down the highway toward THORNHILL, KLAXON BLASTING impatiently.

The plane speeds relentlessly toward THORNHILL from the field bordering the highway.

THORNHILL stands alone and helpless in the middle of the highway, waving his arms. The plane draws closer. The tanker is almost upon him. It isn't going to stop. He can HEAR THE KLAXON BLASTING him out of the way. There is nothing he can do. The plane has caught up with him. The tanker won't stop. It's GOT to stop. He hurls himself to the pavement directly in its path. There is A SCREAM OF BRAKES and SKIDDING TIRES, THE ROAR OF THE PLANE ENGINE, and then a tremendous BOOM as the Diesel truck grinds to a stop inches from Thornhill's body just as the plane, hopelessly committed and caught unprepared by the sudden stop, slams into the traveling gasoline tanker and plane and gasoline explode into a great sheet of flame.

In the next few moments, all is confusion. THORNHILL, unhurt, rolls out from under the wheels of the Diesel truck. The drivers clamber out of the front seat and drop to the highway. Black clouds of smoke billow up from the funeral pyre of the plane and its cremated occupants. We recognize the flaming body of one of the men in the plane. It is LIGHT, one of THORNHILL's original abductors. An elderly open pickup truck with a second-hand refrigerator standing in it, which has been approaching from the east, pulls up at the side of the road. Its driver, a FARMER, jumps out and hurries toward the wreckage.

FARMER: What happened? What happened?

The Diesel truck drivers are too dazed to answer. Flames and smoke drive them all back. THORNHILL, unnoticed, heads toward the

unoccupied pickup truck. Another car comes up from the west, stops, and its driver runs toward the other men. They stare, transfixed, at the holocaust. Suddenly, from behind them, they HEAR THE PICKUP TRUCK's motor starting. The FARMER who owns the truck turns, and is startled to see his truck being driven away by an utter stranger.

FARMER: Hey!

He runs after the truck. But the stranger—who is THORNHILL—steps harder on the accelerator and speeds off in the direction of Chicago.

## FIGURATIVE COMPARISONS

In his essay "La Caméra-Stylo," Alexandre Astruc observed that one of the traditional problems of film has been its difficulty in expressing thought and ideas. The invention of sound, of course, was an enormous advantage to filmmakers,

**9–13.** ***Day for Night*** **(France, 1973),** *with François Truffaut (leather jacket), directed by Truffaut.* Film titles are chosen with great deliberation because they usually embody the central concept behind a movie. Film titles, in short, are symbolic. The original-language title of this film is *La Nuit Américaine,* "The American Night." It reflects Truffaut's great love for American culture, especially its cinema, and deals with the making of an "old-fashioned" kind of movie—the kind they made in Hollywood in the 1940s. (Truffaut even includes a tender homage to *Citizen Kane.*) "La nuit américaine" is also what the French call the day-for-night filter, which converts sunlit scenes into nighttime scenes. The filter transforms reality—makes it magical. For Truffaut, cinema is magic. *(Warner Bros.)*

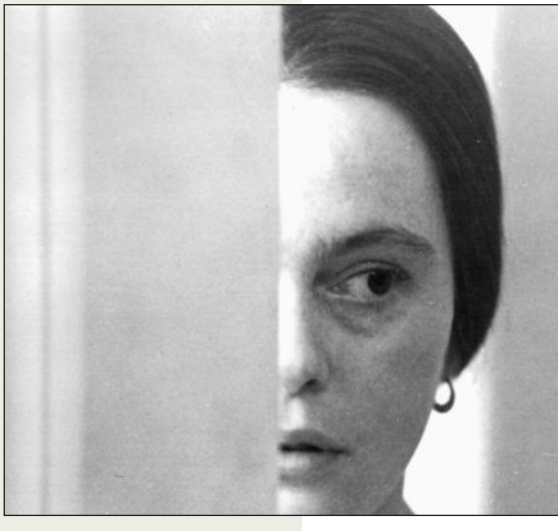
**9–14a.** ***Lantana*** **(Australia, 2002),** *with Rachel Blake, directed by Ray Lawrence.*
The power of metaphor. Sometimes a movie's main thematic concept is embodied in the symbolism of a central metaphor. For example, lantana is a tropical plant with colorful blossoms that hide a thick, thorny undergrowth. A psychological thriller, the movie opens with a dead body lying in a dense growth of lantana. The flower metaphor also symbolizes the shadowy, twisted tangle of anger and resentment that afflicts the four sad couples of the movie. As we can see from this shot, this central metaphor can also be embodied in the mise en scène. *(Lions Gate Films)*

