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## Dealing with Description in Adaptations

Taking as a starting point my title, there are two terms which need some explication: *description* and *adaptations*.

Just exactly what is meant by *description* in the present paper? To answer that, let us look initially at description in literature. We will return to the question of description in film later.

Description can refer to a number of aspects of a literary text, but what I am concerned with here is a particular segment of a work of fiction known to linguists and narratologists as a *text type*. Text types are defined with respect to their functions in the work at hand, and include, for example, narrative, commentary, argumentation, and exposition. Description, then, according to the entry in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ‘identifies the properties of places, objects, or persons’.<sup>1</sup> The distinction between narrative and descriptive text types has been a subject of considerable interest through the years, often to the disadvantage of description. Classical narratology, for instance, ‘defines description as a narrative pause interrupting the presentation of the chain of events’.<sup>2</sup> There is indeed a long historical tradition of downgrading the importance of – indeed, of denigrating – the role of description in fiction. Some of this comes from fiction writers themselves, many of whom emphasize that the main – if not the only – goal of a writer is to tell a story. Anything that gets in the way of that telling of the tale – including excessive description – is a potential threat to the success of the story in question. But also literary critics and academic scholars of literature have been dismissive of description in comparison to narrative. As Jeffrey Kittay puts it in the introduction to a special issue of *Yale French Studies*, devoted to description:

We still operate very much within the Aristotelian concept of action, which suggests that description be viewed as secondary, and purely functional, or merely decorative. Consequently, description is seen as something which must be kept in its place, functioning to fill in or to set up, and having a certain marginality or accident, making

it detachable or skippable; otherwise, if it does claim a larger *droit de cité* (as in descriptive poetry of the eighteenth century), it is seen to be uncontrollable or excessive or boring.<sup>3</sup>

One scholar who has *not* placed narration in an aesthetically superior position in comparison to description, who has indeed deliberately called for their mutual importance and dependence upon one another, is Seymour Chatman. In *Coming to Terms*, from 1990, Chatman produced what is still today one of the most relevant scholarly texts on the relationship between these two text types.<sup>4</sup> What he points out – quite correctly – is that there are different kinds of description. And that neither narration nor description are seldom, when examined closely, found in a pure state. He demonstrates and exemplifies the way in which a particular text type can be what he calls ‘in the service of’ another, so that narrative passages can serve partially descriptive functions, and vice versa. Writing at approximately the same time, Harold F. Mosher, Jr. also emphasizes how the situation is most usefully seen in terms of a continuum stretching from pure narrative, through what he calls ‘descriptized’ narration, to narratized description, to pure description.<sup>5</sup> And Ruth Ronen has gone so far as to suggest that the division between narrative and descriptive text types is itself an invalid one.<sup>6</sup>

The research in which I am currently engaged focuses extensively on the fictional worlds, or storyworlds, of contemporary literature, television, and cinema. That allows – or often requires – me to see things from a somewhat different perspective than is often adopted by narratologists, rhetoricians, and other literary scholars. In this context, description becomes one of the most central, most important of all text types for the creation, understanding, and evaluating of storyworlds, assuming a significance at times as great as – and sometimes greater than – that of character or plot development. When full consideration is given to the interactions and interrelationships of the various text types – something which has not always been done by critics and scholars – there are interesting and valuable things to be learned.

Before broaching the issue of description in film, let us briefly tackle the question of *adaptations*. An adaptation, in the very restricted sense that I am using the term here, concerns a work of literature which is made into, or serves as the basis for, a motion picture or television program. I will not discuss adaptations in the opposite direction, from screen to printed page. Long dominated by the questions of the fidelity, or faithfulness, of particular adaptations to the literary source material from which they have been developed, adaptation studies

have relatively recently begun to ask more complex and sophisticated questions concerning the nature of the adaptation process. While earlier discussions often focused on the ‘accuracy’ or the ‘correctness’ of adaptations – thereby automatically, if not always consciously – prioritizing the literary over the cinematic, many present-day students of adaptation are aware of the pitfalls of narrowly-focused fidelity studies. And the days when the film was automatically and always inferior to the novel are, hopefully, past – even though in the popular imagination and non-academic treatments of adaptation, especially journalistic approaches to specific films, the fidelity paradigm remains clearly dominant.

Still (and despite what I myself am saying here) there is a recurring issue of exactly what it is that links a given book with its ‘filmization’, what exactly it is that is transferred, conveyed, or – if you will – translated from novel to screen. My own personal view is that this is an issue of both import and sophistication that has not yet been successfully or fully addressed by students of adaptation, whether they be champions or opponents of fidelity. It is also, unfortunately, far outside the boundaries of the present paper.

