

COLLECTING MOVIE SOURCE BOOKS

The Star Theater was the second-run movie house in the South Bronx neighborhood of my youth. On Saturday mornings the line to get into the theater went well around the block, as several hundred kids like me waited impatiently for tickets to go on sale. The tickets would admit us to view – on a screen no smaller than a king-sized bed sheet – three features, one of which invariably was a Republic or Monogram Western, a March of Time newsreel, several cartoons, a cliffhanger serial (we called them Chapters) and Coming Attractions (we know them today as previews or trailers).

All this cost 11 cents and included a free comic book if you were one of the first hundred entrants. Jujubes, Chocolate Kisses and Shoe Leather (dried apricot strips that eerily resembled flypaper) were not, alas, part of the deal. Today the Jujubes would be going steady with my gold crowns, and my taste in chocolate has evolved toward the rich bitterness of Swiss dark. (Let us leave the Shoe Leather for the cobbler's use.)

The passage of time has changed me in many ways, but one shining constant connects my movie-going then and now: total involvement with what is happening onscreen. I am at two with nature Woody Allen famously said. I am at one with him in refusing to watch a movie that has already begun. And my engrossment extends to more than the movie itself. I want to know who played what part. Are those the sashaying jowls of Eugene Pallette or Francis L. Sullivan? Who wrote the musical score or directed or produced the film? To this day I am among the last to leave the theater, preferring to scrutinize in its entirety the Crawl (such a perfect word) that divulges the screen credits. Thus I soon became aware that a particularly vivid cattle stampede or saloon fight was likely to have been choreographed by a veteran stuntman like Yakima Canutt. I tried to distinguish between the deep focus lighting of Gregg Toland and James Wong Howe. It seemed important to know the difference.

I also learned, as far back as my Star days, that many of the stories being played out on the screen were not written specifically for movies but based on books – usually novels. These stories I would quickly try to locate at the public library or the local paperback shop in hopes of replicating emotionally via the written word the screen images that had so engaged me. Once read, I returned or discarded the books, only to pick up others ranging in

literary class from “For Whom the Bell Tolls” to “The Mark of Zorro.”

I did not know then that I was immersing myself in movie source books, or that I would be collecting them in a serious way 50 years down the line. In all my years as a rare-book dealer, I never once wished to assemble my own author or subject collection, though in a professional capacity I helped form a few decent ones.

Now, while it is not usual for drinkers to become bartenders, book collectors seem to metamorphose into dealers with some regularity. There are reasons for this, none more compelling than the expectation of being able to buy at favorable prices. I have seen more than a few clients attempt such a perceived step up the book chain.

Less than two years ago I decided to collect movie source books. The timing was right, for I now had the time and the resources required to begin the comprehensive collection I envisioned. When I told my colleagues of my plans, a few of them saw this as apostasy. The pro, they smiled sagely, was heading south, turning amateur. One confrere took a more sinister view, likening my switch to that of a hunter tossing away his weapon in order to become prey. Fine books, this ever-practical man concluded, would henceforth be offered to me at, shall we say, even finer prices. This, of course, is not the way things have worked out. Just as they would for any serious collector, dealers began offering me titles, the availability of many of which would surely have remained unknown to me. It was not long before I had acquired a defining nucleus from which to expand.

Andrew Marvell’s words seem worth playing around with here: “Had we but funds enough and time, this book search, lady, were no crime.” An ample purse is no doubt useful in entering today’s book market. Coyness, even if you must budget your book buys with the mindset of a Silas Marner, just will not do when the right copy of the right book turns up. On the other hand, I have not yet shelled out the \$5,000 or so that a pristine copy of “Gone with the Wind” will set me back, because this key book is expensive but not rare. I am just waiting for the right copy to come along.

As dealers in modern first editions our firm had through the years bought and sold movie source books which we listed in sales catalogues by author. Then one time we offered a group of such books under the rubric “Movie Sources.” To our surprise and

delight, books waltzed out of our inventory virtually en bloc. This, at a time when other categories were proving themselves wallflowers, or worse, three-dimensional wallpaper that lent our shelves an unwanted décor. Now these cinematic belles of the ball are again being wooed by me.

Literature and the movies have been wedded for 100 years, their union existing from cinema's silent, black-and-white beginnings to today's technical innovations. The movies' first phase was primitively instinctual yet awesome -- a precocious baby walking, even as it learned to stand. Early film plots required only short attention spans from their audience and wandered simplistically. As moviegoers began to come of age they craved more substantial plot structures as moviemakers soon realized that audiences would fill their theaters to watch full-fledged narratives projected on the screen. Consequently, they turned for source material to historical events, to the theater, and to the novel.