a

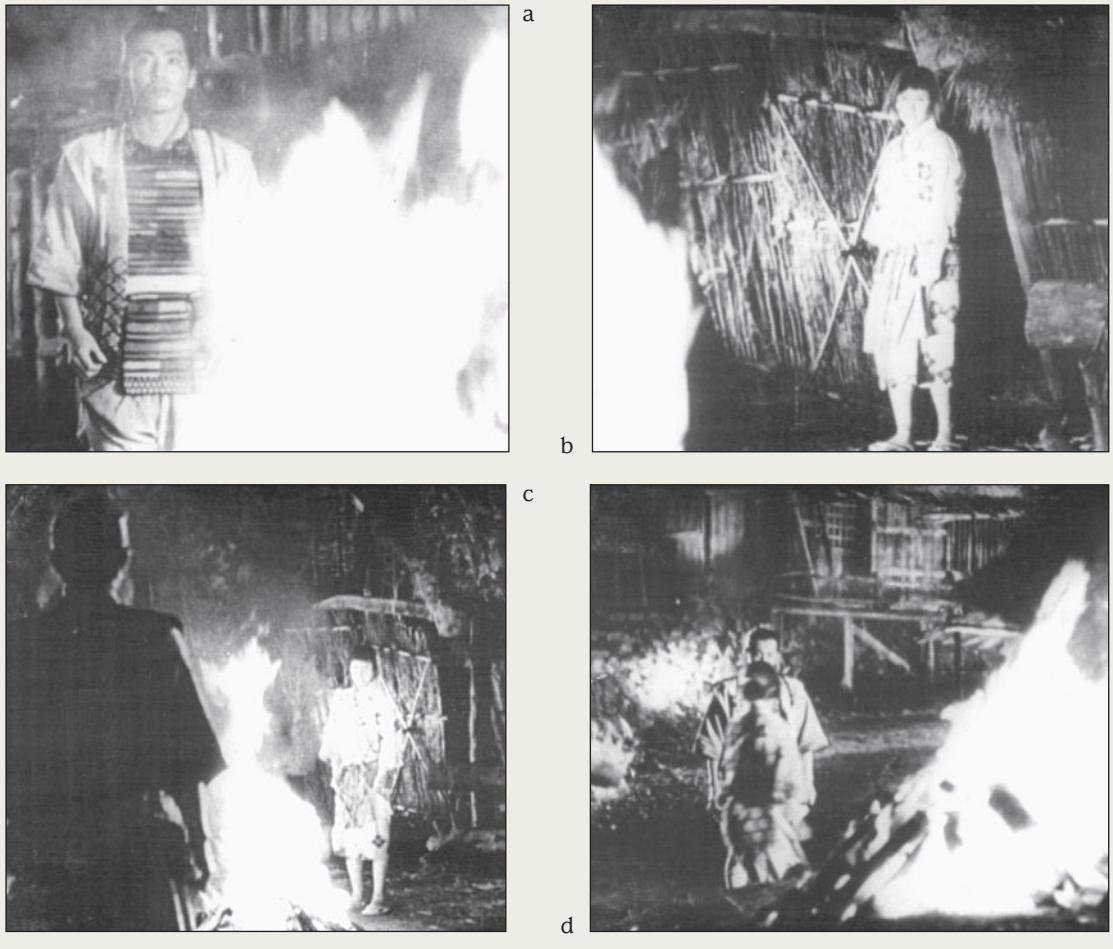
**9–14b & c.** ***Cries and Whispers*** **(Sweden, 1972),** *with Liv Ullmann (b) and Kari Sylwan (c), written and directed by Ingmar Bergman.*
A recurrent motif in this movie is the human face split in two, suggesting self-division, the hidden self, the public versus the private self. *(New World Pictures)*

b

c



for with spoken language they could express virtually any kind of abstract thought. But film directors also wanted to explore the possibilities of the image as a conveyor of abstract ideas. Even before the sound era, filmmakers had devised a number of nonverbal figurative techniques.




**9–15.** ***The Seven Samurai*** **(Japan, 1954),** *directed by Akira Kurosawa.*
Symbolism is not always constant in a scene and may change meaning as the dramatic context changes. The fire in this sequence is strongly sexual in its implications. As Sigmund Freud once pointed out: "The warmth that is radiated by fire calls up the same sensation that accompanies a state of sexual excitation, and the shape and movements of a flame suggest a phallus in activity." Of course dramatic context always determines symbolic content. To many realist filmmakers, who tend to use symbols less densely than formalists, a fire—to paraphrase Freud—is sometimes just a fire. *(Toho International)*

