

Moon Palace Films in the Classroom

By Harald Weisshaar



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In this paper, I will give some examples of how to use film in the classroom with a text where there is no film version available (yet). Paul Auster's novel 'Moon Palace' about a young man trying to find his place in life uses some recurring features not only of the 'Bildungsroman' but also of many movies; besides, some 'historical' film material and films from a whole range of different genres might be employed to enhance students' understanding of the text. Furthermore, I will show how the author, who has been involved in the making of various films, uses 'film techniques' in his writings.

After a short introduction to the novel, we will be looking at two passages: one to show how a sequence from Al Pacino's

SCENT OF A WOMAN can be used to compare and contrast text and film, the other to show how Auster draws on conventions from Western Movies to tell his tale. Finally, I will sum up my findings by suggesting a large number of movies that might also be used in the classroom when discussing this novel, and at the same time inviting readers to think about their own 'films and sequences' they might like to use while reading a novel in the classroom. In addition, you will find an extensive list of pre-, while- and post-viewing activities that can be used when dealing with films in the language classroom.

I. Short summary of the novel

In *Moon Palace*, there are three main lines of action and three central characters – Marco Stanley Fogg, Solomon Barber and Thomas Effing. The narrator is MS Fogg, but there are other 'voices' in the novel, too. Marco starts writing down his story more than 20 years after some of the events have taken place. The story-line is split into seven chapters. This is what happens in those chapters:

Marco tells us about his family – his mother died when he was only a boy. He never had a father. His Uncle Victor took over but also died while Marco was still at college. Marco is running out of money, sells off all his books, has to go hungry, loses his flat and eventually ends up in Central Park.

The narrator talks about his time in the park and about how Zimmer, his former flatmate, and Kitty Wu, a girl he once met by chance, save his life.

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MS Fogg lives with Zimmer and gradually recovers. He turns out to be unfit for military service in Vietnam – a result of his physical and mental exhaustion. Later, he realises that Kitty Wu is in love with him, and they become lovers.

At the end of the last chapter, Marco has managed to find a job looking after an old man in a wheel-chair, one Thomas Effing. Effing is an extremely odd. Marco reads to him, pushes him about NY in his wheel-chair, and eventually Effing tells Marco about his life. He wants Marco to write his obituary for him. Right at the centre of the novel, Marco is sent to the Brooklyn Museum to study a painting by Ralph Albert Blakelock, “Moonlight”.

Effing tells the second part of his story. His real name is Julian Barber, he used to be a famous painter. When he went out west he was dogged by bad luck, lost his companion and ended up in a cave. This is where he lived for some time, painted, and eventually killed three criminals who had murdered the former inhabitant of the cave. With their stolen money, he started a new life using a new name. After an obscure attack Effing became paralysed. Marco Fogg is told to work out three different “obituaries” from these accounts. Effing dies on the very day he had predicted himself, May 12th.

Effing has left Marco some money, and Kitty and Marco lead a happy life in Chinatown. Marco meets Solomon Barber, Effing’s son, who is a professor of history. Eventually we (and Marco) learn that Barber is Marco’s father and Effing was really Marco’s grandfather. Barber had an affair with Marco’s mother when she was a student in one of his history classes. We learn about Barber’s childhood and get to know the plot of his awful novel ‘Kepler’s Blood’. Kitty is pregnant but wants to have an abortion. Marco and Kitty split up, and

Barber wants to take Marco on an expedition out west to find Effing’s cave.

Barber unsuccessfully tries to bring Marco and Kitty back together again. On their way west they visit Emily’s and Victor’s graves in Chicago. Here, Marco realises that Barber is really his father. He gets terribly angry. Barber falls into an open grave and breaks his back. After two months Barber dies and is buried next to Emily Fogg. Marco now continues the expedition only to find that Effing’s cave has been flooded by what is now Lake Powell. His inheritance of ten thousand dollars gets stolen and, in an act of defiance, Marco starts walking west. At the end of the novel, he reaches the Pacific, a sadder and a wiser man, and sits on the beach waiting for the full moon to rise “and find her place in the darkness”.

