

Teaching the Screenplay as Literature

Mason Stoddard

Abstract

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BYU—Idaho's English department currently uses fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and drama as texts in literature courses. These genres are generally defined as literature. I argue, however, that if the screenplay is literature then BYU—Idaho ought to teach it in literature courses. The university already teaches screenwriting as a creative writing course alongside poetry, fiction, playwriting, and creative nonfiction. It seems that they see the screenplay as a legitimate writing field but not a suitable for literary analysis. I do not argue that literature courses should screen films but instead read screenplays; these courses rarely view produced plays but instead read the scripts of such greats as Shakespeare or Miller. Similarly, I propose that the department pick a few scripts to read and analyze as literature. I use the *Cast Away* script by William Broyles Jr. as a prime example of a screenplay that contains just as much literary merit as most plays. This script raises questions of existentialism and isolation. Can one maintain identity without contact with any other humans? Though screenplays often describe visual elements more than plays these images can be interpreted as having extremely deep meaning and implications.

Mason Stoddard

Jason Williams

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Introduction:

Motion pictures do more than sell popcorn. It's true that many modern filmmakers work only to wow audiences and sell tickets. Most big box-office contenders won't raise too many philosophical questions. But, with a little research, one quickly finds profound, fascinating films that are released year after year. We can apply almost any literary theory—from Marxist to eco-criticism—to any modern film just as easily as we could to any modern novel. All films begin with a screenplay, a script. Screenplays read differently than any other type of literature, but once we learn the technicalities of screenplays we then see that they contain just as much depth and meaning as any other literature, especially plays.

BYU—Idaho's English department offers a course entitled "English 354-Drama" that focuses of playwrights from several historical and aesthetic periods and backgrounds. Several short plays are read in English 251-Intro to Literature. Professors occasionally have their students read plays to convey something about the time period the class is studying or about a specific author. I believe that screenplays can be read in similar fashion—as an example of specific literary devises or aesthetic traditions of the

times, particularly contemporary times.

Kevin Boon, in his article “The Screenplay, Imagism, and Modern Aesthetics” argues that “Screenplays cannot be considered literature until we acknowledge the possibility that they may be literature.” There has long been a bias towards screenplays because they were initially seen as a cheap, artless form of entertainment—more business-oriented than artistic. Boon continues: “We discover that they are as amenable to literary critique as poems, novels, and stage plays, and like poems, novels, and stage plays, they can be examined independent of their individual performances” (Boon 266). Boon believes that we can hold screenplays under the same light as other forms of literature. I agree with him.

Interpretation:

For some, it is problematic to read screenplays as literature because a script is, in a way, simply a blueprint of an art form to be interpreted by others artists such as actors or directors. Play scripts and screenplays have been compared to sheet music; both are intended to be interpreted by other artists before being presented to an audience. But isn't this true of all kinds of literature? All literature relies on reader response and interpretation. So while the involvement of directors, actors, cinematographers, etc. is more pronounced than the involvement of the reader, I would say that this is a difference in degree rather than in kind.

The screenplay should never be treated as something completely separate from the works of other great contemporary writers but instead as another valid form of

historical literature. Nathaniel Kohn's "The Screenplay as Postmodern Literary Exemplar" uses the screenplay to further the postmodern discussion by saying, "They (screenwriters) are making a newly engaging literary thing, something epistemologically diverse, unanchored, free flowing, floating, & authorless -- an exemplar of how to make what Barthes calls 'writerly texts' in the contemporary moment" (Kohn 34). Filmmaking is an excellent medium for artists to explore important aesthetic issues like postmodernism or any artistic movement.

Patrick Loughney, while discussing the history of the screenplay in "From 'Rip Van Winkle' to 'Jesus of Nazareth'" examines some early examples of screenwriting. "The fact that Dickinson recognized the competitive feasibility of transforming theatrical works to film—and predicted their eventuality—demonstrates that the concept of using pre-existing written compositions in the making of movies was formulated during, and perhaps before, the first year of commercial cinema in America" (Loughney 114). Loughney seems to admit that screenplays are more than commercial products to make money but are instead pieces of a movement from written word to theatrical production to film.

