Film as Literary Influence on the Novel:

How to Approach Scenes Within Novel Chapters

By

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Celluloid Strangers

The movie is better than the book.

There, I said it; I broke the sacred oath of all book-lovers. But in some cases it's actually true and there are very good reasons as to why. And novelists can learn from movies a great deal.

This past fall this very issue came up countless times in the undergraduate Film & Literature course I teach at The University of Akron. And perhaps the strongest example we explored was *The Godfather*. Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 masterpiece adaptation of Mario Puzo's novel not only took home the Oscar for Best Picture but is widely regarded by critics to be among the finest American movies of the twentieth century. And although Coppola and Puzo co-wrote the screenplay, it is clear from the first frame what the filmmaker brought to presenting the story on screen that the novelist could have used in his original one on the printed page.

There are valid arguments about film's negative influences on fiction. I can attest to this because it is obvious to me that the majority of young writers I see in my fiction writing workshops have clearly seen more movies than have read novels. However, all good storytelling, especially novel chapters, is comprised of scenes. Effective scenes that operate together as a working unit is what long narrative hinges one, and filmmakers are instinctively aware of this. Great filmmakers know exactly what they want to accomplish in a scene and even more importantly know when to leave a scene and not linger one second longer than is necessary to provide the

audience what it needs from it. I, stupidly, did not adhere to this during the original drafting of my own novel, *Celluloid Strangers*, which ironically pays homage to the movies.

The opening of the film adaptation of *The Godfather* is among the most perfectly executed scenes in movie history. But it is not how Puzo originally opens his novel. The novel begins with Puzo utilizing a classic Russian literature technique of having the reader first encounter a supporting character—in this case the undertaker Bonasera who sits in a courtroom and watches a judge suspend the sentence of two men who have beaten his only daughter like an animal—so that when the domineering figure of the story is presented—Don Corleone—he needs little introduction.

In contrast, the film does open with Bonasera, but instead it is a forward shot of him retelling this experience to the don as he sits in Corleone's home office. The camera rests over Don Corleone's shoulder and by hearing his voice and the filmmaker withholding a visualization of him until the moment Bonasera asks for the don to murder the two men, the audience must *imagine*. Here Coppola is demonstrating the first of the two key ingredients to constructing a successful scene: knowing what you *don't* need to show. By not showing the don at first, and only hearing Marlon Brando's chilling guttural voice, the audience instinctively accepts that Bonasera is speaking to a figure of immense authority that warrants great respect. After this, the second ingredient is achieved: incorporating everything the scene demands in as little space as possible and getting out of it pronto and onto the next one.

When writing my own novel, *Celluloid Strangers*, I truly wish I had recognized this early on but I unfortunately did not. I am not joking when I say that at one point the manuscript almost reached 1,000 double-spaced pages. Yes, there were plenty of chapters that never made it even close to the final cut. But the majority of the real trimming was done on a scene-to-scene level. I had too often fallen in love with my scenes and lingered in them long after I had accomplished what their purposes were. This is of course humorous in retrospect. Because near the beginning of my novel I tell the back-story of how a B-movie filmmaker, Barry Lords, is beside himself when he discovers that a very important scene he has shot for his movie is destroyed when the celluloid is developed.

Lords asks the novel's central character, Simon Gandelman, "How do I finish a thriller without the murder scene?" That night Simon has a dream. He is in his hometown, but he is also reliving WWII. There are no people or soldiers to be seen, but he knows the fight is near. He can hear the war, but he cannot see it. And that is what has always scared him the most: knowing that death might be in front of him but not being able to pinpoint just where. At the moment Simon knows he will be able to see the enemy, he wakes up from his sleep, chilled and terrified. The next day he restructures the scene in Lords' thriller for which they are missing footage so as to never show the actual murder, arranging it around the fear and suspense of never seeing what the audience suspects has happened, forcing the viewer to imagine how gruesome a murder can be without witnessing it as the screen fades to black.

I should have been listening to my own characters because when drafting *Celluloid Strangers* I had not yet learned that, just like a filmmaker, a writer does not always need to show everything in his narrative. Watching good movies is a goldmine of inspiration for doing this in fiction. Likewise, it is often what doesn't need to be in a scene, especially in a novel chapter, that, when removed, tightens the narrative so that you keep the reader in the scene only as long as necessary.

In my novel I withhold a very important piece of the personal history about Simon's love interest, May Park. She is a complicated character who was a joy to write for because, out of all of my characters in the book, I had the hardest time understanding where she was coming from. Before meeting Simon, she had been raped as a teenager. After a lot of consideration I felt I needed to show that life-changing evening of her young life so readers could better understand her and, more importantly, empathize with her worldview. The chapter itself came easier than I expected but in draft after draft I could not bring myself to create the actual moment of horror on the page. I simply kept "[RAPE]" typed in white space as a placeholder. I couldn't write that part of the scene because just *imagining* such a horrible act of violation disgusted me. It still does.

