A fun part of the curriculum that Marilyn and I used in our Media Literacy instruction was comparing written creations to the mediation of the same content. The material we used included poetry, such as Robert Frost poems, and short stories, including the work of O. Henry and Arthur Conan Doyle. Many media works are available where the producers based their creations on the written word. In this column, we will concentrate on novels and the films based on them. This was Marilyn’s expertise. She will share her tips below. At the end, she will offer a sample exercise.

Read the Book, See the Movie

Is the movie the same as the book? Most students will say that they are. But students who critically read the book and see the movie will be able to see the differences between the two. We feel that this media literacy ability will enable them to better write and create productions of their own.

In our lessons, we gave examples of the differences between a “written” story and the same story told using a cinematic format. The goal was to open the eyes of would-be screenwriter/media producers so that they could see what they must do to translate a story from any format to that of a media production.

Compare & Contrast

Length. An author doesn’t need to be concerned with the amount of time it will take the reader to read his or her book, but a screenwriter will have as little as an hour and a half to as much as four hours to tell that story in a movie. Here is an example of what a screenwriter will do to fit the author’s story into the timeframe of a film.

In “The Spirit of St. Louis,” the story of Lindbergh’s solo flight across the Atlantic, includes many scenes of his life as he leads up to this historic flight. Though he had many friends that affected his future, the screenwriter bundled them all together and only one person represents them all in the film.

Contents. A book includes everything the author intended to tell readers about the characters and the situation of the story. A movie will not include everything that is in the book. Time will not allow it, even if the screenwriter wanted to include “the whole book.” Recently, Robert Osborne, who introduces films for Turner Classic Movies, introduced the film “Night and Day” about composer Cole Porter, in this way

“Supposedly this film is based on the life of Cole Porter but even Cole Porter couldn’t recognize anything about himself when he saw this film for the first time. But there is a reason. There had been very little drama in his life. He was born rich, and he stayed rich. He
had one music success after another. He had a very successful marriage to a beautiful wealthy socialite who adored him. Since there wasn’t any drama in his life to work with the screenwriters went to work and made up their own life story for him. They were more interested in making a framework for his body of music.”

**Introduction of Time and Setting**

An author will “use his words” to tell readers where his story takes place. He will describe everything from the snow on the mountaintops to the mud in the streets. He will describe the people and the town, and he must describe the situation that exists in the time period when the story takes place. He will do all this with words and usually a lot of them. A filmmaker introduces his opening scene with practically no words. Graphics may appear over the picture such as “Saint Louis, 1903” but all the details in the picture must support that graphic. The set designer is charged with bringing the description in the book to life.

Richard Sylvert, the Production Designer for the film “Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” was interviewed. He told what he had done for the living room/library set. He picked out a couch and two chairs. The chairs were made of different fabrics. When asked why, he explained that this couple was not wealthy enough to have purchased their furniture all at one time. Also, the film was going to be shot in black and white, so he picked furniture that had different textures because they would show up better on B&W film. One whole wall of the room was a bookshelf. He said he picked out every book title in that library because they would help to tell who the characters were.

**Introduction of Characters, Their Names and Relationships.**

In a storybook, names exist from the very beginning. Consider Winnie-the-Pooh who, in the first paragraph of the first page is “coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head…. Here he is at the bottom, and ready to be introduced to you. Winnie-the-Pooh.” Readers of a book know the characters names and even how to spell them. Relationships are a snap as well.

In a film, the only way to find out a character’s name is for someone to call them by their name. We still don’t know how to spell that name unless it is on the mailbox (Grapes of Wrath) or written on the bottom of a toy (Toy Story). There are three ways we learn about a character in most films:

1. What the character says about him or her self.
2. What the other characters say about him or her.
3. What the character does.

One of the best ways to get a feel for how this is done is to watch the pilots—the first episodes of new TV shows as they air at the beginning of each season. Sometimes the pilot is twice as long because introducing the characters takes a lot of screen time. If it is a half-hour show, the whole show will be about who the characters are and how they are related. John and I made assignments to our students to cover each of these new shows. They took notes and we talked about them in class.