Thomas Edison's fin de siècle pageant, "The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots," with its climactic scene of the ill-fated ruler's severed head bouncing aimlessly across the floor like a point guard's errant pass, is a rudimentary forerunner of the accomplished 1971 Vanessa Redgrave movie (in which Hollywood enterprisingly posits a dramatic but fictitious meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, the English Queen who dooms her). Nevertheless, the interrelationship between source and film is in each case there to be examined.

What I was bringing to the collecting table was a lifetime of reading books and watching movies not once or twice, but more. Yet given the vast number of volumes eligible for a movie source collection, I was ripe for the Talmudic reminder that if I knew what I didn't know and didn't know what I knew, I would know a whole lot more.

I investigated what was available on the subject bibliographically and concluded that much of the information contained in even so monumental a reference as the 12-volume "Motion Picture Guide" is flawed when it comes to citing the original literary sources of films. More importantly, the many facts I needed to make a list of movie sources were recorded piece-meal in what discouragingly seemed to be almost as many volumes as I was contemplating amassing. Interestingly enough, one of the better references for comparing films and their inspirations is the monthly "Books into Film" column that has appeared in these pages monthly since Firsts' inception. Unfortunately, only some

80 books have yet been covered. So I started compiling my own bibliography from all the knowledge I had been able to glean through the years. It took me the better part of a summer to compile a working list of some 2,000 movie source titles.

The next move was to establish parameters. Since I am by nature picky, it was relatively easy to establish limits. Quality, not quantity, was the keynote from which I would make selections. It would not be necessary to find all of the books on my list, only those that met my exacting guidelines. Growth for growth's sake, after all, is the ideology of the cancer cell.

Like *Citizen Kane*, I formulated principles. The collection would consist of the finest copies of first editions I could afford, with original dust jackets being requisite for books published from shortly after the turn of the century. Moreover, I would try to get special copies where I could: inscribed ones, association copies, or with an apposite letter from the author laid in. I vowed to be only slightly more flexible than a U.S. Marine Corps drill instructor in maintaining the rare-book standards I was imposing, and to raise the level of my sensibility. Bad sensibility, bad collection. It really is as simple as that.

The movie sources eligible for my collection would be texts that were the genesis of a film, including novels, short stories, plays, biographies, even a poem like Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" or Mackinlay Kantor's verse play "Glory For Me," which was the basis for the Academy Award-winning movie "The Best Years of Our Lives." The original source for "The King and I," for example, is not Margaret Landon's generally regarded "Anna and the King of Siam," but her source, a Nineteenth-Century memoir by Anna Harriette Leonowens titled "The English Governess at the Siamese Court."

Some of the greatest movies ever made will have no literary counterpart in the collection because they are based on original screenplays, screenplays published in book form, or novelizations published after a film's release. These categories are outside my purview. The rationale for the collection is the relationship between literature and film, between the abstraction of words where you supply your own image of how, say, the heroine looks as opposed to a fixed pictorial representation that is augmented by cinematography, dramatic lighting, and the like.

In the John Fowles novel, he limns the French Lieutenant's Woman thus: "It was an unforgettable face, and a tragic face. Its

sorrow welled out of it as purely, naturally and unstoppably as water out of a woodland spring.” That fine description, evocative as it is, can be applied to as many women as there are readers. In the movie though, everyone gets the planed beauty of Meryl Streep’s features as she gazes forlornly at the Lyme Regis sea.

Another necessary restriction is that of time. Movies have changed definitively in recent years as the technology of filming has become computerized, digitized and – in my view – often trivialized. I don’t watch movies for their special effects. As Ronald Reagan observed in another context, if you’ve seen one car chase you’ve seen them all. Ditto explosions, cute aliens, musclebound Terminators or Rambos. It is character-driven films that move me, not moving comic books. Sitting in the dark I crave to watch the cinematic workings out of real people reacting to depictions of experience that resonate in our hearts because they are universal.

The period when Hollywood accomplished this most consistently (if not always most subtly) was the so-called Golden Age, the early Thirties – a few years after the advent of talkies until the end of the studio system just before 1970, when Warner Brothers closed their studio and Twentieth Century Fox’s Darryl Zanuck left for Europe. This was before the money boys and their accountants began fine-tuning the likelihood of a film’s success with a spreadsheet. Today a movie’s fate is often decided on the very weekend it opens. Not enough tickets sold and off it goes to the glue factory. They shoot movies, don’t they, in more ways than one.

