

**THE MEDIUM IS NOT THE MESSAGE:
TEACHING WORLD LITERATURE THROUGH FILM**

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“Television [film] ...speaking so as to be understood by idiots”
(Jacques Lacan, Television 3)

In Plato’s analogy, “The Cave” in The Republic, the prisoners are chained to their illusions, accepting the shadow world as a substitute for the real world. The shadows are formed by master puppeteers behind a fire and create fleeting images on the cave wall, much as a modern film projector would create images on a screen from a projector using light as its source. The prisoners can only see the shadowy images on the wall and assume those images are reality. Are we also fooled, deceived by the fleeting images of the film, and by the words of literature, as symbolic, existential moments, advocated by the postmodern attitude of deconstructionists? Jacques Lacan warns us to “Beware of the image” in our media, literature, and language (Lacan for Beginners 1). In developing an honor, interdisciplinary course, “World Literature through Film,” a phenomenological approach emerged, concerning the nature of these fleeting images of reality and illusion, based upon a reading of Mikel Dufrenne’s Phenomenology of the Aesthetic Experience and upon Edmund Husserl’s classic work in Phenomenology, Ideen (Ideas). Since the Christian worldview advocates a “created” world from a Creator, and since the contemporary critical theories of deconstruction, surrealism, relativism, and postmodernism attempt to obliterate that reality, what role could the integration of film and literature have in returning the existential, here-and-now generation of film-goers back to the foundations of literary heritage and our Christian heritage, without dumbing down the traditional, educational content?

Since students enjoy the visual arts, especially the film as a medium in the information age, its relationship to literature would provoke interest and interdisciplinary critical thinking. Several contemporary films have been made from literary world classics, especially in the diverse Russian, German, Western and Eastern European, Far Eastern, and other ethnic areas. This course could relate the similarities and differences in composing the film and in composing literature from a composed Christian worldview analysis. With this intention, a course was designed in order to encourage in-depth reading, and analysis, and criticism of selected, representative works of later non-British/American films and literature, including those of Europe, Asia, Africa, and/or Latin America. One film per week will be shown and discussed concerning a major literary work assigned for the reading. Each comparison of the film to the original literary work selection will be composed as a reflection paper, utilizing comparison/contrast rhetorical approaches. The class would meet one evening per week in a three hour block for a semester with a class discussion of the film and literature from a Christian perspective. The following films and literature would be the content for the first half of the course:

1. Goethe, Faust (Germany)
2. Flaubert, Madame Bovary (France)
3. Conrad , Heart of Darkness/ Apocalypse Now (Poland/Vietnam)
4. Pushkin, Eugene Onegin (Russia)
5. Ibsen, A Doll's House (Scandinavia)
6. Dostoevsky, Brothers Karamazov (Russia)
7. Grass, The Tin Drum (Germany)
8. Kurosawa, Rashomon, Seven Samarai (Japan)

The second half of the course would require the student to research a literary classic and film for class presentation and discussion. In addition, core survey texts would be available for the students, such as The Longman Anthology of World Literature,

Explorations in Theology and Film (Blackwell), and A Short Guide to Writing about Film (Pearson Longman). In the introduction to the course, a theory of film and literary discourse analysis will be presented by the instructor as preparation.

Looking back in Marshall McLuhan's rear-view mirror image, in The Medium is the Message, this instructor does not want to substitute the medium itself, the film, as the only basis for analysis. Using a comparative literary approach with the film emphasizes the significance of a literary tradition, both oral and visual. This curriculum developer's background, studying the art of both film and literature from a philosophical and language analytical approach, stems from a sequence of courses taken at S.M.U., Dallas and at The University of Texas, Dallas. At S.M.U., in the department of Comparative Literature and Liberal Arts, Dr. G. William Jones taught the composition techniques of analyzing a film, using James Monaco's classic text, How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History and Theory of Film and Media. At The University of Texas at Dallas, Dr. Paul Monaco concentrated upon the French and German film/literature connection, using his text, Cinema and Society: France and Germany during the Twenties. From this educational background, a course was proposed to the honors committee, utilizing both techniques of composition and ethnic variation. James Monaco stressed what Ferdinand Saussure later called "Sign and Syntax" (56) in perceiving the denotative and connotative meaning, reading the framed image by means of sound, montage, and narrative. Paul Monaco, on the other hand, approached the film from an historical background, emphasizing the psycho-historical influence of the French and German ethnic culture, expressed in surrealist, expressionistic films of the early filmmakers of the 1920s. Most contemporary Christian texts, however, approach film

theory and analysis from a sexuality perspective, such as Gerald Loughlin's Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology (Blackwell), not from a Christian worldview analysis, such as Clive Marsh's and Gaye Ortiz's Explorations in Theology and Film (Blackwell).