**Plot Exposition.** Both book stories and film stories exist to tell “what happened.” In filmmaking, “what happened” is often called plot exposition. The screenwriter uses characters to tell the audience about past events that he wants them to know but he doesn’t want to film.

One of our favorite quotes about plot exposition comes from a Muppet Movie. The scene is that of an ornate living room of a clothes designer. Miss Piggy is trying to get a job on the staff so she is being particularly polite. When the woman starts talking about her brother’s childhood and her feelings about him, Miss Piggy asks, “Why are you talking about that?” The woman says, “It’s plot exposition, it has to go somewhere.”

It could be said that a writer of books works with lots of words and a few if any pictures. A filmmaker has to tell a story with lots of visuals and a few words and many tricks of filmic language. In actuality, there is a difference between a book and a movie, even though it is essentially the same story.

**A Sample Exercise**

The purpose of this exercise is to help you recognize the differences between the written word and a media production. Read the written narrative first. Is there enough description that with the use of your imagination you can picture what is happening? Then look at the pictures and ask, “Is this the picture I had in my imagination?”

The four pictures included in this article would be four of the frames of the storyboard, but in order to tell the story with only pictures, more frames will be needed. What might they contain? What would you do about the people? Would you show them in the street looking both ways? Would you show them in the cab of the motor home talking about the lack of gaso-
line and the possible gas station up ahead? What about a shot of the map when the decision is made to turn off the main road? How about a cutaway of the gas gauge?

**Going to Needles for the Winter**

Once upon a time, a pair of retired schoolteachers from Hawaii, John and Marilyn, bought a motor home to travel around the mainland. They spent the first few winters of retirement in great places like Germany, Ireland, and Florida. Friends recommended Needles, California as an inexpensive place to spend the winter in a motor home. So south and west they went.

John usually did the driving and Marilyn watched the map. As they drove through the California desert, Marilyn recommended that they get off Highway 40 onto a smaller road that appeared to be a direct road into Needles. What a sight.

She said, “I’ve got a bad feeling about this. There is nothing on either side of the street for as far as you could see.” Actually, that wasn’t exactly true. After all, there were Teddybear Cholla (a cute little cactus, so full of needles it looks like fur) and Jumping Cholla (a charming cactus called “Jumping” because the needles jump off the plant and stab anyone who passes by) and Joshua Trees, which make a valiant attempt to provide some shade. There were also lots of scrubby little plants but not a lot of color.

The monotonous landscape caused them to lose track of time. They were only about 60 miles from Needles but it seemed like they were never going to get there.

John looked down at the gas gauge and said, “The gas is getting low. Can you find a gas station close to here?” Marilyn checked the map. “Looks like there are three little towns along here. I don’t know exactly where we are but the first one should be coming up pretty soon.”

The road did not curve but it was hilly. One stretch of road had a sign that announced, “Dips for the next 25 miles.” In 10 or 15 miles they got to the first town. At first look, it appeared to be a ghost town. Nothing was moving. None of the buildings seemed to have windows. There wasn’t even anything blowing in the wind. There was especially no gas station.

As they headed up a hill out of town, Marilyn was sure she could see a gas station at the top of the hill. Climbing the hill, they were both sure that they were out of trouble. She was looking through the digital camera in order to get a better look at the sign. “It looks like a gas station but I can’t read the sign.”

“Isn’t there a lot of bushes where the gas pumps should be?”

“I don’t see any windows either. Now I can read the sign, it says “restaurant” and there are no gas pumps or windows.”

They went a few more miles and then pulled over so they could take a good look up and down the road. Marilyn said to John, “I don’t see a living thing, do you?”

“It doesn’t look good either way. We may as well continue on our way and hope we don’t run out of gas.”

There were no gas stations but they didn’t run out of gas. They were only about 25 miles from Needles at that point. There were no signs. It was an adventure. Marilyn wondered if they would ever drive on that stretch of road again.
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