II. Marco meets Effing – Meeting Al Pacino

In Chapter 4 of the novel, Auster tells us about the first encounter between Marco and Effing:

The first time I set eyes on Thomas Effing, he struck me as the frailest person I had ever seen. All bones and trembling flesh, he sat in his wheelchair covered in plaid blankets, his body slumped to one side like some minuscule broken bird. He was eighty-six years old, but he looked older than that, a hundred or more, if that is possible, an age beyond counting. Everything about him was walled off, remote, sphinx-like in its impenetrability. Two gnarled, liver-spotted hands gripped the armrests of the chair and occasionally fluttered into movement, but that was the only sign of conscious life. You could not even make visual contact with him, for Effing was blind, or at least he pretended to be blind, and on the day I went to his house for the interview, he was wearing two black patches

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over his eyes. As I look back on this beginning now, it seems appropriate that it should have taken place on November first. November first: the Day of the Dead, the day when unknown saints and martyrs are remembered.

It was a woman who answered the door to the apartment. (...)

Halfway down the hall, Mrs. Hume took hold of my arm and whispered into my ear. "Don't be put off if he acts a little strange," she said. "He often gets carried away, but it doesn't really mean anything." (...)

Effing was sitting in wheelchair in the middle of the room, positioned across from a sofa with a low table in between. Perhaps my initial impression of him was caused by the fact that he did not respond to us when we entered the room. Mrs Hume announced that I had arrived. (...) Then she was gone, and I found myself alone with Effing, waiting for him to break the silence.

It took a long time, but when it finally came, his voice filled the room with surprising force. It did not seem possible that his body could emit such sounds. The words crackled out of his windpipe with such a furious, rasping kind of energy, and all of a sudden it was as if some radio had been switched on, tuned to one of those distant stations you sometimes capture in the middle of the night. It was totally unexpected." (...)

Effing snorted at this, an ornery kind of laugh that seemed to dismiss the subject once and for all. Immediately after that he straightened himself up in his chair. It was remarkable how quickly this transformed his appearance. He was no longer a comatose semi-corpse lost in a twilight reverie; he had become all sinew and attention, a seething little mass of resurrected strength.

Effing then goes on to interview Marco. He

is very rude to him and asks him questions about his name, his family, about his voice and about his muscles. "Now come over here and let me feel your muscles. I can't have some weakling pushing me around the streets, can I? If your muscles can't do the job, you won't be worth a goddamned thing to me."

Scene from: **Scent of a woman**, 5'

There are hundreds of similarities between this scene from the film and the situation described in the novel. Students should be invited to compare and contrast the two scenes. They should also be given the chance to talk about the boys' feelings in the two scenes, and whether they have been in similar situations. How do they expect the relationship to develop in a) the novel and b) the film?

Students usually come up with some of the following criteria:

Moon Palace (novel)	Scent of a woman (film)
blindness, wheelchair	blindness, armchair
protagonist wants a job	protagonist wants a job
general atmosphere hostile, unfriendly, intimidating, personal insults	general atmosphere hostile, unfriendly, intimidating, personal insults
how about your muscles?	how is your skin?
voice of Effing	voice of Frank Slade
sits quietly in his chair, almost dead – sudden movements	blind but very controlled when refilling the glass or throwing the cushion
playing games with Marco	playing games with Charlie
living room in the flat	small living-room
hints that Effing is more than just a monster	just a hint of Slade perhaps having some feelings after all ("you're touching!"; introduction: "down deep, the man is a lump of sugar")
	Slade is younger than Effing, has a family
Marco answers all the questions, is rather self-confident and clever	Charlie is intimidated, helpless

So what are the advantages and/or the disadvantages of using film scenes when teaching a novel where there is no film version available?