Robert Morsberger's article "Screenplays as Literature" examines some of the problems that the screenplay faces in modern academia. His article focuses on some screenplays that are original literary works by significant writers and says that they are worth analyzing as major writers. Morsberger argues that libraries must be equipped with reasonably complete and catalogued collections of both films and screenplays for any interested student to access.

Susan Radner's article "Transforming Contemporary Literature" examines attempts to redefine how literature is defined in modern universities. "Students learned that the world around us was a fitting subject for imaginative writers. They saw that women were doing some very exciting writing today. They saw that contemporary literature is actually being written by people like ourselves, from the middle or working class. And they saw that people of color have experiences and writing styles that are exciting to read. The result was that 'Contemporary Literature' itself was redefined" (Radner 137). I think that this redefinition of literature must include the screenplay as contemporary literature because it fits all these descriptions. Screenplays are coming from the middle classes, from women, and from academics.

Howard Rodman helps define what a screenplay is and how it's used: "A screenplay wants to become a film. But when that desire takes over, something gets lost. The screenplay becomes a legal document. It then disappears once its mission has been accomplished, leaving the purchaser to pull the lever and wait, hands cupped, beneath the spout" (Rodman 233). Rodman sees the need for screenwriters to be seen as writers and artists on their own merits and not just as stepping stones to a finished and completed film. Dore Schary's "Literature and the Screen" argues this point, that screenplays serve similar functions as literature. "The elements of the screenplay are then used to raise questions that are fundamental to man's existence. Questions being raised about justice are used as an example" (Schary 23). The screenplay is a great venue for a writer to ask hard and important questions about mankind, about who we are and what we do here on

Earth.

An interesting exercise that I'd like to recommend to professors of literature would be to first read a novel, say *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Then, after reading the novel and analyzing it, read the screenplay adaptation of that novel. One can then ask questions like, "Why did the author leave this in or why did he change that scene to this?" An analysis of the screenwriter's interpretation would provide incredibly meaningful conversations about a novel. Finally, after reading the screenplay, a class could watch the film adaptation of the screenplay and ask, "Why did the director shoot it this way? Why was this actor cast in that role?" Now we have several artists such as cameramen, sound designers, and musicians interpreting the screenplay which was an interpretation of a novel. This exercise could prove rather meaningful for students of literature.

Bruce Kawin points out an interesting example of literary authors who ventured into the realm of screenwriting in "A Faulkner Filmography" by pointing to the great author's work for the screen. "This is not to suggest, as so many critics have done, that Faulkner's screenplays are not worth bothering about... most of them extend and clarify the themes of his major fiction" (Kawin 67). Kawin suggests that when reading an author, one can look to that author's work for the screen as part of his or her literary canon. Cormac McCarthy, for example, has written two screenplays that should be approached by any class claiming to give a complete overview of his work.

Cast Away:

Let's look at the script for *Cast Away* as an example. William Broyles Jr. wrote

Cast Away, and Robert Zemeckis directed the film. Broyles had previously written *Apollo 13*, which also starred Tom Hanks. So we see an immediate theme in his work—stories about loneliness and survival. *Cast Away*, though only 12 years old, exemplifies how deeply a screenplay can run. The film centers on one man, Chuck Noland, who is a sufficiency-obsessed FedEx analyst. The first twenty minutes of the film show his life as one controlled by the clock; he's always moving, always problem solving, leaving little time to be with the woman he loves, Kelly. Chuck's airplane crashes over the Pacific Ocean, leaving him stranded on an uninhabited island for more than four years, completely alone.