At this point, it is necessary to briefly mention a couple of jointly theoretical and methodological positions adopted concerning conceptual (and terminological) issues that can be summarized like this: cinema is not a language and movies are not texts.

The first of these issues is an old one, seen whenever someone speaks of the ‘language of film’, a phrase which is still commonly-enough heard in both popular and academic contexts. Nonetheless, it seems clear to me that this is simply wrong, because film is *not* a language. And, consequently, treating cinema as if it were just another written or spoken language is a mistake.<sup>7</sup>

The second issue becomes relevant in the use of the term *text type*, which I use quite readily with respect to literature, but which is troublesome when referring to movies. This is because of my perspective on a larger question: I find the widespread use of the term *text* as a general designation not only for literary but also audiovisual works to be highly problematic. Aware that my objections place me in a minority among academics, in this context I can do no better than cite Kamilla Elliott and note agreement with her concerning this terminological (and implicitly conceptual) praxis: ‘First, it obviously confuses an interdisciplinary discussion. Second, I join numerous film and visual arts critics in opposing the colonizing application of terminology derived from language and linguistics to film and pictorial arts.’<sup>8</sup> The immediate consequences for the presentation at hand is that I need

another term to designate the functionally-defined sections or segments of a film analogous to text types for literature. These I will call *shot types*, assuming – at least for the present time – that a cinematic shot can be seen as (albeit very) roughly equivalent to a textual segment.

Which brings me (at last) to the question posed, or at least implied, in my title: How do we deal with description in adaptations? One thing which becomes apparent on examination: description cannot simply be transferred from one medium to the other. In fact, there arises immediately the issue of whether description as such exists in film at all.

According to one argument, not only *can* description exist in movies, it is actually *always* present. In fact, segments of a film – the shot types – are functionally multivalent; they are not like text types, which can have (but do not have to, of course) a single – or at least one dominant – functional purpose; film shots always function simultaneously on many levels, one of which might be called description. For instance, film sequences cannot help but be both temporal and spatial at the same time, so what is sometimes claimed as the distinguishing characteristic of description – its spatiality – has necessarily to share the stage with the built-in temporality of the (appropriately named) *movie*. As Klaus Rieser puts it, ‘the descriptive in film generally includes action or at least movement and [...] narrative in film is always also descriptive’.<sup>9</sup> One cannot help but be reminded of Mosher’s continuum of literary text types stretching from narrative to description mentioned above, but with film it seems that *every* shot is intrinsically descriptive, not just some of them.

One can of course question whether this really should be called *description*. Placing something in front of an audience, on *display*, as it were (the term I prefer for this cinematic phenomenon) is not quite the same as describing it. For me, the concept of description implies more than allowing something to be seen. Implicit in the definition is a feeling that whatever is being described has been chosen, singled out in some manner, for some reason – however subjectively or lightly – as being worthy of special attention. And the description itself also provides a focus on, and attention to, particular – and particularly interesting or important – elements, aspects, or characteristics of what is being described. Some of what I am getting at is captured by the views of Jean-François Marmontel, taken from the eighteenth-century French *Encyclopédie*: ‘Description is a figure of thought by development which, instead of simply indicating an object, makes it somehow visible, by lively and animated exposition of its most interesting properties and circumstances.’<sup>10</sup>

However the case may be, what I am interested in in the present context is what can be done with literary description when a story is being adapted to an audiovisual format. One might, at first glance, think that novels whose texts contain a large number of text types which are traditional description might be among the most easily transferred from book to screen. In fact, just the opposite is true: It is my contention that the more explicit and detailed a descriptive passage, segment, or section of a work of written fiction is, the less a filmmaker can (or, indeed, will want to try to) capture or transfer that description onto the screen. More explicit detail, and more detailed descriptions – whether of persons, places, or other aspects of the fictional world – make for greater difficulty in intermedial ‘translation’.

