

## 7. "Coming of Age": Film and literature as art, culture and content

Jacqueline Garçon

**F**ilm, in the form of feature length films on video, allows the learners to develop listening skills and strategies. Literature helps learners develop all language skills and expand their vocabulary in context. Exploring, contrasting, comparing, interweaving both literature and film, for their own aesthetic values becomes rich classroom material. If learners are aware of genre, voice and structure the texts make more sense, leading to a fuller exploration of meaning and a richer contact with authentic spoken and written discourse. Discovering a novel's narrative and the film adaptation's structure gives learners a framework to build on while constructing meaning during the reading and viewing process. The learners work with both mediums drawing on their personal experiences, backgrounds and imagination to access a new culture and its patterns of social interaction.

Novels and their film adaptations are interpreted as complete works through a content-based approach. As the learners recognize stimulating and relevant content, they become actively involved in communicating and in the learning process. Tasks take a whole approach to language and literature, doing things "with language not to language." (Rigg, 1991). *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (novel, 1960; film, 1962), *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (novel, 1982; film 1985) and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* by Fannie Flagg (novel, 1987; film, 1991) are the course content. The texts were selected for their rich universal themes: growing up, learning experiences, loss of innocence, education, prejudice and women's roles. Each source has a narrative which leads to personal experiences, drawing possible analogies, contrasts and suggesting possible interpretations. Each film adaptation transforms the written narrative creatively through the perspective of the camera and the visual media.

This article focuses on *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Color Purple* from the perspective of narrative: how stories work, the storytelling strategies, the aesthetic conventions, types of stories and symbolic implications. *Fried Green Tomatoes* relates the interweaving of the lives and times of several characters through complex multiple time-frames, including flashbacks and stories from the past with more than one storyteller. This complex narrative structure is simplified in the film

version to flashbacks relating one past story with the principle novel characters. Narrative includes voice. Whose story are we involved in? Whose experience are we witnessing? Who is actually relating that story? What is the degree of presence of the voice, the degree of intimacy and shared knowledge between the storyteller and the reader? Each element moves the reader towards a given perspective. Outlining and formulating this framework becomes a guide for learner understanding of text structure and meaning.

Learners discover how the narrator's role may change from novel to film. This evokes the classical repeated charge, "Well, it wasn't the book..." It was not intended to be. The adaptation is a version, a new story. Imagination creates dramatic scenes as images in our minds while reading literature. However, the film version may only deal with the major incidents or plot of the novel. In *To Kill Mockingbird* the "I" becomes "he"/"she", changing the point of view and the nature of the story. A completely different voice takes over the narrative in the film version of *The Color Purple*, as visual imagery relates the story. The film adaptation occasions criticism because the material has already appeared in another form which becomes the standard against which the film version is compared. Many film makers believe the better the literary work, the more difficult the adaptation. The true content of each medium is organically governed by its form.

### **Fiction narrative structure**

Narratives are spoken or written expressions of personal experiences. Oral histories have long been spoken narratives of personal exploits or adventures. The interactive, collaborative nature of oral storytelling ensures audience participation, involvement and identification with the experience. Good storytelling is a performance, drawing the audience in, getting them to participate in active and educated guessing, predicting. Literary texts also draw the reader in through various devices, including the structure of the narrative. Literature gives the spoken narrative a written form allowing the reader to become involved in the experience.

The classical narrative structure begins with an abstract or ambiguous reference to an experience attracting the reader. *To Kill a Mockingbird* opens with "...it began the summer Dill came to us, when Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out." (pg.7). The referential "it" attracts the readers attention to find out what event this might refer to. Learners are guided to find textual clues to make predictions. In contrast, the strongly emotional opening of *The Color Purple* contains ambiguity, yet powerfully involves the reader in brutal secrets, "You

better not never tell nobody but God. It'll kill your mammy. Dear God, I am fourteen years old. (I am) I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me." However, this novel does not follow a classical narrative structure. The opening pages do not describe the characters, setting or why characters behave as they do. Celie's story evolves out of each letter.