*continued* ➤

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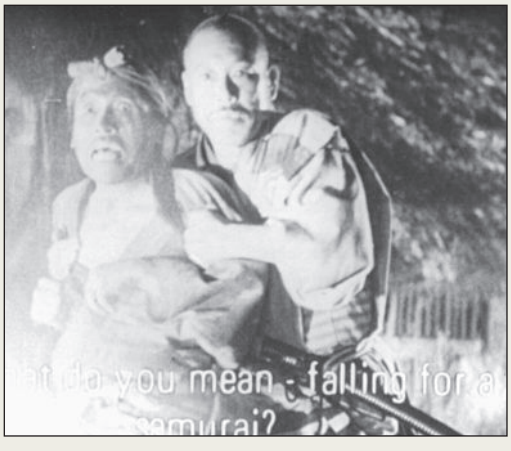
g

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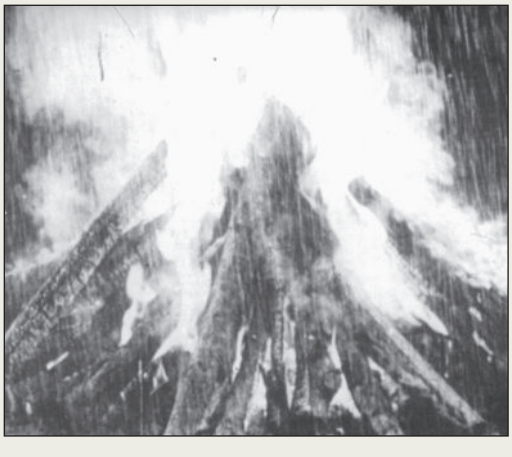


j

A figurative technique can be defined as an artistic device that suggests abstract ideas through comparison, either implied or overt. There are a number of these techniques in both literature and cinema. The most common are **motifs, symbols,** and **metaphors.** In actual practice, there's a considerable amount of overlapping between these terms. All of them are "symbolic" in the sense that an object or event means something beyond its literal significance. Perhaps the most pragmatic method of differentiating these techniques is their degree of obtrusiveness. Instead of locking each term into an airtight compartment, however, we ought to view them as general demarcations, with motifs representing the least obtrusive extreme, metaphors representing the most conspicuous, and each category overlapping somewhat with its neighbor.

*Motifs* are so totally integrated within the realistic texture of a film that we can almost refer to them as submerged or invisible symbols. A motif can be a technique, an object, or anything that's systematically repeated in a movie yet doesn't call attention to itself. Even after repeated viewings, a motif is not always apparent, for its symbolic significance is never permitted to emerge or detach itself from its context **(9–14).**

*Symbols* can also be palpable things, but they imply additional meanings that are relatively apparent to the sensitive observer. Furthermore, the symbolic meanings of these things can shift with the dramatic context. A good example of the shifting implications of a symbol can be seen in the uncut version of Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* **(9–15).** In this movie, a young samurai and a peasant girl are attracted to each other, but their class differences present insurmountable barriers. In a scene that takes place late at night, the two accidentally meet. Kurosawa emphasizes their separation by keeping them in separate **frames,** a raging outdoor fire acting as a kind of barrier **(a** and **b).** But their attraction is too strong, and they then appear in the same shot, the fire between them now suggesting the only obstacle, yet paradoxically also suggesting the sexual passion they both feel **(c).** They draw toward each other, and the fire is now to one side, its sexual symbolism dominating **(d).** They go inside a hut, and the light from the fire outside emphasizes the eroticism of the scene **(e).** As they begin to make love in a dark corner of the hut, the shadows cast by the fire's light on the reeds of the hut seem to streak across their bodies **(f).** Suddenly, the girl's father discovers the lovers, and the billowing flames of the fire suggest his moral outrage **(g).** He is so incensed that he must be restrained by the samurai chief, both of them almost washed out visually by the intensity of the fire's light **(h).** It begins to rain, and the sorrowing young samurai walks away despondently **(i).** At the end of the sequence, Kurosawa offers a close-up of the fire as the rain extinguishes its flames **(j).**

A *metaphor* is usually defined as a comparison of some kind that cannot be literally true. Two terms not ordinarily associated are yoked together, producing a sense of literal incongruity. "Poisonous time," "torn with grief," "devoured by love" are all verbal metaphors involving symbolic rather than literal descriptions. Editing is a frequent source of metaphors in film, for two shots can be linked together to produce a third, and symbolic, idea. In *2001: A Space Odyssey,*