Comparing film and text will increase students' understanding of the novel because they think about the text in many different ways. Since the chosen film extracts differ from the text, they offer the

opportunity to compare and contrast, thus giving a rather natural incentive to talk – just as one might do after having been to the movies. After having read the text, students will have a certain impression of what the characters in the novel look like. When using “the real thing”, i.e. film versions of a novel, their own imagination might be curbed. This does not happen when using a variety of extracts from a variety of films because students are aware of the differences, i.e. that the scene they are watching is not a 1:1 rendering of the text. In addition, students can contribute their own film clips (just as they might bring along a soundtrack or a song to the classroom). A disadvantage might be that students become too used to being served with a visual/cinematographic version of a text. This, however, can be counterbalanced by really using these film extracts rather than just watching them “for the fun of it”.

III. Showdown in the cave

In Chapter 5 of his novel, Marco re-tells the story Effing had told him: how he ended up in a cave somewhere in the West, and how he fights with three criminals, the Gresham Brothers, and finally kills them.

This passage (pp. 178-180 of the Penguin/Faber & Faber editions) should be read with students. Collect some elements that they think come up in most western movies. You might like to ask them to bring along some scenes from Western Movies and compare some of the stock elements with how Auster goes about constructing his chapter. Thus, you can show that it's not only literature that is turned into film, but that certain film techniques have found their way back into literature. Students can collect other examples from a variety of authors (Grisham and Crichton might be a good starting point)

After we have been warned that the

Gresham brothers are going to return, Effing's story within the story becomes more and more exciting. There are various cliff-hangers at the end of paragraphs (“he didn't allow himself to hope very much”) and Auster uses a number of film techniques to create tension here. He also ridicules Western movies, parodying scenes we have all seen somewhere else before. Effing has been waiting for a long time. He has had to leave his shelter, he is hiding, and when the light begins to fade (“The Greshams came riding up at dusk”) he can both see and hear them – “a burst of noise that echoed among the rocks”. We learn about Effing's reaction – he is excited (his pulse, he is surprised about his nerves, and in the end he throws up) and doesn't know what is going to happen.

The passage is very precise as to timing – half an hour, two hours, another one and a half hours, bit by bit. This heightens the tension, of course. There are phases of no action (“for the next two hours, nothing happened”) before things begin to happen very fast. While Effing is waiting, we feel that we are waiting with him. Every now and then, one of the Greshams comes out of the cave. Effing uses most of the five senses to re-create the scene for us (see: Greshams, the fading light, the stars, no moon incidentally, there was no moon when Marco spent his first night in Central Park ...; hear: the horses, muffled sounds; smell/taste: smoke, cooking meat, later he throws up; feel: the candle, the butt of the rifle against his stomach). When he enters the cave, there is a nice example of comic relief “You're the one who's dead, not me”; at the same time, it's another stock element of Western movies, as is the “hastily trying to scramble out of his bedroll on the floor” (yes, we've seen it all before!). Of course, the third killing must be the most difficult one – but Effing is invincible, he uses his

superior brains and after all the noise, “everything went silent in the cave.” Many of the descriptions in this passage seem to be a written-down version of film scenes (the brain on the wall). Again, he uses the five senses: no sound, smell of gunpowder, feel his body shake, throws up. The whole passage is like a cartoon version of what the ‘Wild West’ was all about, but the description is incredibly graphic, (in spite of its cruelty) funny and terribly well written.

IV. Using films in the Moon Palace Classroom

As far as Moon Palace is concerned, our main interest lies with comparing/ contrasting film extracts and the novel, resulting in a deeper understanding of Auster’s work.