Orientation to who, when, where, establishes the time, the place and the characters in a setting. Each element is a clue allowing the reader to activate previous background knowledge using the text, as well as their own life experiences. The simple past tense in the opening lines of *To Kill a Mockingbird* place the novel in a childhood past: "When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow... When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading to his accident." The third paragraph introduces where and when: "Maycomb County has recently been told it had nothing to fear but fear itself." Learners complete tasks, selecting one element or one significant sentence illustrating their image of the South or list characters, giving one descriptive adjective. Thus, learners reconstruct meaning and information collaboratively from their different personal or cultural perspectives. Their interpretations are then guided by further activities (Kramsch:1985). The first six pages of the text are divided into clear narrative sections. Titles are given to each section, structuring the learners background knowledge to situate the coming events in the novel.

The classical narrative paradigm is based on a conflict between a protagonist who initiates the action and an antagonist who resists it. Characters and themes are developed as the narrative moves to the resolution. How does the protagonist get what he/she wants in the face of considerable opposition? Lastly, there is a coda or evaluation, which comments on the events. Thus, a framework is available to read the novel in longer stretches in a more autonomous fashion, reacting and responding in a more personal manner.

### **Voice in fiction**

The role of the narrator is the key to interpreting texts. The reader becomes a friend listening to the story or remains a distant observer. Who is being addressed and how, indicates the reader's involvement in the text. The degree of presence of the writer, speaker, listener or reader gives a distinct point of view. Intimacy with the reader can be created through informal language, contracted verb forms in spoken dialogues become markers of intimacy between the story-teller and the reader.

Celie's story is told through her unique voice, creating intimacy immediately. Reading aloud her letters recreates her voice. A connection is established between the reader and a young woman offering a chance for others to understand her suffering and need for compassion. Learners are made aware through a closer look at language how, in a matter-of-fact way, she actually writes about violence. There is no third person moderator to distance the reader from Celie's struggles.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the wisdom expressed in Atticus' words is more than a child's thoughts or learning. They are a reflection of the adult looking back into the past through her nostalgic memory of childhood. The story is told from a distance in the third person. How much are we assumed to know or understand about the narrator's world? Some learners feel hesitant about reading what at first appears as a child's story, but soon realize it is an adult's perspective on growing up. Listening to the book-on-tape for several pages helps establish the voice of the narrator.

The eyes of the narrator are the windows through which the events and ideas of the story are viewed. Incidents are sifted through his/her consciousness to various degrees as the main character tells her own story. Celie sounds more genuine than Scout. Is it the language she uses, how she communicates or who she is communicating with? Is there a second narrator directing the reader's perceptions? These are useful questions for learners to explore. Both texts are narratives of personal experience and thematize the teller, not only as a participant in the events, but also someone who evaluates. Most stories use the simple past to reflect the hypothetical tentativeness of this world. Thus, creating sentiments of nostalgia or loss innocence equated with childhood, the loss of innocence, becoming strong and significant in the world. The use of the historical present tense in both spoken and written narratives tends to be in complicating events of the narrative, heightening the dramatic effect, bringing the reader into the action with the teller. Such a focus on markers could give learners tools for constructing their own writing.

### **Voice and themes**

Narration explores themes: the narrator is the carrier of these themes. Characters' evolving choices and decision create themes. One element that makes the novel seem to have more depth than the film version is the dimensions the characters take on as they embody deeper themes and convey small unique inner choices. Their depth allows the reader's imagination to create real and true images of the characters. A reader has the time to ponder, to learn in depth what motivates each

character's innermost thoughts. This element of time and reflection may also lead to a deeper sense of identification with the character's choices and behavior. The narrator calls attention to what we are suppose to notice, clarifying issues, explaining ideas, telling us what is happening. *To Kill a Mockingbird* emphasizes more what is said than what is happening. Wise words take on a strong moral value. *The Color Purple's* theme is communication: written language as a vehicle of communication, the need to express oneself, even though nobody could or would listen except God. As time passes Celie changes, moving from an inability to communicate to becoming fully independent and articulate in communication.

As learners read the novel they discover narrative structure, the narrator's rôle and perspective in understanding the text. Tasks begin by examining meaning through the gist focusing on how the description of the events is shaped by the narrator. Learners need feel comfortable with the opening pages of the novel, taking more time in the first pages to decide who is speaking, their purpose, point of view and value system. As the action or plot line takes over the learners become more autonomous and are able to react on a personal level, using the text and its themes as a resource in exploring their interpretation, values and images.

