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CASE STUDY 3: Literature and Film - Reading Film: An Angel at My Table

Book Section

How to cite:

Neale, Derek (2009). CASE STUDY 3: Literature and Film - Reading Film: An Angel at My Table. In: Da Sousa Correa, Delia and Owens, W. R. eds. *The Handbook to Literary Research* 2nd Edition. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 162-165.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.routledgeliterature.com/books/The-Handbook-to-Literary-Research-isbn9780415485005>

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From: *The Handbook to Literary Research* (2nd edition, ed. Delia da Sousa Correa and W.R. Owens, Routledge, 2009)

This is a pre-published draft of the case study (with relevant recommended reading) – from chapter 9 in the above book, pp.162-5.

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Literature and Film

Case study 3 Reading film: *An Angel at My Table*

This last case study looks at Jane Campion's 1990 film *An Angel at My Table*, the adaptation of Janet Frame's autobiography of the same title, (London: The Women's Press, 1990). Films are often remediated stories which originate from a variety of sources, sometimes obscure, sometimes eminent, as with Frame's three-volume memoir. Since the 1970s and the influence of structuralism film criticism has tended to perceive film performance as 'text', with the growing assertion of its own theoretical framework and vocabulary, distinct from the literary sphere. As in literary theory there are various schools and approaches but, as the image is film's predominant *modus operandi*, much film study tends to be preoccupied with optical modes of representation and visual narrative methods; it analyses the use and content of shots, narrative segmentation, scene-linking techniques, and is largely if not exclusively concerned with non-verbal signification. This case study can only touch briefly on possible avenues of approach to film studies, but it is interesting to note that such approaches are made more complex when both film adaptations and the original texts on which they are based are scrutinised. Adaptation studies, which evolved in parallel with film studies, has developed its own agenda, one which has gradually grown away from its original orthodoxy of gauging a film's proximity to its adapted text (what became known as 'fidelity criticism'). More recently studies of adaptation have come to focus on the intertextuality at work with a more free-ranging approach to the analysis and comparison of the respective narrative contents and methods, and in ways which avoid perceptions of the originating text as primary.

The narrative in Jane Campion's film operates by using series of juxtaposed images, shots which if viewed in isolation might not make any narrative sense. This shot and scene montage narrative appears as a wordless poem that often requires the film's reader to imagine what might lie between the partial, uninflected images. This is most apparent in a key early scene: the young Frame's first, dangerous encounter with lying, where she is caught out by her teacher, Miss Botting. Sergei Eisenstein, the founding theorist of montage, traces the method of partial images to nineteenth-century literature and visual arts. For instance, he evokes Zola and two paintings by Manet, 'Bar at the Moulin Rouge' and 'Bar at the Folie-Bergère', ('Lessons from Literature' trans. Jay Leyda in *Film Essays with a Lecture* London: Dobson, 1968, pp.81-2), where characters are obscured by other elements within the scene; yet, Eisenstein claims, it would never appear that these characters were, 'anatomically, half-people'. He suggests these 'clots of real detail', however partial, produce detailed characterisations. Elsewhere Eisenstein traces montage back to the early Hollywood film maker D.W. Griffith ('Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today' trans. Jay Leyda in *Film Form* New York: Meridian, 1957, pp.195-255), who in turn acknowledges Dickens as his role model. Griffith took from Dickens the prevalent spliced-strand method used by many other

nineteenth-century novelists – Thackeray, George Eliot, Trollope, Meredith, Hardy – which is billed by Eisenstein as the ‘montage of parallel action’: one narrative is left pulsing as another begins, so delaying reader gratification. This montage method is often referred to as the ‘cut’ in modern discussion and should not be confused with ‘montage sequence’, another modern usage, which is related to Eisenstein’s versions of montage but which is an accelerated and exaggerated version of the method, one which is widely deployed but often disparaged by screenwriting orthodoxies.

When talking of Dickens’s influence on Griffith, Eisenstein identifies other narrative techniques and optical qualities that cross over between genres and media – frame composition, close-up, shifting emphasis using special lenses, and even ‘dissolve’ (in the opening of the last chapter of *A Tale of Two Cities*). He also elaborates upon the type of montage that we can recognise in *An Angel at My Table* – the type which doesn’t cut between characters or narrative strands, but instead cuts between partial, inconclusive images of the same character, as with the figures in the Manet paintings. Dickens does this using syntax and the insertion of brief, revealing clauses. Eisenstein illustrates using a passage involving Mr Dombey from *Dombey and Son*, suggesting that this method in effect engages the performative imagination of the reader. Something of the characterisation is partial but, when surrounded by the other elements, a detailed and dramatised characterisation with interiority arises.

