LITERATURE AND FILM: MODERNITY – MEDIUM – ADAPTATION

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Keywords: Literature, Film, Modernity, Adaptation, Narrative, Semiotics, The Third Man, Contempt

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Summary

Interactions between literature and film facilitate tracing the evolution of European modernity during a period of intense innovation from 1890 to 1930 and since. This interaction also discloses broader issues of aesthetics and technology that center on the emergence of cinema as a distinctive cultural medium of the twentieth century. Two examples of adaptation from fiction to film – Carol Reed and Graham Greene’s The Third Man (1949) and Jean-Luc Godard’s Contempt (1963) – set the dynamics of adaptation into context. A concluding section reviews current issues related to adaptation and current technologies of visual cultures.

1. Introduction

The evolving relations between literature and film between 1890 and 1930 provide a suitable context to trace cultural modernity in light of key concepts and historical inquiry. From the side of film, the period in question approximates the era of silent (sometimes equated with “early”) cinema spanning the work of Thomas Edison, Louis and Auguste Lumière, and Georges Méliès, up through the onset of sound film. Silent film should not, however, be misconstrued as film without sound, since projections through the 1920s often included musical and voice accompaniments. Sound film likewise offers a complexity encompassing speech, music, and ambient noise in various combinations and expressions. The period between 1890 and 1940 also coincides with the emergence of a European literary modernism for which overlapping concepts and practices among literary, visual, performing, and plastic arts are central. The notion of a grand synthesis in a total work promoted collaborations among playwrights, musical composers, dancers, and painters whose efforts defined avant-garde practices many of which continue to the present. Grounded in musical composition by Richard Wagner’s total work of art Gesamtkunstwerk and in poetry in Stéphane Mallarmé’s notion of Le
Livres (Book), this synthesis promoted a new awareness of parallels and differences among artists, writers, and composers. Claude Debussy’s 1894 musical composition, “Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun” linked to Mallarmé’s 1876 poem of the same title and Jean Cocteau’s 1920 play, The Newlyweds of the Eiffel Tower were among new collaborations and hybrids among music, drama, and poetry that reconfigured possibilities of creative expression. Debussy’s work also points to the major role played by adaptation — mainly, but certainly not exclusively, from literary sources – in any consideration of film and literature.

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Biographical Sketch

Steven Ungar was born in Chicago, IL in 1945. He studied at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, earning B.A. (1966) and M.A (1968) degrees in French language and literature. He received his Ph.D. in French in 1973 from the Department of Romance Studies at Cornell University (Ithaca, NY).

He taught at Case Western Reserve (1972-1976) and since 1976 at The University of Iowa (Iowa City, IA, U.S.A.), where he is Professor of French and Comparative Literature. His book-length publications include Roland Barthes: The Professor of Desire (1983), Scandal and Aftereffect: Blanchot and France Since 1930 (1995), and (coauthored with Dudley Andrew) Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture (2005). Current projects include a monograph on Agnès Varda’s 1961 film, Cléo de 5 à 7 for the British Film Institute’s “BFI Film Classics” series and a study of postwar French documentary films.

Professor Ungar is a member of the Modern Language Association, the American Comparative Literature Association, and the Society for Cinema and Media Studies.