In order to return to a deeper structural analysis, a spiritual sense of the film and its comparison to literature, a phenomenological philosophical approach will be utilized in order to establish a theory of film/literature discourse analysis, opening the opportunity for a Christian worldview response to the appearance of the image, whether that image be in terms of the word or of the cinematic symbol/sign (semiotics). The symbolic world of the film first appeared to me in one of the first foreign films I had seen: *El Topo*, "The Mole" (Jodorowsky, Mexico 1970). Alexandro Jodorowsky's film has a wayward, religious intention: "Actors, audiences are killed, destroyed, and they must be born, and they must leave the theatre as new people" (Interview 97). This "born again" emphasis captures the audience's hearts, minds, and souls through the twisted, fearful, forceful, violent, disturbing images of a gunfighter on a journey for self-introspection and his "quest for sainthood." Jodorowsky's film is based upon the reading of the journey of St. Brendan, who voyaged from island to island, seeking the Lord in his isolation. St. Brendan's Journey is a story about a 5th Century monk who is suspected to have sailed across the Atlantic to land in North America. The journey is also a metaphor for his spiritual journey. Unfortunately, Jodorowsky, like many contemporary, cultural Christians, ends his own journey into Christianity with an aberrant doctrine: "I decided to be inspired by the lives of the saints, by their actions... but without their concept of God. We can't see him or talk to him" (Interview, 171-172). The film image then becomes the

new idol for approximating a spiritual encounter with God instead, with conquest and Freudian, Reichean, orgasmic sexuality, substituting for Christian lowliness and love. Most contemporary film theories advocate this biased intentionality, such as sexual liberation, Marxist propaganda, or other contemporary a-genders. Returning to sound educational pedagogy, a film and literature should teach “how a film [literature] means” (Paul Monaco, preface i). By examining the symbolism, theme, using frame-theory, and a phenomenological approach, the deep structure of both a film and literature should reveal the essential foundations for a classical education, established in the roots of a Christian worldview tradition.

A phenomenological approach to film and literature diminishes the presuppositions and biases toward the image captured frame by frame, or word by word. Both the film and literature attempt to capture reality, not necessarily to escape it: “Yet, action is always in the real world, and Husserl’s method is supposed to bracket the real world while considering the pure essence of phenomena” (Jarvie, *Philosophy of the Film*

26). Edmund Husserl systematized the philosophy of Phenomenology:

- A. Philosophy is a rigorous, disciplined science of the mind. (Husserl, Ideas)
- B. Phenomenology is a method of consciousness to attain absolutely valid knowledge of things or essences.
- C. The world-in-which-we-live (Lebenswelt) is reduced to absolute presuppositionlessness.
- D. By the method of phenomenological reduction, we learn to see things we previously thought to perceive, in a different way, penetrating deeper into things, and grasp an understanding of consciousness, our “being-in-the-world” (Dasein). (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty)
- E. Our consciousness, by eidetic reduction, transcends our limited space-time experience, and we enter into a “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer) with other thinkers in history (“oneself as another,” Ricoeur), reinterpreting (hermeneutics) thoughts with “communicative action groups” (Habermas).

Attaining the valid essence of reality, these communicative action groups practice discourse analysis of the film and literature, grasping a greater truth beyond the fleeting image and relativistic perception. Film and literature must be consistent with reality, correspond to reality, and present a coherent viewpoint on their own evidences, the text itself, or the framed image itself. Creatively, we begin by imaginative stimulation, playing with the attempts of what Jacques Derrida calls “differentiation” or *la difference*. As we achieve a deeper structural analysis, we derive an unveiling of universal truth transcending the images and symbols, or meaning behind God’s created world. Just as God’s Word in the Bible becomes mature meat for the baby Christian, “Developmentally, we start as children looking behind the television for little people... More mature, a film invites us to take it for real” (Jarvie 137). Beginning with appearances in existence, phenomenology then is “ a model of self and world that will mediate between being and consciousness and will not reify either, nor reduce one to the other” (Jarvie 137). This phenomenological philosophical approach discloses the biased perceptions, criticizes the shadows of biased intentionality, for “behind such a work there always lurks the personal or cultural perceptions about morality, reality, implicit in our thoughts and actions” (Jarvie 26).

In a world of relativistic opinion claimed as truth, reality and truth do not exist independently of human consciousness, as a sovereign entity. In this denial of an objective, eternal, absolute truth, any here-and-now narrative is acceptable as truth in film or in literature. George Linden differentiates these narratives in fiction, the theatre, the novel, and the film:

Most stories begin “Once upon a time.” Films do not. They begin, “Once upon a now.” The basic premise of the theatre is “What happens next?” The basic premise of the novel is “What has happened?” The basic premise of film is “What is going on now?” (Reflections on the Screen 7)

For example, the Japanese film, *Roshomon*, by Kurosawa, displays four different endings to a series of action episodes, similar to Jodorowsky’s *El Topo*, containing the violent outlaw and sexual perversions for sensation, assuming each ending is credible or incredible, left up to the audience’s whims. If we return to the foundational elements of literary criticism, examining the frames of the film, the applications of the elements of literature are transposed upon the elements of the film. Eliminating as much bias and presupposition as possible, bracketing in the consciousness, an analysis of the film and literature allows us in our phenomenological frame-theory to include recognizable elements like, setting, character, plot, tone, diction, climax, resolution, tragedy, comedy, theme, etc., grasping the essence of the film and literature once again in the tradition of Aristotle’s Poetics and Rhetoric. Recovering the classical tradition by a deep structure analysis of the film and literature would allow us to reveal how the thesis reflects human and spiritual universal ideas and values, essences. As a result of examining film and literature, the meta-questions arise: Is it true of the film/literature? Is it true consistently in general, corresponding to a coherent reality, God’s creation? Is it true of the human spirit, made in God’s image? In teaching film and literature, we can not afford to substitute the “medium as the message” and as Christians, we have an obligation to teach the truth of reality: the message of God’s Word, edifying through all means possible, including film and literature.

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