**9–16.** ***Psycho*** **(U.S.A., 1960),** *directed by Alfred Hitchcock.*
Cinematic metaphors can be created through the use of **special effects,** as in this **dissolve,** which yields the final shot of the film—the dredging up of a car from a swamp. Three images are dissolved: **(1)** a shot of a catatonic youth (Anthony Perkins) looking directly at us; **(2)** a duplicate shot of his mother's skeleton, whose skull flickers briefly beneath her son's features and whose personality he has now assumed; and **(3)** a heavy chain that seems anchored to his/her heart, hauling up the murder victim's car, which contains her corpse. *(Paramount Pictures)*

director Stanley Kubrick joined two shots that are separated by millions of years to create a startling metaphor of human intelligence. In one sequence depicting "the dawn of man," we see a tribe of apes attacking another tribe. One ape picks up a thigh bone and uses it to kill his enemy. It is, in effect, a primitive weapon, a kind of machine. The victorious ape triumphantly hurls the bleached-out thigh bone in the air. As it falls back to earth in slow motion, Kubrick cuts to a shot of a white spaceship, shaped like the bone, floating effortlessly through space, in the year 2001. The bone-cudgel and the spaceship are being compared: Both are machines, and both represent giant leaps in human intelligence.

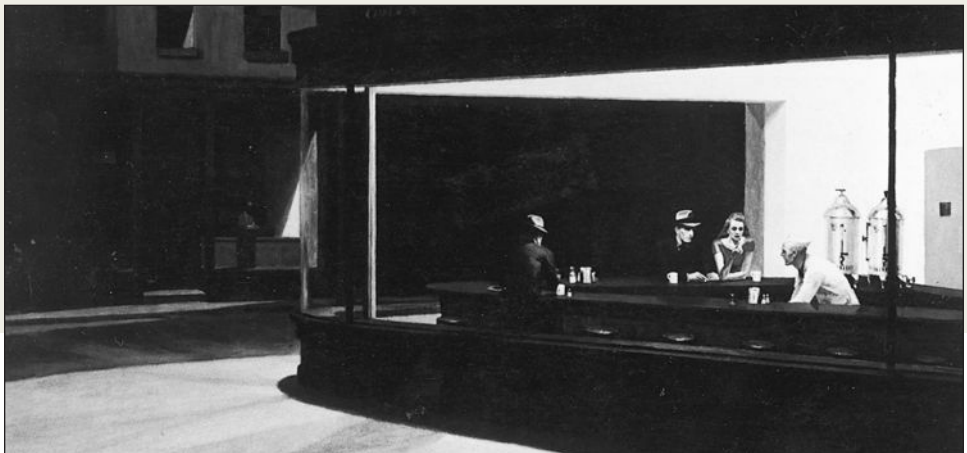
There is usually a sense of shock in metaphorical comparisons. Two traits are violently joined together, often in violation of common sense. For example, in *Trainspotting* **(5–29a),** which explores the desperate lifestyle of several Scottish heroin addicts, the protagonist (Ewan McGregor) is forced to satisfy his drug habit anally, with a heroin suppository. While sitting on "the filthiest toilet in the world," he accidentally expels the suppository. In desperation, he

**9–17.** ***Strawberry and Chocolate*** **(Cuba, 1994),** *with Jorge Perugorría and Vladimir Cruz, directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (with Juan Carlos Tabío).*
Not all allegories are self-consciously symbolic: Some are slyly so. *Strawberry and Chocolate* seems to be a realistic study of life in contemporary Havana, but the movie is also a thinly veiled political allegory—sadly, an honorable genre in communist and ex-communist countries. The film explores an unlikely friendship between Diego (Perugorría) and David (Cruz). Diego is gay, artistic, and a "freethinker"—all dangerous traits in Castro's Cuba. David is straight, sober, and a committed communist zealot. Alea, one of Cuba's most respected filmmakers, pointed out that the movie is really about living under the rule of a repressive government: "As a society we are becoming aware of the mistakes we have made over the years, and it's time for a change," Alea has said. "*Strawberry and Chocolate* points out a basic problem within Cuban society—our inability to accept others who are different from ourselves." *(Miramax Films)*

literally dives into the toilet and swims frantically through a quagmire of urine and feces, while he retrieves his suppository. Obviously, the sequence—which is shocking, disgusting, and funny at the same time—is not meant to be taken literally. His swimming through his own fetid waste is a metaphor to dramatize how all-consuming his addiction is. This is also a good illustration of the *power* of metaphors: We are not likely to want to try using heroin after seeing this stomach-churning scene, which is more effective than ten sermons on the dangers of drugs. Another striking use of metaphor is found in *American Beauty,* where the hero's sexual fantasies are associated with red rose petals **(1–21a).**