I grudgingly granted entry to a few movie books from the Seventies and Eighties because they seemed too vital to be excluded even if, like many books of this vintage, they were still readily obtainable. To bar novelistic inspirations for movies like “Kramer vs. Kramer” or “The Silence of the Lambs,” both of which won major Oscars, seemed counterproductive to the collection’s aim at large.

What should be done with foreign movies? I decided to exclude most that were not originally written in English. Thus, the lovely signed copy I have of “The Tin Drum” by Gunter Grass will be denied entry, while Ed McBain’s 8th Precinct police procedural, “King’s Ransom,” which was the basis for Akira Kurosawa’s epic film “High and Low,” stays. My collection, my call. How about plays that were made into movies? Should a published play, true source that it is, qualify for inclusion? Here I decided to admit

only those whose movie counterparts outshone their predecessors, like “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” or “One Touch of Venus,” with the divine Ava as the heavenly creature she never managed to be in her troubled life.

Thus, I sometimes break my own rules in exploring the boundaries of the collection. (The etymology of the Latin “probare” makes clear that the exception, rather than proving a rule, only tries it.)

One fertile area for movie books that I am unable to till for lack of Almighty Green is the pantheon of literary antiquity. Shakespeare is the source for several films, but just because “Hamlet” and “Julius Caesar” are cinema classics doesn’t mean that I can afford First Folios. The same holds true for the first editions of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens’ “Great Expectations,” or “Frankenstein” by Mary Shelley, who created the monster back in 1818.

What I can and have been doing is exhausting the possibilities of purchases within my means. When the late Carter Burden’s lesser first editions (18,000 of ‘em) were sold by his estate to two Berkeley booksellers, I visited Peter Howard’s Serendipity and David Wirshup’s Anacapa premises in search of some of the movie sources I remembered selling Carter 15 years ago. I had moderately assisted this peerless man in assembling the finest and most comprehensive collection of American literature of our time. (A little-noticed aspect of Carter’s accomplishment is that, unlike lesser literary suns, more than a hundred dealers revolved around his prodigious undertaking).

So I went to Peter’s, want list in hand. And there they were, just where I hoped they would be. Here for example, was the long-gone inscribed copy of “Blazing Guns on the Chisholm Trail,” another copy of which had eluded me since. Why did this routine Western novel zing the strings of my heart so? It is the basis for Howard Hawks’ “Red River.” Back home I perused the novel to see how the author, Borden Chase, had first written what turned out to be a famous line from the film. The difference was telling and illustrates in part the symbiosis between literature and the movies that this collection hopes to define.

Early in the movie John Wayne and the teenager he finds wandering, after Indians have massacred everyone else in the boy’s wagon train, locate the site where their herd (Wayne’s bull and the boy’s cow) will graze, mate, and begin their cattle empire. The

animals run off and rumble down-camera. The boy starts after them, only to be recalled by Wayne's drawl: "Wherever they go they'll be on my land." This evocative bit of dialogue, coupled with the camera's depiction of the vast Texas plain, makes clear the possibilities available to a man on the Nineteen Century American frontier.

In the book, however, the line reads: "Anywhere he turns he'll be on my ground." Ground? Well, what do you expect from a cowboy author who grew up in Brooklyn? At the end of "Red River" a slit-eyed, pigeon-toed Wayne strides imperviously through his cattle to kill the boy (now grown up to be Montgomery Clift) who took his herd from him. After a somewhat improbable brawl in which the (maybe) 140-pound Clift fights Wayne to a standstill (actually a sitdown, if you remember the scene), it is clear that they will live happily ever after. Chase, however, had the book end with the Clift character taking the mortally wounded Wayne home to Texas so that he can expire on his beloved soil. I am not sure how many care about such differences, but isn't it pretty to think so.

Other movie source books I had sold to Carter that were not recycled back to me at Serendipity turned up later at Anacapa Books. A wonderful scouting day. You get off- the-beaten-tracks books like this one by one; a slow rate of accretion, perhaps, but if you continue to track them, a steady one.

I now have some 350 books, and probably will have to rely on Searchers in the trade to help me corral twice again as many before I have enough to qualify as a real collection. That'll be the day.

Firsts Magazine, 1998