In the end, that was what I wanted readers to feel as well. I decided to write the scene right up to the boys overtaking May after she puts up a strong struggle. I then cut to white space and picked up

the scene directly following the incident after the boys have left her in the place of the terrible act. She is alone and I have not shown what happened, but by describing her emotional and physical condition following it I feel readers are given an even more chilling experience because they have to *imagine* it. And the movies taught this to me more than any work of fiction could. I don't have to see Bonasera's daughter being beaten like an animal in *The Godfather* nor do I need to see him watch the judge suspend the culprits' sentences. His devastated emotional state over just knowing of his only daughter's torment lets me know everything. It lets me know that I don't need to show my own character being violated to achieve the reaction I desire from readers.

Knowing what is necessary to show readers and what isn't in the specific scenes of novel chapters does not come easily to most fiction writers. Scenes that involve sensitive material are often the most difficult to navigate regarding this. When depicting sex scenes, the late Oakley Hall advised his writing students to "cut it off at the fireplace," so to speak. But I think that approach gives fiction writers rigid boundaries. There are times when sex or violence must be presented in a story and there are times when it is not necessary. It's something with which all writers need to be cautious. But a healthy dose of good movies is a great place for all novelists to start from when considering the tricky balance.

What Eric's Characters Were Trying to Teach Him: An Excerpt from *Celluloid Strangers*

The first time Simon ever heard a person scream at Sunrise was during post-production for his first screenplay: *Shelter in the Dark*. He and Jack Thallman co-wrote the script in five weeks and it was budgeted for a tight eighteen-day shoot. Even Simon knew it was nothing special. He caught on to how the studio worked quickly enough. The first draft was looked over by Marty, who said, "This isn't advanced mathematics. Millions of people go to the pictures every week, give them what we know keeps those seats filled." The draft had been tossed back as if it was a melon that wasn't ripe enough. "Chop the background crap. It doesn't matter what happened when the killer was a teenager that turned him into what he

is. And pump up the love story. Assume the audience is dumb."

The screaming came from the print development department. Barry Lords had been assigned to direct *Shelter in the Dark*. Lords was known for having no sense of style whatsoever, but Simon really liked him. Lords was the only director who ever turned to Simon after a scene-take to say, "It's not working, any ideas?" Then again, the next take was usually the last. But for all his faults, Lords really enjoyed going to the pictures, even the bad ones. Simon had never once heard the man criticize a film. When asked what he thought of a picture, Lords would usually say, "It was good."

Barry Lords was a real gentleman. And maybe that's why he never made it far, why he was considered washed up at forty-five. He actually gave compliments without expecting anything in return. And he was lucky. He had been discovered eleven years before by a studio scout who saw a weekend production of *Much Ado About Nothing* Lords directed at the San Diego Community Playhouse. The next day Lords was offered more money than he ever made selling life insurance.

Lords did not complicate things. He positioned the camera at the same angle for every shot and told his cinematographer to roll. One take: sometimes two. No coverage. If that first take did not work he would politely say to an actor, "One more try." That was it. He always followed a request with, "thank you." He was the only person in Hollywood Simon met who did not owe money to anyone: not a bookie, mortgage, nothing. Lords also might have been the only director who was still married to his first and only wife. His kids even attended public schools.

When Simon heard Lords scream in the print development department it was obvious that this cheap picture was the man's last chance at keeping his job. Walter Alston, the print manager, had said, "We have a problem."

"What do you got for me, Walt?" Lords had asked in a pleasant voice. It amazed Simon. Lords' wife could tell him she was having an affair and he would probably say, "How can we mend this?" But Alston's news was different.

The developer had over-exposed an entire can of film. He tried to re-soak it in solution, which occasionally worked for exterior scenes shot with too much light. Unfortunately, the can contained an

interior scene filmed with low light. The celluloid had been burnt blood red. Normally Lords would shrug and say, "That's Hollywood," because these incidents typically occurred with second unit filler material. Simon and Thallman could not believe what came out of Lords' mouth, because the man had difficulty even hearing God's name taken in vain.

"You little fuck!" Lords screamed. When the room went silent, Lords' face was moist. His voice broke. "How do I finish a thriller without the murder scene?"

"Relax," Alston said. "We'll develop it again, just give me the negative."

There was no negative.

Lords had been kept under contract for eleven years for one reason: He brought in every picture he directed under budget. Thus he remained employed making films that the studio used to showcase new talent and that the critics never ceased to pan. Anybody could direct them, but not as cheaply as Lords.