**9–18a.** ***Hot Shots! Part Deux*** **(U.S.A., 1993),** *with Charlie Sheen and Valeria Golino, directed by Jim Abrahams.*
An allusion is an indirect reference, sometimes respectful, other times scornful, to an artist or work of art. This movie is filled with comical film allusions, some of which are recognizable only to the cognoscenti, hard-core film fans. For example, this shot is a playful allusion to a scene from the Disney animated romance, *The Lady and the Tramp,* in which two moonstruck canines share a platter of spaghetti. *(Twentieth Century Fox)*

**9–18b.** ***Pennies From Heaven*** **(U.S.A., 1981),** *directed by Herbert Ross.*
This movie, a brilliantly innovative musical, includes many popular songs of the Depression era of the 1930s. It also includes a number of visual homages to the great American painter, Edward Hopper. This shot, a striking recreation of Hopper's famous painting, "Nighthawks," emphasizes the loneliness and alienation of the era. *Pennies From Heaven* might well be the darkest musical ever made—both technically and thematically. It was photographed by Hollywood's prince of darkness, Gordon Willis. *(MGM)*



There are two other kinds of figurative techniques in film and literature: **allegory** and **allusions.** The first is seldom used in movies because it tends toward simplemindedness. What's usually involved in this technique is an avoidance of realism. A correspondence exists between a character or situation and a symbolic idea or complex of ideas **(9–17).** One of the most famous examples of allegory is the character of Death in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal.* There's not much ambiguity involved in what the character is supposed to symbolize. Allegorical narratives are especially popular in the German cinema. For example, virtually all the works of Werner Herzog deal with the idea of life in general, the nature of the human condition in broadly symbolic terms.

An *allusion* is a common type of literary analogy. It's an implied reference, usually to a well-known event, person, or work of art. The protagonist of Hawks's *Scarface* was modeled on the gangster Al Capone (who had a well-publicized scar in the shape of a cross on his cheek), an allusion that wasn't lost on audiences of the time. Filmmakers often draw on religious mythology for their allusions. For example, the Judeo-Christian myth of the Garden of Eden is used in such disparate works as *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis, Days of Heaven, How Green Was My Valley, The Tree of the Wooden Clogs,* and *Brokeback Mountain.*

In the cinema, an overt reference or allusion to another movie, director, or memorable shot is sometimes called a **homage.** The cinematic homage is a kind of quote, the director's graceful tribute to a colleague or established master **(9–18b).** Homages were popularized by Godard and Truffaut, whose movies are profuse in such tributes. In Godard's *A Woman Is a Woman,* for example, two decidedly nonmusical characters burst out in spontaneous song and dance while expressing their desire to appear in an MGM musical by Gene Kelly, choreographed by Bob Fosse. Fosse's *All That Jazz* contains many homages to his idol Fellini, and especially to *8 1/2.* Steven Spielberg often pays tribute to his three idols, Walt Disney, Alfred Hitchcock, and Stanley Kubrick.

## POINT OF VIEW

Point of view in literary fiction generally concerns the narrator, through whose words the events of a story are understood. The ideas and incidents are sifted through the consciousness and language of the storyteller. He or she may or may not be a participant in the action, and may or may not be a reliable guide for the reader to follow. There are four basic types of point of view in literary fiction: **(1)** the first person, **(2)** the omniscient, **(3)** the third person, and **(4)** the objective. In movies, point of view tends to be less rigorous than in novels, for although there are cinematic equivalents of the four basic types of narration, fiction films tend to fall naturally into the omniscient form.

The **first-person narrator** tells his or her own story. In some cases, he or she is an objective observer who can be relied on to relate the events accurately. Nick Carraway in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is a good example of this kind of narrator. Other first-person narrators are subjectively involved in the main

**9–19.** ***Sideways*** **(U.S.A., 2004),** *with Virginia Madsen, Paul Giamatti, Thomas Haden Church, and Sandra Oh, directed by Alexander Payne.*
Writers have probably never been so undervalued in the American cinema as they are today. The majority of mainstream movie characters talk in monosyllables, or grunts. Dialogue consists mostly of a few terse lines, the fewer the better. Presumably actions speak louder than words, even four-letter words. But there are always exceptions. Some film artists are unusually literate—like Alexander Payne, for example. *Sideways* was written by Payne and his longtime writing partner Jim Taylor, based on a novel by Rex Pickett. The movie is a road picture and a buddy film combined, and deals with a failed novelist (Giamatti) and his old college roommate, a failed actor (Church), when they take one final trip together to the California wine country before the actor settles down in marriage. On the road, they meet two alluring women (pictured). Suddenly, their lives get a lot more complicated. The movie is funny, romantic, and very well written. *(Fox Searchlight)*

action and can't be totally relied on, like the sly Matthew Broderick character in *Election*.

