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Film and Literature

10/22/13

### Mini-Essay Number Three

There are two elements within each medium of *The Sweet Hereafter* that Seymour Chatman explains helps understand each adaptation. Whether it's the novel written by Russell Banks or the film directed by Atom Egoyan, the point of view and the description are the two main elements which can help understand and distinguish the relationship between the two sources.

I want to first discuss the novel where in which the timeline of its story is constructed using what Chatman describes as Storyline which is a chronological timeline that is underneath which starts from the beginning of the story and concludes at the end separated by four different chapters. The novel begins with Dolores Driscoll's point of view before the bus accident and then moves over to Billy Ansel's story. It then shifts to the lawyer Mitchell Stephens and finally arrives to Nichole Burnell's point of view after the accident. The last chapter makes a complete loop back to Dolores Driscoll when arriving to the town destruction derby.

Even though these chapters are separate points of view between four major characters's the story seems to remain chronological, with only slight moments of stories overlapping one

another. Chatman explains that the novel functions with its storyline through Description which are the exact words of the text that create their own physical space throughout the narrative.

Chatman explains this by saying, “what happens in description is that the time line of the story is interrupted and frozen. Events are stopped, through are reading or discourse-time continues, and we look at the characters and the setting elements as at a tableau vivant” (405). What Chatman is saying is that within the book medium of *The Sweet Hereafter* the chronological time doesn't have to pass with the characters within that text, and that the words assert itself by coming from the inside out. Because of this the words within that text are finite and that the words must stop describing at some specific point. When we read the text within the novel we have the ability to use the words to create a unique space to be inside a character's first person point of view, and there doesn't have to a physical component to establish why we are there.

The film adaptation of *The Sweet Hereafter* uses different elements within the cinematic adaptation which equally can achieve what Andre Bazan stated as equivalence between the novel and the film. The film distinguishes its timeline by using Discourse time which is an arrangement of moments of flashbacks and flash forwards that are condensed and presented not in chronological order. For instance the film begins with the lawyer Mitchell Stephens (Ian Holm) as he is at the airport on his way back home. The film than cuts back and forward in time to tell its story which is equally as powerful as the point of view chapters that Russell Banks constructed when telling the literary version of the story. Chapman describes discourse-time by stating, “The discourse-time order may be completely different; it may start with the person's deathbed, then ‘flashback’ to childhood; or it may start with childhood, ‘flash-forward’ to death, then end with adult life” (404).

The film also uses Point of view in which the film has its own unique space that describes its scenes through implication not assertions, and the spectator chooses what they want or not want to take in. Unlike the novel in which we can stop when we want, back up, and reread moments, the way we engage with the cinema is indeterminate, which is viewed as a non-stop running time.

Unlike the novel the film of *The Sweet Hereafter* uses the power of its visuals with the mise en-scene, which creates specific images to help guide the spectator to where they need to look at and what they need to listen too. Unlike the separate point of view's within the novel the film uses the third person camera as its point of view which gives the audience a voyeuristic way to be ambiguously present to view the most personal moments in the lives of the characters within the story; And presents itself to go from the outside in. For instance in the novel within Nichole Burnell's chapter she explains within the text about her father sexually molesting her in vivid detail. The film doesn't get as explicit as the novel and instead suggests it through its visuals and small moments of dialogue.

Most films usually have narrators that are particular characters, opposed to literary works which doesn't as the world of the novel can instead use words to create space for its reader. Cinema doesn't need that and because it is a visual medium it can create an image to present a particular assertion. Chapman states that filmmakers show disdain when the cinema relies on asserting a moment with a voiceover or dialogue instead of visually presenting the moment visually. He states, "Filmmakers and critics traditionally show disdain for verbal commentary because it explicates what, they feel, should be implicated visually" (408).

When considering Chatman's theories on point of view and description between the novel and the film of *The Sweet Hereafter*, both of the mediums seem to equally present what Andre Bazan established as equivalence. In Andre Bazin's article he argued that within the unity of different art forms each distinctive outer packaging of a text is an irreverent and what is important is in the keeping of the spirit and soul of the meaning. Both the film and the novel have their distinct differences, most obviously with the film omitting the final chapter of the novel with Dolores Driscoll attending the destruction derby. And yet this omission doesn't seem to weaken the film because the film is still able to equally present the meaning and soul of the story all the while differing on Chatman's theories on point of view and description, storyline and discourse, and finite and indeterminate.

This spirit of the story of *The Sweet Hereafter* within both mediums is equally presented which tells a story not about lawyers or the law or small-town vengeance, but more about people carrying on their lives after a horrific tragedy. The film and novel is equally as sad and tender toward its characters, and even the lawyer who is an outsider isn't a character who arrives to stir up more trouble, but instead comes across like a witness, who regards the mourning parents and sees his own approaching death of his daughter in their eyes.