

Morton Marcus: The quandries of 'Potter' and 'Goya'

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In my April 14 column, "The Namesake' Doesn't Work," I discussed the problem of film adaptation; specifically, making a novel into a film. I said that ideally the screenwriter should make a screenplay of the entire book, but unless the film had a 10- or 12-hour viewing time, as it can on television, it would be too sketchy. At the normal two-hour theater length, it would provide only a glimpse of characters and incidents, "as if the viewer were rushing through a bustling city on a speeding train." The alternative approach is to show "highlights of the novel -- the book's major characters and famous scenes." My point was that the screenwriter has to choose one approach or the other: it is a quandary.

Now along comes "Harry Potter and The Order of The Phoenix," which takes the full-novel approach and falls prey to the problems I just mentioned. Not that it's a bad film. It's very good and fits perfectly into the Harry Potter series. But the viewer who hasn't read the book may experience a sense of incompleteness, even confusion, and ask why this or that incident is being shown: How does it relate to the main thrust of the plot? And why do all those characters put in an appearance and then disappear--particularly Hagrid and Sybil Trelawney who, after she's been fired, still lives at Hogwart's but is never seen again?

"The Order of the Phoenix" is the first Harry Potter film that employs full-novel adaptation. The directors of the other films sidestepped its pitfalls by eliminating whole characters and subplots. David Yates, "Phoenix's" director, has been signed to do the next Harry Potter installment and it will be interesting to see if he will change his approach.

Another quandary filmmakers face has to do with audience expectations: how a filmgoer approaches a film. By and large, American audiences expect a film to render a semblance of everyday reality and therefore they anticipate that characters will be recognizable in their motivations and actions -- unless the characters are deranged.

Unfortunately, many foreign filmmakers make films that are symbolic -- fables, parables or allegories. Their characters are ciphers for ideas rather than people -- and, therefore, their reactions are more in keeping with their symbolic identities than those of flesh and blood humans. The most recent example is Milos Forman's "Goya's Ghosts," which is not ultimately about the famous painter Francisco Goya but the milieu in which he lived, a time of upheaval and uncertainty much like our own. The action takes place in Spain during the late 18th and the early 19th centuries, when the power of the Inquisition is restored and then Napoleon invades, and the film makes the point that one "occupation" is as vicious as the other.

According to Forman and his collaborator, Jean-Claude Carriere, the film's central character is Brother Lorenzo, a religious fanatic who revives the most extreme practices of the Inquisition. Forced to abandon the cloth, Lorenzo becomes Napoleon's minister of justice after the invasion, and represents the zealot who seeks power and persecutes anyone who disagrees with his ideas. The film's heroine, Ines, whose horrific experiences tie the plot together, is innocence incarnate, which Forman and Carriere portray as the eternal victim.

Throughout the film, Goya is depicted as a one-dimensional character who is continually duped by those in power and helpless to change the horrors around him. He is the symbol of the artist who can change nothing, only bear witness to his times.

Certainly the film is far from successful, but the critics have treated it too harshly, I believe, because they didn't see its symbolic intention. The question is how can we avoid their blunder? The answer is simple. Don't come to a film or any piece of art with preconceived notions or expectations. Be open to the experience the artist has in store for you.

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