Cast Away was a financial success, appealing to moviegoers as a survival/adventure story. And it does contain those elements. But, more importantly, it has several underlying themes and questions that appeal to students of literature. For example, once Chuck comes to terms with what has happened and that he won't be getting rescued anytime soon, he realizes that he will need fire to survive. Fire represents hope. It represents survival for him. It represents meaning to life. Chuck struggles to get even the slightest flame and after he does it, he's thrilled! He feels that he has now conquered nature, that he is going to survive, that meaning has returned to his life. But that doesn't last long.

Once Chuck has learned how to survive physically, he is faced by an even more threatening challenge—loneliness. The film asks us, “Why survive at all? What is the purpose of living?” Chuck deals with this problem in a way that is now widely

recognized in pop culture: Wilson. He accidentally makes a face on a volleyball from his own blood and begins talking with this volleyball. After several years on the island, Chuck's volleyball has become a key character. The audience never hears what Wilson says to Chuck but it is made clear to us what kind of personality Chuck gives this volleyball. This represents Modern Man's struggle to find meaning and create meaningful relationships with others. The film seems to suggest that perhaps we artificially create meaning in our most important relationships. Just how close are we with our families? Are we any different than Chuck and Wilson? A serious, in-depth analysis could be performed on the *Cast Away* text about this issue of relationships and artificial meaning through our own creation.

One day, after four years on the island, Chuck awakes to a loud noise on the beach. He finds that the tide has brought in a large chunk of plastic, a piece of a Porta Potty. Chuck uses the plastic to create a sail that enables him to break free of the reef and to finally break out of the island and attempt to find other sea vessels and go home. It works. The sail helps him find a boat and he survives. When Chuck finally gets home, one would think the story would be over. He did it! He survived! But, just like the fire, the viewer is asked to consider the meaning of survival and life in general. Chuck has been on his island for four years. His girlfriend, Kelly, has moved on. She is married with several small children. Again, the audience must ask, "Why survive at all? What is the purpose to living?" After Chuck finds Kelly and realizes she has moved on, he goes to the house of a friend and tells him a story from the island. He tells him that after about a

year alone on the island, Chuck tried to kill himself but failed to do so. He then goes on to address the main theme of the story:

CHUCK

That's when this feeling came over me like a warm blanket and I knew that no matter what happened to me on that island, I had to keep breathing. And then one day all my logic was proven wrong because the tide came in and brought me a sail. And now I'm here with you, in Memphis. And I've lost her all over again. But I'm so glad she was with me on that island because I know what I have to do now. I have to keep breathing. Because tomorrow the sun will rise. And who knows what the tide could bring.

To me this passage is absolutely beautiful. It sums up the problems of existential anxiety but also provides a wonderful reason to hope and to go on living. It sums up much of what I believe about the world and about life.

Chuck's experiences, though told in a screenplay, open up a grand discussion of themes and meaning. I can imagine great critics applying Freudian theories to this script. The feminists would have a great time looking of Chuck's isolation. Joseph Campbell's ideas of a hero's journey are also incredibly clear in the story. Chuck goes on a quite a journey to hell and must return to the world with new information. He returns a successful hero, one who has learned how to deal with extreme grief and loneliness in a way that none of us will likely ever know. The script for *Cast Away* is a great example of the literary depth and quality that so many screenwriters bring to the table if we were to teach the screenplay as literature here at BYU-Idaho.

Problems and Responses:

Warren French's article "A Steinbeck Screenplay-Literature or Film?" raises an interesting question and opposing argument to mine: "While a printed script can never take the place of a film for critical study, such study of a film is impossible without such a script because of the difficulties of procuring and consulting copyrighted films, especially since rental prints may, for many reasons, not be complete" (French 122). French's point is that our study cannot stop at a screenplay alone but that we must also study the other cinematic elements that are then added to the film. I agree with French. After a class has read a screenplay, it would then be necessary to watch the film in its entirety to see the script brought to life through several artists' interpretations.