- there is no film “Moon Palace” (yet?)
- Paul Auster knows a lot about film
- he has been involved in a number of movies (director/writer)
- some extracts from his films are useful in understanding MP
- an interview with Paul Auster is available on film or via the www
- the author uses ‘film techniques’ in his novels
- we can use extracts from a large variety of feature films to underline some of the scenes in Moon Palace
- using film extracts in the classroom can be highly motivating

A. “Historical” Film Material

As far as Landeskunde is concerned, there are a number of absolute “musts”:

- moon landing
- any city profile New York
- Vietnam War & protest movement
- 1968
- Woodstock

B. Films with/by Paul Auster

- Interview with Paul Auster (Arte)
- <http://us.imdb.com> for title search, plot summaries etc.
- Smoke (1995, 112 min., directed by Wayne Wang)
“The plot of this movie, like smoke itself, drifts and swirls ethereally. Characters and subplots are deftly woven into a tapestry of stories and pictures which only slowly emerges to our view. This film tries to convince us that reality doesn’t matter so much as aesthetic satisfaction. In Auggie’s NY smoke shop, day by day passes, seemingly unchanging until he teaches us to notice the little details of life. Paul Benjamin, a disheartened and broken writer, has a brush with death that is pivotal and sets up an unlikely series of events that afford him a novel glimpse into the life on the street which he saw, but did not truly perceive, every day. Finally, it’s Auggie’s turn to spin a tale...”
- Blue in the face (1995, Wayne Wang/Paul Auster)
“Wayne Wang’s follow-up movie to Smoke presents a series of improvisational situations strung together to form a pastiche of Brooklyn’s diverse ethnicity, offbeat humor, and essential humanity. Many of the same characters inhabiting Auggie Wren’s Brooklyn Cigar Store in Smoke return here to expound on their philosophy of smoking, relationship, baseball, New York, and Belgian Waffles. Most of all, this is a movie about living life, off-the-cuff.” (starring Michael J. Fox, Madonna ...)
- Lulu on the bridge (1998, directed/ written by Paul Auster)
“A jazz saxophonist (Harvey Keitel) loses his ability to play when he is injured in a shooting at a cafe where he was playing. He sinks into depression when everyone charges in to take care of him, including his ex-wife. However, he discovers a stone with a telephone number attached. Returning the stone, he meets a young aspiring actress who in one of those film

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coincidences is listening to his music. Soon the two begin an affair which is fouled by his over-obsessiveness with her, which costs them both a job at a restaurant. ...”

C. Some useful feature films

- *Around the world in 80 days*
actually mentioned in the novel, watched by Uncle Victor and MS Fogg
- *Forrest Gump*
Forrest’s speech in Washington DC on ‘The Vietnam War’ (no sound)
- *Moonstruck*
nice pictures of New York, impressive full moon
- *Scent of a woman*
young man meets blind old man for the first time (MS Fogg - Effing)
- *Far and away* (Kidman/Cruise)
Hollywood’s idea of how the west was won
- a number of ‘western movies’
Effing’s story: hiding in the cave, Tom, George Ugly mouth, the three Gresham brothers
- *Finding Forrester*
Sean Connery is a famous author and teaches a young man to learn how to write film script not by Paul Auster, but it’s very close!!!

(The Graduate/The Truman Show/Costner: Dances with Wolves/The Jungle Book -> proto-type of a “Bildungsroman”/Manhattan Love Story, directed by Wayne Wang/...../etc.)

How to use ‘Moon Palace’ films in the classroom:

- at first, students should be shown extracts only
- extracts may be shown a number of times
- students should be given a special task when watching an extract
- you might like to offer a “long afternoon

of Moon Palace films” and show several of the above mentioned films in a row!

Some suggestions on how to use films with students:

1. Pre-viewing activities

Most “pre-reading activities” can be adapted and turned into “pre-viewing activities”!

- you have read (the scene in) the novel ... describe the first scene of your personal film version
- what can we see/hear/smell/taste/feel in the first scene?
- where would you place the camera?
- which props do we need?
- which actor would you choose?/what does s/he have to look like?
- title of the film: Have you seen x...? What do you know about y...?
- using quotes from the film: who says this to whom?
- soundtrack on tape (cassette recorder): which scene do you imagine to go with the music?
- bring along three different pieces of music - which one would you choose to go with this particular scene? why?
- conversation on tape (cassette recorder!): describe the setting - what do we need to create an atmosphere typical of ... (the ‘Wild West’, Central Park, etc.)
- “hot chair” and “freeze frames”: you are MS Fogg in In this scene, you are Who is with you now? What clothes are you wearing? etc. - students ask questions; before watching the film, character constellations might be set up in class by using freeze frames etc.
- tell students the key terms of a scene - now describe the scene
- students can ask 10-20 etc. yes/no-questions and have to guess what the film or the extract is going to be about