### **Film narrative devices**

Examining film narrative structure learners gain a deeper understanding of both text types and the role of each art form. While reading the novel, learners review film vocabulary, read articles on film and study film techniques. They spend time discovering the modes of film communication. Does a shot equal a word? What is a film "adaptation"? Is an adaptation a new original? How many characters are there? Which ones are eliminated and why? Such questioning leads to a basis for comparing and contrasting the two works of art. Film is story-oriented, the action being foremost, moving towards a climax or resolution. It is a one time experience in the here and now as the viewer becomes an observer of the unfolding event. Learners are also guided to reflect on cultural issues in film. Why, for example, do American films generally prefer strengthening the story line rather than themes? These films are linear with a simple narrative structure. There are approximately 120 minutes to involve the viewer and tell the story. Action is key to the drama and themes are carefully balanced between story and characters.

Each of the film adaptations represents a classic three-part dramatic narrative structure: set-up (introduce the situation), confrontation (complicate it) and resolution (resolve or reverse it). However, words, thus the narrative, are translated into

images and sounds. Film represents a text that interweaves sound (noise, music, speech, sound effects, etc.) and image (gaze, gestures, shooting angles, depth, lighting, etc). These techniques are pointed out through viewing tasks as signposts becoming tools to read film. The camera shot creates images communicating much more than one word. At times, it accomplishes the interpretive process in moments as the camera takes in three-dimensional detail in seconds, perhaps taking pages in a novel to suggest. While watching, viewers are hardly aware of their instantaneous adjustments to an unfolding plot being absorbed in the auditory and visual stimuli at an incredibly rapid rate. Film may appear as less interactive, an easier process, than reading. The information has already been packaged. There is no time to create one's own images gradually in the creative and personal imagination. Learners are guided to ask questions, to compare, to contrast and to interpret film and literary versions.

Music and sound are studied for their contribution to the narrative. Learners take time to listen to background music, illustrating recurring themes. Musical signature themes help identify a character, a place, a physical state or indicate a turn in the plot or an angle on a theme. A musical phrase may enhance the narrative, being associated with a character, a situation or a mood. Music becomes a technique to advance the narrative by building to climax, creating expectations through rhythm, style or pace. Background noise is also essential to the action, coming from a source outside the physical setting of the action to direct or draw the viewers' attention. At times, conflict may be heard rather than witnessed. Sound may also include the voice of the narrator. Combining image and sound, in perfect synchronization, creates a tense atmosphere as sound comes from within the image or from the background as a distant and dispassionate commentary.

Film narration includes the choice of lighting, colors, shot angles and movement. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, (1962) in black and white, uses film techniques of the time: fades, iris (dark tunneling effect to the screen center) and voice-over narration, each for strong cinematographic effect. The themes of loss of innocence and growing up appear solemnly illustrated in shades of black and white. It becomes a character film built around the Oscar winning Gregory Peck as Atticus. The lawyer and father carries the story with his wise sayings, strong presence and decisive actions. These choices alter the focus, perspective and voice of the narrative. The story no longer belongs to the little girl. The film is not a translation of the novel, but another version of the story, a different perspective on events. The film incorporates scenes and characters from the novel that enhance the action and

directly involve Atticus. The lofty opening traveling shot relates the background information given in several pages of the novel. An adult voice opens the film as a far-off narrator of past events, with a voice-over reading of one paragraph from the novel describing Maycomb. The lynch mob and courtroom scenes, representing action, are more pivotal in the film than the novel. They become the central events which lead to Scout's learning experiences. These scenes also reveal the significant role of Atticus in the action, using long intense close-up shots as he speaks to the viewer who becomes the jurors making the critical decision. Scout is present, but does not have the central camera focus to move the story along. She is witness to events in an adult's world she does not change the events. The themes of prejudice, discrimination and racism are viewed through adult eyes and not a child's. After reading the novel the learners predict which scenes might appear in the film, which might be eliminated and why. Interestingly, one of the most emotional learning incidents is removed from the film. The film shifts perspectives so there is no longer the same intimacy between narrator and viewer as established between narrator and reader. The story has changed because the teller is the lawyer- father, not the growing young girl.