Many films use first-person narrative techniques, but only sporadically. The cinematic equivalent to the "voice" of the literary narrator is the "eye" of the camera, and this difference is an important one. In literature, the distinction between the narrator and the reader is clear: It's as if we were listening to a friend tell a story. In film, however, the viewer identifies with the lens, and thus tends to *fuse* with the narrator. To produce first-person narration in film, the camera would have to record all the action through the eyes of the character, which, in effect, would also make the viewer the protagonist.

The **omniscient point of view** is often associated with the nineteenth-century novel. Generally, such narrators are not participants in a story but are all-knowing observers who supply the reader with all the facts we need to know to appreciate the story. Such narrators can span many locations and time periods and can enter the consciousness of a number of different characters, telling us what they think and feel. Omniscient narrators can be relatively detached from the story, as in *War and Peace.* Or they can take on a distinct personality of their own, as in *Tom Jones,* where the amiable storyteller amuses us with his wry observations and judgments.

**9–20.** ***Nashville*** **(U.S.A., 1975),** *directed by Robert Altman.*
Throughout the 1970s, Altman revolutionized filmmaking with his improvisational techniques. Though the screenplay to *Nashville* is credited to Joan Tewkesbury, in fact she never wrote a conventional script. As she explained, "What you have to do for a director like Bob is to provide an environment in which he can work." For example, *Nashville* is structured mosaically, tracing the activities of twenty-four eccentric characters over a five-day period in the city of Nashville, the heart of the country music industry. One wag referred to the film as "twenty-four characters in search of a movie." Tewkesbury created many of the characters in sketch form, then mapped out what each major character would be doing at any given time. Most of the dialogue and details for the actions were created by the actors. They even composed their own songs. "It's like jazz," Altman explained. "You're not planning any of this that you film. You're capturing."
*(Paramount Pictures)*


**9–21a. *Shallow Hal* (U.S.A., 2001),** *with Gwyneth Paltrow and Jack Black, directed by Bobby and Peter Farrelly.*
Formerly a superficial jerk who valued women solely for their looks, the callow protagonist of this comedy (Black) is hypnotized into seeing a woman's inner beauty rather than her actual physical appearance. Thus, we are given two points of view at the same time, one objective, the other subjective—the source of much of the humor in the film. In this shot, for example, we see his 300-pound plus girlfriend through his adoring eyes; but in the canoe's precarious tilt, we also see the physical effects of her actual heroic girth. *(Twentieth Century Fox)*

**9–21a. *Match Point* (Britain, 2005),** *with Scarlett Johansson and Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, written and directed by Woody Allen.*
The overpowering urgency of sexual desire. An unusual theme for an artist like Allen, who's in his seventies. Yet very few contemporary filmmakers can match the erotic energy that fuels this psychological thriller, set in England rather than the usual Manhattan. (Of course it helps to have two sexy leads, like Johansson and Rhys-Meyers.) Woody Allen is the godfather of the literary branch of the American cinema. He has mastered a veriety of genres, styles, and periods. He has won many awards for his literate, sophisticated screenplays. He has conquered the New York stage on numerous occasions, and has been a prolific contributor to the pages of the prestigious *New Yorker.* Writing is his life. *(DreamWorks)*

Omniscient narration is almost inevitable in film. Each time the director moves the camera—either within a shot or between shots—we are offered a new point of view from which to evaluate the scene. The filmmaker can cut easily from a subjective point-of-view shot (first person) to a variety of objective shots. He or she can concentrate on a single reaction (close-up) or the simultaneous reactions of several characters **(long shot).** Within a matter of seconds, film directors can show us a cause and an effect, an action and a reaction. They can connect various time periods and locations almost instantaneously (parallel editing), or literally superimpose different time periods (dissolve or **multiple exposure**). The omniscient camera can be a dispassionate observer, as it is in many of Chaplin's films, or it can be a witty commentator—an evaluater of events—as it often is in Hitchcock's films or those of Lubitsch.

In the third person, a nonparticipating narrator tells a story from the consciousness of a single character. In some novels, this narrator completely penetrates the mind of a character; in others, there is virtually no penetration. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* for example, we learn what Elizabeth Bennet thinks and feels about events, but we're never permitted to enter the consciousness of the other characters. We can only guess what they feel through Elizabeth's interpretations—which are often inaccurate. Her interpretations are not offered directly to the reader as in the first person, but through the intermediacy of the narrator, who tells us her responses.