How did he make them so cheaply? He took scripts that were period pieces and revised them into contemporary stories; sometimes did away with second unit shots or assumed the audience would not notice him using the same stock footage three or four times. But more than anything, Lords minimized post-production costs by going directly to final print out of the can. He had not developed a negative in eight years.

Lords' fingers shook as he sipped whiskey at the Pacific Bar on Tangerine Street, three blocks from the lot. Simon drank a club soda. Thallman had wanted nothing to do with the problem.

"I'm finished," Lords had said. "This time next month I'll be going door to door trying to convince people I'm selling them a piece of mind. Do you know what life insurance is, Gandelman? You're betting against yourself. The way it pays off is if you die."

The only solution Lords could conceive of was to ask the studio for more money, go back and re-shoot the scene. That was, if the actors were still available and if Katz did not replace him with another director. Sunrise would spend the money, but Katz would see that Lords had lost his cheap man's touch and would cut him loose. Simon convinced him to take a day to think it over.

That night Simon had a dream. He was in Dorchester, but he was

also in a war, only the battle was now on Kenstook Street. There were no people or soldiers to be seen, but he knew the fight was there. He could hear the war, but he could not see it. And that was what had always frightened him the most: knowing that death might be in front of him but not being able to know just where it was. And at the moment Simon knew he would be able to see the enemy, he awoke, chilled, terrified. The smell of gasoline and gunpowder consumed his nostrils. He threw off the sheets and went to his typewriter.

The next morning Simon found Lords and insisted they edit what they had already shot according to his new restructuring. Lords said, "Do whatever you want."

Rather than complicate matters by going to producer Cal Drankin's office, Simon dragged Lords to Alston's bungalow and did not let him leave. If anyone saw Lords' face it was over. Lords sat nearly comatose sipping whiskey in the corner while Simon dictated the new edit of the picture, complete with voiceover narration of his own speech, altered to an octave lower by chain-smoking and speaking through a handkerchief. Thallman's only comment was an emotionless "Hmm?"

When Lords handed the studio the final cut they had no idea what to make of it. This was not the film they had assigned him to direct. Word spread around the lot like giggles in a high school cafeteria. "You won't believe it, Barry Lords now thinks he's Hemingway or something." Lords left the studio without being asked. Simon had to call him in San Diego two months later to share the good news.

By never showing the actual murder, by restructuring the picture around the fear and suspense of never seeing what the audience suspected had happened, by forcing the viewer to imagine how gruesome a murder could be without witnessing it as the screen faded to black, *Shelter in the Dark* put Simon and Thallman on the map as the hottest young writers in town and provided Lords with his first complimentary reviews. Simon read from the *Herald* over the telephone:

LOS ANGELES — Barry Lords' bare-bones, single-positioned camera angles and the simplicity of what he has pioneered as the

"anti-style" approach, force even this critic to question if all along we have not watched this genius' pictures with the release of expectations he demands. "Shelter in the Dark" is not only the best structured of Lords' films, but is also the most emotionally involving. Lords arrives as a mature artist backed with a brilliant screenplay by newcomers Simon Gandelman and Jack Thallman. After seeing this picture it is now clear that the world would be a better place if it was directed by Barry Lords.

Lords laughed. "They make it sound like I had fans all these years."

"Get back here," Simon told him over the telephone. "You're career's saved."

Lords breathed heavily. "I know this will take you guys places. But I think it's a nice way for me to bow out. I'm not a real cineaste like you, Gandelman. Watch your back, kid. And more important, remember that there's a life beyond pictures. For god's sake, go see a baseball game. That's real. All this, it's just celluloid."

Two years later, just before the war, Simon ran into Lords in San Diego when scouting locations. Lords was in the restaurant at the Hotel Del Coronado, sitting with his wife, who was what Simon had expected—a soft-faced, heavy-waisted woman who lovingly stirred sugar cubes into her husband's coffee. Lords mostly talked about his kids. Simon was happy that the man was content living the life he never wanted for himself.

Lords was back selling life insurance, but was also directing Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* at the San Diego Community Playhouse. "Just for fun. It runs the next two weekends." Simon returned to San Diego the next weekend. After the show he found Lords in the lobby and did what Hollywood had taught him best: he lied and said, "I really enjoyed it."

Lords had smiled and said, "Thank you." He then pulled Simon aside and said, "You're changing; I can see it. But don't let them change your destiny. Don't allow them to let you direct a picture—ever. Directors are businessmen, expendable managers. You're a writer. If you direct you'll never write true again, not as you're destined to." He then gave Simon a hug. It was more affection than his own father had ever shown.