Steven Spielberg's version of *The Colour Purple* uses vivid contrasting colors to evoke raw and, sometimes brutal emotions. Dialogue is sparse, visual imagery, bright with color, mixed with music and strong rhythms are extremely evocative. Spielberg is a master in manipulating film techniques and the viewer. Learners speculate on the significance of objects that receive repeated close-up camera shots: the mailbox, the camera travels into its depths and darkness for transition to a new scene, symbolically evoking the passage of time and the lack of communication. Celie rarely speaks, constantly visualized in long background shots, behind windows or doors. She is not the center of visualization because she is denied a significant role in life. Her hand is a central image as gesture offers affection or inflicts pain. The book *Oliver Twist* appears several times, a symbol Spielberg assumes the viewer understands: both characters are the victims of cruelty and deception. The camera has difficulty entering the inner world of human consciousness, giving the characters real depth, as their words and thoughts evolve in the novel. The novel tells the story, from the inner world; the film from actions in the outer world. Spielberg's version has been contested as his own story, the perspective of a white male, far from the novel written by a black woman.

Learners watch the entire film after reading the novel. Selected scenes are watched again to comment on the film narrative techniques or the film is watched

in thirty-minute segments. Films break down into rather neat narrative sequences called hinge scenes, approximately every thirty minutes. Exploring film techniques leads learners to predict how certain scenes might be dramatized. Such guidelines allow the learners to read the film differently from the novel. They become aware of several language systems utilized simultaneously: photographic, spatial, kinetic, vocal, musical, etc. As participants become more sophisticated viewers, they read the visual images. Listening comprehension activities become nearly superfluous as visual imagery tells the story. Music, rather than words, also takes on a new connotation. The musical phrase enhances the narrative by being associated with a character, a situation or a mood. Music becomes a technique to advance the action, changing the pace, creating expectations and emotions in a different manner than words. The scenes following Celie's discovery of her sister's letters until the razor scene in *The Colour Purple* are quick, rhythmic and tense. Film tasks focus on the visual imagery as the language of communication. The activities are meant to guide the learners to realize the economy of the language of words as the visual text links words and image eloquently in inseparable messages. Spielberg creates a sense of compassion and emotion for his characters through music and color tightly linked to visual imagery. The novel is Celie's words and story. In the film, she rarely expresses herself orally.

In the opening images the film narrative defines its limits. The credits and the accompanying musical score determine the tone of the picture. The first expository scenes establish the internal "world" of the story, what is possible, probable and not very likely. Learners who have read *To Kill a Mockingbird* realize the opening credits take on more than one visual meaning, the objects and music reveal all the major themes and evoke significant events in the novel. The music and sounds establish a mood of nostalgia, childhood memories and souvenir objects, each with a special meaning and experience. The sound of a clock ticking and a child humming with the soft flowing music determine the time and place. Learners relate these images to their interpretations of the novel and surmise how the film might advance these themes. The entire novel story is evoked in the opening film credits. On the contrary, *The Colour Purple* opens with extremely long panning shots of fields of purple, the wind blowing, calm music with nearly an idyllic vision, setting-up a contrasting atmosphere to the harsh, cruel and abrupt beginning of the novel. Unlike the novel, the film carefully delineates time and its passage with dates on the screen.

Conflict, in film, builds rapidly to maximum tension in the climax then the

dramatic intensity subsides. Strands of the story are then tied up and life (might) return to normal with a closure to the action. Time is of the essence in film. The first three minutes engage the viewer. Major scenes develop in 20-30 minute slots and the entire story is told and felt emotionally within 120 minutes. The major hinge scene in *The Colour Purple* reveals Celie's discovery of the letters from Nettie, hidden away for many years. Few words are used: music, color, gestures and shot angles create an emotional climax. The actual length of this scene makes it a turning point in the film. Pace and rhythm pick up rapidly as the letters are then visualized with voice-over narration and cross-cutting to generate a dramatic effect from Nettie's nondramatic letters. As Celie reads, the setting she is currently in gradually turns into the one from the reading, a bulldozer coming through her church or an elephant coming directly at her from behind. She is eventually transported to another world in the same manner as any reader truly engaged in a text. Such film techniques also illustrate the effect of language on the imagination. These key scenes are tense, rapid and with cross-cut sequences to lead the viewer to fear the worse from the razor in Celie's hand to the ritual ceremony in Africa. Visual imagery and sound communicate without words.

