

The Problem of Adaptation Solved!  
Lessons Learned From A Study of Caroline Leaf's  
The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa

Geoffrey Beatty

JSLA-361: Fiction to Film

Prof. Kulczytzky

15 April 2010

Geoffrey Beatty

Prof. Kulczytzky

JSLA-361: Fiction to Film

15 March 2010

## The Problem of Adaptation Solved!

### Lessons Learned From A Study of Caroline Leaf's

#### The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa

Why is it that the book is nearly always better than the film? Why is it that the movie we imagined as we were reading almost always exceeds the movie that was actually made? Conversely, what is it about those very few creatively successful adaptations that makes them work?

The problem of adaptation boils down to the fact that literature and film (and music and painting, for that matter) are not just different languages, but are fundamentally and radically different species. As this paper deals with Kafka's Metamorphosis, perhaps it would be fitting to say that the difference between literature and film, for example, is about the same as the difference between a man and a bug. There is a gap between text and visuals that must be reckoned with, one that prevents easy translation and disallows the simplistic one-for-one correlations found in a child's illustrated dictionary.

In spite of this, some filmmakers, in the name of fidelity, strive for a literal visualization of the source, an image-for-word approach. Some at the other end of the spectrum dump nearly the entire source text and instead opt to focus on the "emotional truth" of a literary work, a thought-for-thought approach. In either extreme and in between, the goal is a faithful reproduction of *content*. This is a reasonable goal, but is content the only transferable component of a literary work?

I would suggest that the medium of animation, and specifically certain animated techniques, offer an ability to faithfully reproduce in part both the content and the *perceptual experience* of a literary work. That is to say, the medium of animation is, by its nature, uniquely equipped not only to visualize, but to accomplish the task of bridging the experiential chasm between literature and film.

This certainly wasn't the paper I had set out to write. I had originally envisioned a narrower outcome to my fairly specific research topic, namely exploring the differences and similarities between Caroline Leaf's animated film The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa and Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis. However, as I pursued the material, I was centrifugally pushed outward from a narrow focal point to larger questions surrounding the problem of adaptation.

My first inkling that this specific case might be a suitable lens through which to address broader issues came from Kafka himself. I learned that he resisted declaring exactly which "monstrous verminous insect" Gregor had transformed into and stated a strong desire to avoid any sort of concrete visualizations. He clearly wanted the creature to exist solely in the world of literature, which is to say that he wanted it to exist solely in the world of the reader's imagination. Naturally, Kafka's resistance to visualization has become an irresistible invitation to filmmakers.

Still, even the most capable filmmaker is faced with this very real gap between literature and film. This distinction can be defined by what each offers in terms of *perception*. Film, and really any of the visual arts offers *immediate sensory content* (Scarry 6). Its message lies in a form that you can see and experience directly, without mediation or delay. Literature, on the other hand,

offers *mimetic content*. While you can feel the pages and see the printers ink or the pixels of a screen font, its message lies in an indirect form. It's not even giving you direct instruction as to how to construct the implied image. So, in the absence of immediate sensory content, how is it then that authors engage us, as readers, to generate rich real-time movies "in our head" based on what we are reading?

Part of the answer lies in the incompleteness of literature. Characters and settings and themes are limited to non-sensory verbal descriptions which are then fleshed out and finished in the imagination of the reader. Although he was speaking about art-making in general, Marcel Duchamp eloquently described the necessity of this incompleteness:

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. (Duchamp)

It was exactly this generous margin, this creative space that Kafka allows for in his writing, that attracted Caroline Leaf to create her animated interpretation of The Metamorphosis. "Kafka's stories give this kind of room to invent," she says. This was an important value for Leaf as she was establishing a body of work based on a unique visual approach. She animated sand. The Metamorphosis, suggested to her by a friend and mentor, was a good fit, as her own "black and white sand images had the potential to have a Kafka-esque feel – dark and mysterious" (Leaf).

The film, created at the National Film Board of Canada in 1977, is indeed dark and mysterious, full of "tenebrous browns" as one reviewer puts it (Village Voice). The images were created by manipulating ordinary play sand on an opaque glass surface lit from underneath and photographed from above. In this

technique, the sand drawings are short-lived, as they are photographed once and then shifted, obliterated, or redrawn to make the next frame. These frames, when played back, generate the movement of the characters and also of our point of view. The plasticity of the sand allowed Leaf to morph one object into another as we shift back and forth between a first and third person perspective in the film, a fitting choice considering the title.

She was faced with several obstacles to realizing the film, however. For one, her shoestring budget prevented her from acquiring the rights to the English translation, even though the story itself is in the public domain. This meant that it needed to be a largely dialogue-free film. Secondly, she was, and is, an independent animator with limited time and resources. It could not be a long film. She had to edit the original so that it would be possible to fit the size of a ten minute short film. This meant limiting the story to the events of a single day, as opposed to the several weeks of the novella. It also meant cutting characters and simplifying the number of interactions between them.