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- after reading the text: find the key terms, then try and “make” the film

II. ‘While-viewing activities’

a) watching - working - (watching) - discussing

- worksheet to analyse the film (characters/ camera angles/language etc.)
- concentrate on a few elements only
- make sure the students can write onto the sheets
- tell them to take notes and not to write full sentences
- watch the scene at least twice; in between, leave some time to complete the worksheet

Some standard questions:

- Who are the characters?
- What do they look like? Features? Clothes? etc.
- Describe the setting of the scene
- What does A tell B (before/after the ... accident/...)?
- Who uses the following words/phrases?
- True/false-questions
- Find 5/.... /etc. differences between the film and the novel
- What would you not find in a German film about
- What does A think/feel when
- watching the film without the sound: what’s happening here?/what does A say to B? why do you think s/he looked so happy?/which stereotypes are being used?/what job/profession might these people have? etc.
- show parts of the film in fast-forward mode: speculate on what’s happening here (summary of a scene)
- show two different parts of the film (beginning, end(ing): how has the protagonist changed?)
- show parts of the film in slow motion: analyse character constellation/camera

- angles/facial expressions/lighting etc.
- show parts of the film in review mode: students talk about the plot
- count the cuts of a particular scene: what effect(s) does this have?
- split class into groups: one can see the film (no sound), others can listen to the sound only (no picture) - students tell each other what they think is happening
- split the screen using cardboard etc. - different groups see half the screen only, tell each other what they have seen
- transcription of dialogue/text; hand out jumbled version, students have to get the order right
- dialogue: students get one part only, have to complete the second part
- dubbing a German film: students are in charge of about 1 minute of film - they take notes, then get some time to “dub” their scene; watch the film a second time, volume turned down, students give an English version, accompanying the pictures (good for “cultural studies” films)
- students write vocabulary sheet; homework: find 10 words central to this film
- Karaoke and sing-along videos

b) stopping the film

- students need time to get used to your stopping the film, they hate it and want to go on watching!
- active pause: how does the film go on? what’s the protagonist doing next? whose foot is this coming through the door? etc.
- fast-forward mode and stopping anywhere (by chance): where in the film are we? what happened before? what’s going to happen in a minute? etc.
- stopping film and talking about scene/the effects/techniques employed by the director: where is the camera now? how is tension created here? etc.

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- speech bubble made of cardboard and held next to the screen:
what's Paul Auster/B/C ... going to say?
 - stopping at/near the climax of the film:
what do you imagine the next scene to look like? when will there be a cut?
 - cf. language lab: stop film, ask students to repeat words/phrases
 - student can be in charge of stopping the film when problems arise
 - stopping and finding “headlines” for individual scenes/cuts
 - stopping and comparing film/text
- Post-viewing activities**
Most “post-reading activities” can be adapted and turned into “post-viewing activities”!
- summing up the film
 - find soundtracks to accompany a scene
 - students bring along pictures from magazines: make a film-poster to go with the scene; afterwards exhibition in class and taking a vote
 - re-writing the scene: what would happen if/what would be different in 20 years' time?
 - acting out the “new” scene in class
 - using a camcorder to make your own version of a scene
 - letter-writing/diary/conversation ... what does A think/feel/do?
 - adding scenes which are not in the film but in the book
 - “blowing up” minor scenes (e.g. telephone conversations, what did they really say)
 - change of perspective: conversation from Y's, not X's angle/point of view
 - writing a tapescript (listening comprehension)
 - comparing novel, film and film-scripts (now widely available, e.g. HMV in London has hundreds of titles on stock; try www.dailyscript.com for film-scripts)
 - writing a film review
 - find other film extracts that remind you of scenes in the novel.