In movies, there is a rough equivalent to the third person, but it's not so rigorous as in literature. Usually, third-person narration is found in documentaries where an anonymous commentator tells us about the background of a central character. In Sidney Meyer's *The Quiet One,* for example, the visuals dramatize certain traumatic events in the life of an impoverished youngster, Donald. On the soundtrack, James Agee's commentary tells us some of the reasons why Donald behaves as he does, how he feels about his parents, his peers, and his teachers.

The *objective point of view* is also a variation of the omniscient. Objective narration is the most detached of all: It doesn't enter the consciousness of any character, but merely reports events from the outside. In fact, this voice has been likened to a camera in that it records events impartially. It presents facts and allows readers to interpret for themselves. The objective voice is more congenial to film than to literature, for movies literally do use a camera. The cinematic objective point of view is generally used by realistic directors who keep their camera at long shot and avoid all distortions or "commentary" such as **angles, lenses,** and **filters.**

## LITERARY ADAPTATIONS

A great many movies are adaptations of literary sources. In some respects, adapting a novel or play requires more skill and discipline than working with an original screenplay. Furthermore, the better the literary work, the more difficult the adaptation. For this reason, many film adaptations are based on mediocre


**9–22a.** ***They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*** **(U.S.A., 1969),** *with Bonnie Bedelia, Bruce Dern, Jane Fonda, and Red Buttons; directed by Sydney Pollack.*
Much is usually eliminated from a novel as complex as Horace McCoy's grim masterpiece about a 1930s marathon dance contest. The novelist can focus on only a few details at a time in a linear sequence. Movies can bombard us with hundreds of details simultaneously, as Leo Braudy has pointed out: "The muted emphasis on gesture, makeup, intonation, and bodily movement possible in film can enrich a character with details that would intrude blatantly if they were separately verbalized in a novel." For example, in the novel, McCoy can tell us what was going on in the grueling race pictured, but only selectively, with a few telling details. The movie version, shot partly in slow motion, shows us all the agonized faces and twisted bodies of the contestants, who are exhausted to stupefaction, as they doggedly trudge forward, supporting and even hauling their collapsed partners, while the cheering spectators urge on their favorites. It is a choreographed vision of Hell. *(Palomar/ABC Cinerama)*

**9–22b.** ***Road to Perdition*** **(U.S.A., 2002),** *with Tom Hanks and Tyler Hoechlin, directed by Sam Mendes.*
A recent trend in the American cinema is the adaptation of comic books. Most of these have been comedies, action films, and fantasies, geared to a predominantly juvenile audience. A few, like *Road to Perdition,* are more somber, even philosophical. The movie explores the relationship of fathers and sons among Irish-American gangsters living in the midwest during the Depression 1930s. David Self's screenplay is based on the serialized graphic novels written by Max Allan Collins and illustrated by Richard Piers Rayner. A work of striking visual poetry, the movie was photographed by the great Conrad Hall. *(DreamWorks and Twentieth Century Fox Pictures)*

sources, for few people will get upset at the modifications required in film if the source itself isn't of the highest caliber. There are many adaptations that are superior to their originals: *The Birth of a Nation,* for instance, was based on Thomas Dixon's trashy novel *The Klansman,* which is more blatantly racist than the film. Some commentators believe that if a work of art has reached its fullest artistic expression in one form, an adaptation will inevitably be inferior. According to this argument, no film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* could equal the original, nor could any novel hope to capture the richness of *Persona,* or even *Citizen Kane,* which is a rather literary movie. There's a good deal of sense in this view, for we've seen how literature and film tend to solve problems differently, how the true content of each medium is organically governed by its forms.

The real problem of the adapter is not how to reproduce the *content* of a literary work (an impossibility), but how close he or she should remain to the raw data of the *subject matter.* This degree of fidelity is what determines the three types of adaptations: the **loose,** the **faithful,** and the **literal.** Of course, these classifications are for convenience only, for in actual practice most movies fall somewhere in between.

The *loose adaptation* is barely that. Generally, only an idea, a situation, or a character is taken from a literary source, then developed independently. Loose film adaptations can be likened to Shakespeare's treatment of a story from Plutarch or Bandello, or to the plays of ancient Greek dramatists, who often

**9–23.** ***Throne of Blood*** **(Japan, 1957),** *based on Shakespeare's* Macbeth, *directed by Akira Kurosawa.*
The loose adaptation takes a few general ideas from an original source, then develops them independently. Kurosawa's film is one of the greatest of all Shakespearean adaptations precisely because the filmmaker doesn't attempt to compete with *Macbeth.* Kurosawa's samurai movie is a *cinematic* masterpiece, owing relatively little to language for its power. Its similarities to Shakespeare's literary masterpiece are superficial, just as the play's similarities to Holingshed's *Chronicles* (Shakespeare's primary source) are of no great artistic significance. *(Audio-Brandon Films)*

drew on a common mythology. A film that falls into this class is Kurosawa's *Ran,* which transforms Shakespeare's *King Lear* into a quite different tale set in medieval Japan, though the filmmaker retains several plot elements from Shakespeare's original (see also **9–23).**

