



EMPTY SPACE

"I like the movie, but the book was better. . ."

By MICHAEL GILTZ

People frequently comment on a movie by saying, "The book was much better." How untrue and unfair that is, both to the movie and the book. We must recognize that a novel and a film are separate creatures, with separate abilities and separate goals.

By its very nature, the novel can accomplish things that a movie could never attempt. A 200-page story contains infinitely more details and events than a two-hour movie. In the transition from paper to celluloid, there will inevitably be omissions that the reader will feel are sorely missed.

A novel can tell us what the characters are thinking and feeling. In a movie, these thoughts must be intimated by the facial expressions and body movements of the actors.

A novel engages our imagination. The beauty of a great book is that two people can read a classic like *Catcher In The Rye* and have completely different ideas of what Holden

Caulfield looks like. They might even disagree about what exactly happened in the story. A novel is a very private experience.

In contrast, movies are very much a group experience. While video cassette recorders are handy, films are best appreciated in a darkened theater where you are surrounded by strangers.

Novels stimulate the mind, but movies involve our mind, our eyes and our hearing. We can become lost in a good book, but it is not quite as enveloping as the multi-sensory experience of a movie.

In novels we identify either positively or negatively with the protagonist. In movies we lose our individuality and share a group identity, both with the characters on the screen and the people around us.

Clearly, a novel and a film are completely different experiences. Difficult as it may be, we must try to treat them as unique and unconnected.

For example, *The Cotton Club* is a fascinating and intriguing book about the famous nightclub and the many black performers who appeared there. But the movie is basically a gangster flick centering around two white people played by Richard Gere and Diane Lane. It is visually dazzling, highly entertaining and contains one of the most memorable dance sequences ever captured on film. But it had very little to do with the book.

An even more extreme example is *The Natural*. The hero of the novel is a very human person who makes mistakes. In the end, however, he redeems himself by intentionally striking out in a baseball game, thereby thwarting the bad guys.

In the movie the hero is portrayed by Robert Redford, and he is treated as some sort of demigod. He is a one-dimensional superhero who saves the day by smashing a home run out of the ballpark, thus winning the pennant.

Conversely, some movies, such as *Superman: The Movie*, create an excitement that their subsequent literary offspring can only approximate. Perhaps most satisfying is when the tone and feel of a novel are expertly captured on film, as in *The World According To Garp*, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* and *Kiss Of The Spider Woman*.

The cinema will never be able to duplicate the experience of reading Hemingway's *For Whom The Bell Tolls* or Helprin's *Winter's Tale*. And literature will never be able to duplicate the dizzying brilliance of *Citizen Kane* or the nonstop hilarity of *Arthur* and *Ghostbusters*.

So the book is never better than the movie, and the movie is never better than the book. To be fair to the writers and filmmakers of the world, we must see novels and films as separate but equal. And we must judge them on their own terms. □