Of course, there are some works – most notably those from the fantasy and science fiction genres – whose storyworlds only exist because of the descriptions found in those works. Often there are no real-world referents to the persons and places of fantasy and science fiction, because these fictional elements exist only in the words of the text, and they come into being as the novel is being read, being truly and literally unique to the particular work at hand. When a cinematic storyteller wishes to transfer such imaginary beings, places, and ‘things’ to an audiovisual medium, then he or she must visualize them; must, in fact, *create* them – in some meaningful sense of that term – so that they can be seen (and, when appropriate, heard) by a movie or television audience. In such cases, it is to the text alone that the cinematic storyteller must turn. Yet even here the descriptions on paper (or computer screen, as the case may be) will be, when it comes to using them for the task of realizing more or less concrete beings or landscapes, far from complete enough to use without significant expansion and extension. However detailed a written description of an alien being, an extraterrestrial planet, a dragon, or a magical castle may be, it will need considerable concretization if and when it is to be transformed into a realistic scene in a motion picture. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why so few of the SF and fantasy novels which provide the most elaborate fictional worlds for their readers have remained unfilmed.

An SF novel which *has* been subject to adaptation is *Dune*, by Frank Herbert.<sup>11</sup> This popular and award-winning book has been adapted twice: the first time over twenty years after its original 1965 publication, as a feature-length film directed and scripted by David Lynch, released in 1984; and, more than fifteen years after that, as a television mini-series under the title *Frank Herbert’s Dune*, directed and scripted by John Harrison and first broadcast on the Sci-Fi Channel in the US in December of 2000.

*Dune* (the novel) takes place in the far future and tells the story, in some considerable detail, of the sociopolitical machinations of a space-faring, technologically advanced human civilization which is nonetheless basically feudal in its social, political, and religious structures and values. The novel is set primarily on the extraterrestrial planet Arrakis, known also as Dune because of its arid nature. It is a world covered in deserts and totally without rain or indeed precipitation of any kind. The intricacies of the book's plot, its large cast of characters, and its many themes make it impossible to summarize briefly. Suffice it to say that, with respect to the focus of the present paper, there is a great deal of detail concerning the world of Dune in the novel, from descriptions of the physical landscape and its ecological nature, to the physiology of Arrakis' inhabitants, to the social customs and religious beliefs of the characters. Despite the wealth of detail found in the novel, however, much remains that Herbert did not – indeed could not – describe, and the filmmakers responsible for both audiovisual versions of the story were forced to invent much that was finally seen in cinemas and on television screens. As is noted in the commentary accompanying the DVD of the miniseries, for example, the airships used to move about in the planet's skies, known as ornithopters in the novel, are not described in detail in the book. Therefore, they had to be created by the filmmakers more or less from scratch.

One method for capturing description when developing a film from literary material is simply not to translate it at all, but to actually retain (at any rate, some) literary-type descriptions in the film. My example here is *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, a 2004 novel by Jeff Lindsay,<sup>12</sup> adapted into a television series which was first broadcast in twelve episodes from October through December of 2006 on the Showtime cable TV network in the USA.

*Darkly Dreaming Dexter* is told in first person by its protagonist, Dexter Morgan, a civilian blood spatter specialist who works for the Miami Police Department. He is also a serial killer. But one who displays order and structure in his illegal and – as he himself readily admits – monstrous activities, perhaps even a moral dimension (since the people he kills are all, in one way or another truly 'bad' people). Dexter explains that he is being driven to his actions by what he calls his 'Dark Passenger', an internal voice or compulsion which steers him to commit his crimes; a further complication is the fact that Dexter thoroughly enjoys what he is doing. *Dexter* (the TV show) actually manages to include sections of explicit, literary-type description in its storyworld – by allowing the protagonist, Dexter himself, to provide more or less direct description of what he sees, observes, and knows

through the use of voice-over. His words deliver description to the viewers – and, significantly, to the listeners – of the program. The series can, therefore, combine the advantages of both verbal and visual storytelling to provide greater depth and more information than would have been available to the audience otherwise.

As a final example, I turn to Ian McEwan's *Atonement*,<sup>13</sup> which was adapted as a feature film in 2005, directed by Joe Wright, with a screenplay by Christopher Hampton. McEwan's novel is divided into four parts: a long first section which takes place during a single, hot, summer's day at an English country house in the year 1935; a second part unfolds five years later and in it we follow three British soldiers in Europe during the days leading up to the Dunkirk evacuations of World War II; the third section is set in the St. Thomas hospital in London, at approximately the same time as the Dunkirk section; the final, much shorter section, dated 1999, takes place in contemporary England. The film adaptation is similarly divided into four segments, which mirror relatively accurately the temporal divisions of the book.