Finally, she was limited by the type of imagery she could produce with the sand technique that she was using. In particular, she would not be able to create highly detailed images, which eliminated the possibility of, among other things, visually describing the festering wound on Gregor's back or his overall deterioration and decay. However, this limitation was not necessarily a problem. "... I think that the limitations of drawing in sand, the simplifications that it requires, made me inventive in the storytelling in the ways I mentioned above. Sand forced me to adapt the story to sand, which is interesting."

This last point regarding the limitations inherent to this type of image-making is crucial in establishing a broader thesis regarding animation's unique

ability to enable a similar perceptual experience to that of reading. To put it bluntly, the images of an animated film are essentially similar to the images we make inside our heads when we read. But what exactly are the qualities of these images we carry in our heads? At first thought, one would assume that they are photographic in nature. But according to Scott McCloud, comic book artist and theorist, they actually resemble cartoon images. In his Understanding Comics, he illustrates in comic form a sort of "thought experiment" to make his point:

When two people interact, they usually look directly *at* one another, seeing their partner's features in *vivid detail*. Each one also sustains a constant awareness of his or her *own* face, but this mind picture is not nearly so vivid; just a sketchy arrangement... a sense of shape... a sense of *general placement*, something as simple and basic as a cartoon. Thus, when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face, you see it as the face of *another*. But when you enter the world of the cartoon, you see *yourself*. (35-36)

This might allow us to reasonably generalize that our mental visual library, that the countless pictures in our brain, are decidedly not photographic but instead something more akin to a series of iconic cartoon images – general forms and descriptions, not every single detail and not every variation. After all, it's not necessary to retain every single pixel of information our retina receives. It's enough to hold within my head a vague, working visual description of my wife, for example, since I can just look in her direction to refresh me of the specifics and correct any falsely constructed memories. "All reality is," says C.S. Lewis, "iconoclastic" (66).

The nature of our mental image-making, whether engaged in a work of literature or in our daily efforts at remembrance and identification, matches up nicely then with the imagery typical of comics, cartoons, and animation (I am excluding the recent trend towards photo-realistic computer generated imagery which, to my mind, negates the whole point of having a fantastical medium like animation). In fact, when Caroline Leaf makes mention of how the shortcomings of her sand drawings inspired invention, it could also be said that those very shortcomings were actually to her advantage in the pursuit of adaptation. The limitations of her fuzzy chiaroscuro images are actually *affordances*, to borrow an industrial design term from cognitive scientist Donald Norman. These "limited" images afford perceptual opportunities to the viewer not available in photographs.

... because the cartoon as a genre luxuriates in its own self-announcing unreality, its operations are often deeply sympathetic with mental imagining... A cartoon is like something done on a dare: Believe this if you can, even as I assure you that it cannot be the case!  
(Scarry 17)

There is another element in Leaf's adaptation that is worth adding to this discussion, and that is the role of sound. This may not seem like an appropriate topic when discussing the consequences of visualization, but its prominence in the film suggests that it is a crucial component of the adaptation. Sound is unfortunately an oft-neglected element in film criticism and in analysis of film adaptations in particular, in spite of it being nearly half of the perceptual information a film conveys.

The soundtrack was co-designed by Leaf and sound designer Normand Roger. It was "minimal and strong, like the imagery." There is no underscoring,

and music is limited to a violin solo which acts as a sort of theater curtain closing on our view of Gregor under the bed – pitiful, depressed, alone, but with a glitter of humanity in his hearing human-like ear.

Again here, as in the case of the images, it was the limitations that inspired an inventive jump from text to film. The previously mentioned copyright restrictions led to the creation of a fictitious language for the characters. “I made up words that sound like the English words, trying to put some meaning into the sound, but I know it's the expression in the voices that give meaning” (Leaf). The obscurity of the language ends up working as an aural equivalent to the fuzzy images. And like the images, the words, in their “fuzziness,” actually engage our imaginations in a way that more coherent dialogue would not.

One critic has faulted Leaf for simply “illustrating the story, not reimagining the terror of a man turned into a beetle...[settling] for such eloquent but facile illustration” (New York Times). But it seems to me that this is a superficial reading. On the contrary, The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa is a great deal more than an illustration. While it may not pursue with singular focus the situational terror described in Kafka's novella, it definitely retains, even in its visualization, much of the experience of reading his prose. This is a consequence of both the choices that Leaf made in making her film, and in the nature of the medium itself.