How does Spielberg personally interpret the narrative? He takes one of the rare scenes from the novel where there is no dialogue: at dinner Celie curses Albert then leaves. He develops it into a culminating point in the film. As such, it is full of dialogue and verbal exchanges. Celie moves out of the background, as she makes decisions, takes significant steps in life. Language now takes on a different role. Everyone is speaking, giving their opinions and revealing their choices in life. Each one is the center of visualization. After this scene film seems to move slowly, taking a long time to be resolved, unlike the novel. The viewer has witnessed Albert's brutal treatment of Nettie and Celie so reconciliation can not take place in the film version (unlike the novel). Albert is now filmed in the background. The film's climax is the reunion of Celie with her children and sister. Film and novel differ in endings, as different stories or narratives.

### Conclusions

We have briefly examined two novels and their film adaptations from the point of view of basic narrative. This perspective reveals the rich content novel and film possess for the language classroom. Both are art forms reflecting culture(s). They provide an authentic and extensive source of language with a wealth of potential for the learners. Each has been carefully selected and treated as separate,

yet complementary forms of art; a reflection of language, cultures and personal experience. Such a content-based approach provides the teacher with exciting material and prospects for her own learning and communicating with the learners. In this case, teacher and learners discover what visual imagery communicates, how experience may be related in another manner through the written word, as the participants respond and react to significant themes in their lives and cultures. The material may also lead to exploration and project work beyond the texts. For example, quilting is a major activity for the women in *The Colour Purple*, not mentioned in the film version. Rich visuals in *National Geographic* illustrate and clarify this aspect of Black American culture. The learners are also encouraged to do group projects related to cultural aspects or themes in the novels. The overall course theme "Coming of Age" ties the works together with a common thread. It also leads learners to think about other works of art, literature or film which might reflect the same themes in a different manner.

Judicious selection of novels and films allows for a real exploration of meaning. The narrative structure gives a framework for the novel and film. Such an approach also assumes that reading, viewing and listening are extremely active and interactive skills.

The next step is to experiment using novels and films with younger learners, integrating their passion for visual imagery and their developing literacy skills. The focus on narrative structure would be a helpful strategy for understanding texts/stories, as a literacy skill. In addition, the motivation and interest factor in working with whole texts and contextualizing language beyond the sentence level with lower level learners may help the rate of second language learning. Younger learners live in a visual world and can use this understanding to get meaning and extensive input in a second language. Working with narrative structure gives the learners basic rhetorical and stylistic knowledge to comprehend the texts, to respond and to react in a meaningful manner.

## **Appendix — suggested activities**

### ***Literature***

- Comparing and describing events in different tenses or from a different perspective, i.e. another character's point of view or writing a letter to a friend
- Pick significant passage/quote. Give reasons.
- Learners select words dealing with mood/color/movement/feeling and compare their selections.

- Retelling the story, wall/flow charts, montage of events, on-going note-taking or grid filling as novels unfold.
- Reading your favorite lines; other learners put them into context.

### *Film*

Learners define and discuss film techniques. Film questions for various scenes:

- Why does the camera take this angle? Effect? What is the relevance of what is going on in the background?
- Is the story easily adaptable to the screen? Explain.
- Has the author's style been transferred to the screen?
- Predict how the novel might be transferred to the screen? Potential problems.
- A screenplay involves visual images. Identify major visual points.
- Does the plot/action follow the novel? Identify major events of the novel carried over into the film? Did the director make a major change in the point of view?
- How does the film reveal the passage of time in comparison to the novel?
- Does the film successfully capture the spirit, mood, and major themes of the novel? Give your reasons.
- What role does the soundtrack play in creating mood?
- Do you believe the director made an explicit choice to make the changes for the sake of cinematographic art or the sake of creativity? Is the director's personal mark of creativity and techniques obvious in the film adaptation?
- How do the film characters fit your imagined interpretation and notions of the characters in the novel? Which actors fit your mental image of the characters? Do you see reasons for the changes made?
- If you saw the film previous to reading the novel, did the film's imagery influence your imagination and interpretation while reading the novel?

### *Themes to explore*

receiving	giving	curiosity	duty	escape	belief
consequences	motives	romance	superstition	resolution	
obligation	creativity	choice	independence	society	
reform	property	sharing	education	generations	

**Jacqueline Garçon** is a teacher educator on the WICE/ Rutgers University TEFL Certificate Programs in Paris. She has extensive experience in ESL/EFL and teaching French in a wide variety of contexts, including Team Head of Real World Listening at Harvard University Summer School. This article was adapted from a workshop given at the TESOL Convention in Chicago, March 1996.