Obviously, there are a number of things that cinema can do – and which cinematic storytellers are indeed often very keen on doing – which are intrinsically different from what can be done on paper. Some of these have to do with the visual nature of film, some with its audio characteristics, not least the use of music. For instance, in the initial scenes of the cinematic *Atonement*, by allowing the camera to follow young Briony Tallis, the story's protagonist, as she moves through the entire house in which she lives, we are given a 'description' of the place and introduced to some of the people found there. In a similar manner, aspects of Dunkirk and the London hospital are conveyed on screen via images, information which necessarily had to be conveyed differently in the novel. One can note, for instance, the introduction of the color red into the section of the film set in the hospital only *after* wounded soldiers begin to arrive there. Also, the later intensification of this visual effect by the use of the thick, solid, red drapes which completely surround a dying French soldier, setting him and Briony apart from the rest of the ward – effectively from the rest of the world – could not have been accomplished by purely literary means. Sound is another tool which is not directly available to the novelist. In the segment of the film just mentioned, immediately after the French soldier's death, as Briony walks away from his bedside, the music of Debussy is heard. This particular piece of music has been mentioned to Briony by the soldier, moments before his death – an event reported in the novel and subsequently transferred into the film – although the actual audio

reproduction is something which could only have been accomplished in a movie theater, not on the printed page.

Aspects of media-specific differences in descriptions in novel and film are many. In the novel, McEwan often uses his written descriptions to indicate differences between what is apparent at the surface and what one finds at deeper levels. For example, the Tallis house and grounds appear at first glance to be old, elegant, safe, and secure, but on closer inspection – for which the detailed verbal descriptions provide ample evidence – much of the initial impression turns out to be mistaken. Likewise, the experiences of the men who actually survived the Dunkirk retreat are shown – again via descriptive richness – to differ significantly from official versions of the happenings. In the film, much of this is conveyed using media-specific visual and audio techniques.

In conclusion, considering my earlier suggestion of *display* as a better concept than *description* for discussing what we see when watching an audiovisual presentation, let me end with a proposal for how and when description can be said to be present in film. What film *does* describe are the likes of *processes*, or *relationships*. That is to say: film can excel at describing complex, multivalent circumstances, especially those with an important temporal dimension. Examples include phenomena such as the shifting political relationships on Arrakis, the process of survival necessitated by the activities of Dexter Morgan, or the nature of the role of writer assumed by Briony Tallis. Selected aspects of the phenomenon in question are highlighted or become a primary focus. Rather than providing physical details, however, these descriptions are descriptions of more abstract ‘things’. We are allowed to more or less explicitly observe (are *shown*, rather than *told*, to use the common shorthand) how relationships develop over time. Process takes center stage, with the temporal dimension becoming at least as important as the spatial, which is otherwise central in many descriptive passages in literature.

Of course, process (usually as depictions of explicit actions, or what is commonly dubbed *narration*) is exactly what we began by discussing – in contrast to description – in literature. And, of course, as noted earlier, narration actually does often turn out to be, to some degree, a kind of ‘descriptivized’ text. What film captures via display, I am arguing, is the visual and audio concretization – in the relevant elements of a movie or TV program – of processes over time, something which can be justifiably be termed *description*. And it is exactly this kind of description that *can* be discerned on the cinema or television screen.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Torsten Pflugmacher, 'Description', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan, London and New York: Routledge, 2005, 100.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Kittay, 'Introduction', *Yale French Studies* 61: 'Towards a Theory of Description', 1981, i.

<sup>4</sup> Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Harold F. Mosher, Jr., 'Toward a Poetics of "Descriptized" Narration', *Poetics Today* 12, no 3, autumn, 1991: 425–445.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Ronen, 'Description, Narrative and Representation', *Narrative* 5, no. 3, October, 1997: 274–286.

<sup>7</sup> For scholars whose views are in agreement with my stance on this issue, see e.g., Berys Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010, and Katherine Thomson-Jones, *Aesthetics and Film*. London and NY: Continuum, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Kamilla Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 8. Elliott's discussion provides an excellent introduction to and background for the entire complex of problems associated with this issue.

<sup>9</sup> Klaus Rieser, 'For Your Eyes Only: Some Thoughts on the Descriptive in Film', in *Description in Literature and Other Media*, ed. Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007, 219.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Philippe Hamon, 'Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive', trans. Patricia Baudoin, *Yale French Studies* 61: 'Towards a Theory of Description', 1981: 3.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Herbert, *Dune*. New York: Chilton, 1965.

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Lindsay [Jeffrey P. Freundlich], *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*. New York: Random House, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Ian McEwan, *Atonement*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2001.