Despite their fundamental differences, literature will continue to inspire film adaptations. And in the name of “fidelity,” many filmmakers will continue to strive to realize (literally “to make real”) the text with as “realistic” imagery as possible. But those filmmakers would be wise to consider the example of Caroline Leaf. Her approach, while on the surface limited in its powers of representation, might actually be a truer and freer visual vehicle for literary adaptation than traditional



live-action cinema. The experience of both literature and animation depend and encourage the work of our imagination. The really good examples of both seem to allow us to simultaneously see the handiwork of the author/artist and let the medium itself fade behind the story. The poet Seamus Heaney describes a moment when, as a boy, he stayed up all night reading Return of the Native, and in the morning could not determine whether the rooster crowing was coming from outside or from the surface of the page (Scarry 7). That is powerful, and the same could be said about Caroline Leaf's film. "There's something fascinating about seeing sand, an inert material, move," she says. "It comes across in all the little finger pushings which you are aware of though you might not know it is sand you are looking at."

## Works Cited

Duchamp, Marcel. Address. Convention of the American Federation of Arts.

Houston. April 1957.

James, Caryn. "Review: Multi-Faceted Animator's Retrospective." New York

Times 6 May 1992

Kafka, Franz. "The Metamorphosis." The Penal Colony: Stories and Short

Pieces. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books,

1948. 67-133.

Leaf, Caroline. Email interview. March - April 2010.

Lewis, C.S. A Grief Observed. New York: Harper Collins, 1961.

Marlowe, Ann. "Review: Caroline Leaf: An Animated Life." Village Voice.

12 May 1992.

McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics. New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa. Dir. Caroline Leaf. National Film Board of

Canada, 1977.

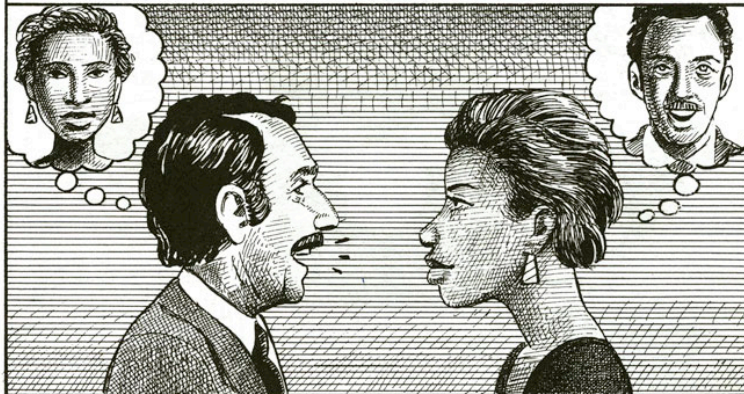
Scarry, Elaine. Dreaming by the Book. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,

1999.

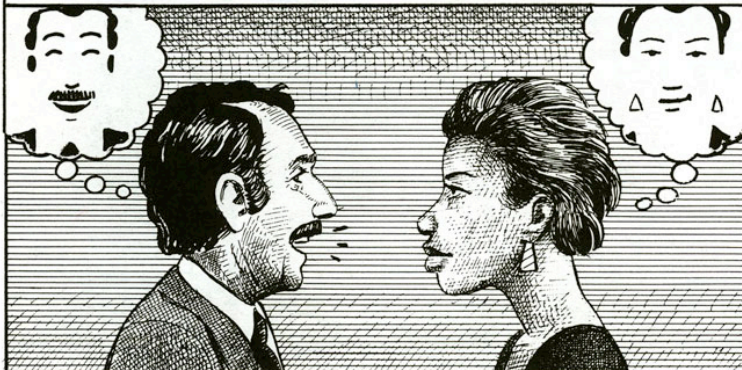


Stills from Caroline Leaf's The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa, illustrating the look of her sand on glass technique

WHEN TWO PEOPLE INTERACT, THEY USUALLY LOOK DIRECTLY AT ONE ANOTHER, SEEING THEIR PARTNER'S FEATURES IN *VIVID DETAIL*.



EACH ONE *ALSO* SUSTAINS A CONSTANT AWARENESS OF HIS OR HER *OWN* FACE, BUT *THIS* MIND-PICTURE IS NOT NEARLY SO VIVID; JUST A SKETCHY ARRANGEMENT... A SENSE OF SHAPE... A SENSE OF *GENERAL PLACEMENT*.



SOMETHING AS *SIMPLE* AND AS *BASIC*--



--AS A *CARTOON*.

THIS, WHEN YOU LOOK AT A PHOTO OR REALISTIC DRAWING OF A FACE--



--YOU SEE IT AS THE FACE OF *ANOTHER*.

BUT WHEN YOU ENTER THE WORLD OF THE *CARTOON*--



--YOU SEE *YOURSELF*.