*Faithful adaptations,* as the phrase implies, attempt to re-create the literary source in filmic terms, keeping as close to the spirit of the original as possible **(9–24).** André Bazin likened the faithful adapter to a translator who tries to find equivalents to the original. Of course, Bazin realized that fundamental differences exist between the two mediums: The translator's problem in converting the word *road* to *strada* or *strasse* is not so acute as a filmmaker's problem in transforming the word into a picture. An example of a faithful adaptation is *Tom Jones.* John Osborne's screenplay preserves much of the novel's plot structure, its major events, and most of the important characters. Even the witty omniscient narrator is retained. But the film is not merely an illustration of the novel. In the first place, Fielding's book is too packed with incidents for a film adaptation. The many inn scenes, for example, are reduced to a central episode: the Upton Inn sequence.

**9–24. Publicity photo of director Chris Columbus talking to actors Rupert Grint (left) and Daniel Radcliffe, in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (U.S.A./Britain, 2001).** Faithful adaptations try to be true to the spirit of a literary work by preserving most of the important characters and scenes as well as the tone of the original. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books have sold over 250 million copies, in 60 languages. The books are beloved by children all over the world. Producer David Heyman promised Rowling that he would be true to her vision and would hire a director who felt the same. Enter Chris Columbus, who also promised Rowling he would protect the integrity of her work. "I told her how I wanted to keep the darkness and the edge of the material intact. I was adamant about being incredibly faithful to the books, which means shooting the films in England, with an all-British cast." Rowling was very pleased with the results, as were millions of youngsters who thronged to the movie. *(Warner Bros.)*

**9–25.** ***Long Day's Journey Into Night*** **(U.S.A., 1962),** *with Ralph Richardson, Jason Robards, and Katharine Hepburn, directed by Sidney Lumet.*
Literal film adaptations are pretty much restricted to stage plays. Both the language and the actions transfer easily to the movie screen. Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is one of the crowning achievements of the American theater, and a masterpiece of artistic compression. Its title is symbolic, but it's also literal: The action takes place in a single location within a single day, beginning in the morning and ending deep in the bowels of the night. Instead of "opening up" the play, Lumet retained virtually all the dialogue and confined the action to the home of the doomed Tyrone family, where they are trapped together like guilty creatures in Purgatory. It's a thinly disguised portrait of O'Neill's own tragic family. Several critics complained that the movie was merely a photographed stage play. "But the critics were incapable of seeing one of the most complex camera and editing techniques of any picture I've done," Lumet observed. See also *Sidney Lumet: Film and Literary Vision,* by Frank Cunningham (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991). *(Embassy Pictures)*

*Literal adaptations* are usually restricted to plays **(9–25).** As we have seen, the two basic modes of drama—action and dialogue—are also found in films. The major problem with stage adaptations is in the handling of space and time rather than language. If the film adapter were to leave the camera at long shot and restrict the editing to scene shifts only, the result would be similar to the

original. But we've seen that few filmmakers would be willing merely to record a play, for in doing so they would lose much of the excitement of the original and contribute none of the advantages of the adapting medium, particularly its greater freedom in treating space and time.

Movies can add many dimensions to a play, especially through the use of close-ups and edited juxtapositions. Because these techniques aren't found in the theater, even "literal" adaptations are not strictly literal; they're simply more subtle in their modifications. Stage dialogue is often retained in film adaptations, but its effect is different on the audience. In the live theater, the meaning of the language is determined by the fact that the characters are on the same stage at the same time, reacting to the same words. In a movie, time and space are fragmented by the individual shots. Furthermore, because even a literary film is primarily visual and only secondarily verbal, nearly all the dialogue is modified by the images.

A systematic analysis of the writing in a movie would explore the following questions. How "literary" is the film? Is there an emphasis on lengthy speeches, verbal wit or adroitness, talky scenes? How articulate are the characters? If not very, how do we get to know what's bothering them? Who contributed what to the screenplay? (This is not easily determined information, except for the most critically admired movies, which have been researched more exhaustively than routine pictures.) Is the dialogue stylized or does it aim to sound like realistic speech? Does the movie contain any figurative tropes: motifs, symbols, metaphors? How do these deepen and enrich the movie? Or do they? Whose point of view is the film told from? Is there a voice-over narrator? What kind of rapport does the narrator establish with us? If the movie is a literary adaptation, is it loose, faithful, or literal?

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