The same is true of the characterisation in Campion’s film, specifically in the scenes leading up to Janet’s confrontation with Miss Botting. Its effectiveness lies in its simple concision, as seen in Laura Jones’s script:

17. *Janet’s hand slides into Dad’s best trousers hanging on a hook behind the bedroom door. There is the chink of coins.*
18. *Janet stands at the door of the Infants room. She hands each child who comes in a pillow of chewing-gum, naming them: Marjorie, Joy, Billy, and so on.*
19. *The children sit at desks in rows, all chewing gum. Two monitors walk up and down the aisles giving out green-covered copy books.*

Miss Botting turns from the board where she has lettered the date. Not all the children stop chewing as she turns.

(An Angel at My Table: the screenplay from the three-volume autobiography of Janet Frame London: Pandora, 1990, pp.4-5).

Both 17 and 18 create only partial meaning in themselves. The cutting is severe and quick. Viewed in isolation the scenes would mean little, but their juxtaposition provides a synthesis of meaning: Janet is stealing money from her father in order to buy friendship and popularity. We do not see her going to buy chewing gum with the stolen money (though this detail is included in Frame’s account). Janet’s shock when her lie – that her father gave her the money to buy the chewing gum – is not believed becomes tangible in the ensuing close-up. Shock turns to guilt, turns to shame; and finally comes the realisation that words have got her into this mess and words somehow have got to get her out of it. Yet no words are used to show this.

More recent advocates of montage such as David Mamet suggest that the ideal film would be wordless (*On Directing Film* London: Faber, 1991, p.72), and *An Angel at My Table* is relatively silent. The events in the classroom provide the only extended dramatic scene in the early part of the film, and surprisingly the dialogue is taken almost verbatim from a mimetic passage in Frame’s

autobiography. Frame's text otherwise contains what might be considered to be non-filmic qualities: a level of interiority that often pauses to scrutinise the ways in which language is used. In the book her childhood is illustrated by her reading – quoted songs, poems and described magazines (only sometimes films), artefacts that are shared with others and which in combination form an intertextual thread. Frame points out her estrangement from the world, her difference, as she announces these linguistic curiosities. She misreads a story's title, enunciating the silent 's', Is-land, and this becomes seen as New Zealand's North Island. She inadvertently personalises the anthems of Empire: having a favourite kerosene tin, she is convinced the song runs 'God save our gracious tin'.

In the film, Frame's difference is represented without this linguistic detail. Though Jones's early scripts contained voice-overs using passages from the autobiography, attempts to translate Frame's poetic, interiorised and sometimes literary voice, these don't survive in Champion's final version. The intertextuality of Frame's early reading is subsumed in the film version by an ongoing dialogic relationship with the original autobiography; the film's audience appreciates what Linda Hutcheon terms the 'multilaminated' storytelling (*A Theory of Adaptation* London: Routledge, 2006, p.21), in this instance the layers provided by Frame's oeuvre as well as her memoir. Hutcheon suggests that the power of close-up unravels the assumption that diegetic literary 'telling' is exclusively effective at revealing interiority; and that, conversely, close-up also unwraps the assertion that the kind of mimetic 'showing' found in films can only reveal exteriority and action (p. 58). This is especially true in the Miss Botting scene, where the silent close-up of young Jean facing the blackboard could not be more revealing of her inner dilemma. Frame's 'difference' is symbolised in the film by her hair, a striking ginger mop which clashes with the predominant greens and browns of Oamaru. Gone are the poems, songs and idiosyncratic phrases. We see from Frame's perspective but this viewpoint is understated; the interiority, the cogitation and import of those perceptions, exists largely in the gaps between explicit shots. Besides the use of silence, close-up and viewpoint, an interior life is created via the other key method: montage and the use of visually contrasting, partial images which, when viewed in combination, create a new meaning. Such juxtapositions allow the audience to think alongside a character and, as Eisenstein suggested, offer a 'personage in "close-up"' in a way that translates, without reproducing, some of the intrinsic qualities of the verbal text.

Recommended Reading

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006).

McFarlane, Brian, *Novel to Film: An introduction to the theory of adaptation*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

Stam, Robert and Alessandra Raengo, eds, *A Companion to Literature and Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004)