Another common concern on this campus is inappropriate or offensive literature. This would play into the decisions of choosing which screenplays to read in classrooms. But, like novels or short stories, professors need not limit themselves to "G-Rated" material. The screenplay for *127 Hours*, written by Danny Boyle and Simon Beaufoy, is one of the greatest character studies written in the last decade. The screenplay tells the true story of Aaron Ralston, the famous hiker who amputated his own arm to survive an accident. The script contains rich back-story, subtle characterization, and non-linear chronology. But it also contains several profanities. The film was rated "R" by the MPAA for language and some disturbing violent content/bloody images.

Though the university certainly wouldn't screen this film on campus, there's no reason professors couldn't read the script in class. After all, Cormac McCarthy's *The*

Road contains violent content/bloody images and the characters in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* utilize quite a colorful vocabulary. The school still permits the use of these texts because they contain deeper meaning. Screenplays would fit quite nicely into the same policy the school currently uses for filtering literature.

Joseph Epstein's "Reel Literature" states another problem that the screenplay faces. The problem is that the novel can do one great thing that movies, despite their immense influence and universal appeal, cannot. Novels can go inside the heads of their main characters to tell the audience what they are thinking. The movies can only attempt to show us the characters, though they have sometimes tried to do both by the device known as "voice over." "But from Cervantes through Tolstoy through Henry James through Proust, interiority has been the great glory of the novel, and the movies cannot really compete with it" (Epstein). This presents a problem for the screenplay, which by its nature is designed only to tell us what the camera sees and hears. But plays face this same problem, and both forms of art resolve it through either monologues or through creative writing techniques to show us what a character's motivation is without explicitly stating that motivation. In some ways, this makes playwriting and screenwriting more challenging and interesting than novel or prose writing because it forces the writer to *show* us what a character is thinking rather than simply *telling* us.

Scott Cameron, an English professor at BYU-Idaho, points out another potential problem with treating the screenplay as literature. He reminds us that play scripts come from a long tradition and thus have been elevated to "high art" in most academic

communities. While it is clearly true that plays have been around an awfully long time, I disagree that this fact alone makes them a superior form of art. When the novel first gained popularity, it too was treated as a lesser form of art by academic circles who favored the poetry or the short story. A sort of academic snootiness must be avoided when addressing what literature is.

Professor Cameron, when asked how he chooses literature for the courses he teaches, said that all works of literature are fair game, from advertisements to newspaper articles. His process begins with analyzing the demands of the course, be it a creative nonfiction course or one based on a certain time period. He then determines which main ideas from this time period or genre he wishes most to discuss with the class. He says that he would “consider teaching a screenplay if I thought that the screenplay worked well enough without the other cinematic elements and it fit the constraints of the class” (Interview). Many classes, particularly contemporary literature classes like BYU–Idaho’s ENG 336 Postmodern Literature, could benefit greatly by analyzing the words of screenwriters over the past hundred years.

Teaching the screenplay isn’t necessary for every class. In fact, it might only be appropriate for courses that covered modern genres, authors, or themes. It would be inappropriate, for example, to read a screenplay adaptation of a Shakespeare play in a Shakespeare class. In this case, it would serve the needs of the class better to go straight to the primary text. I mentioned earlier that one might also first read a text, like Shakespeare, then read a contemporary screenplay adaptation, then watch the film of that

adaptation. Going through the process in this order would prove very beneficial to anyone interested in how Shakespeare has affected modern audiences or how modern artists view Shakespeare's work.

Conclusion:

The screenwriter is now considered a valid writer. But too often his or her work is seen only on the screen, after it has been interpreted by dozens and dozens of other artists along the way. Any serious student of literature ought to be concerned with getting to the root of this new art form by reading original screenplays before watching and analyzing the films they produce. These screenplays use many of the same literary techniques of novels and drama but to a unique end or goal. BYU-Idaho literature classes would benefit greatly if they included the screenplay as literature in their curriculum.

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