



WILLIAM FAULKNER & THE SCREEN: THE WRITER THROUGH CINEMA

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William Cuthbert Faulkner (September 25, 1897—July 06, 1962) is a key figure in the American literary canon who remains as such in our collective memory. Faulkner won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949 and his works are considered to be some of the most important examples of Southern literature. For this year's anniversary of his birthday, despite his relevance within the history of literature, I would like to call attention to the author's connection to cinema. Three elements can be considered when looking at William Faulkner's relationship with the audiovisual world: his own work as a scriptwriter, the cinematic adaptations of his literary works, and movie characters inspired in the writer.

First, William Faulkner was directly involved in movie writing for several years. In the early 30's, having had his writings rejected by several magazines, MGM approached the struggling writer to work for the film industry (Caplan). The first movie in which Faulkner collaborated was *Today We Live*. This was an adaptation of his own story "Turnabout" and, interestingly, it will be the only one of his own adaptations in which the author would be involved. Even Faulkner himself "found difficulty in adapting his more straightforward and seemingly film-friendly material" (Bartunerk 98). He attempted to write an adaptation of *Flags in the Dust*, his 1927 novel, that never got produced. This failure to do so "reveals much about the challenges of adapting art for a new medium" (Bartunek 98). Though the scriptwriting medium would grant Faulkner some financial security, the author himself was not particularly fond of scriptwriting. After more than a decade and fifty screenplays (many of which never got made), he wrote a letter to Warner Brothers Studio in 1945 asking for a release of contract. In it, he stated that scriptwriting was "not his forte" and that he did not "dare mispend" more time (qt. in Caplan).



As recognized by Faulkner, adaptations are quite tricky and harder than it might appear at first glance (if we were to judge by the number of adaptations and remakes that get produced every year). However, several of Faulkner's literary works have been adapted to film with varying degrees of success. Possibly, the most infamous attempt is James Franco's 2013 adaptation of *As I Lay Dying*. As Kyle Smith very sardonically puts it in his review for *The New York Post*: "I don't pretend to have a clue how to adapt William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* for the screen, but unlike James Franco, I, at least, didn't try" (Smith). Franco, far from discouraged, did continue to focus on Faulkner's work with *The Sound and the Fury* the very next year. On the other side of the spectrum, a special mention is due to *Burning* (Chang-dong), a 2018 critically acclaimed movie that figures as an adaptation of Haruki Murakami's "Barn Burning" and incorporates elements from Faulkner's story of the same title.

When considering the appearance of the writer in movies as a character, there are a few movies that directly reference his work or his person—for instance, Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*, in which Gil, the main character, says that he has met Faulkner "the other night" (Allen). I would argue, however, that one of the most interesting appearances of the writer in movies is through a character that is not explicitly referred to as William Faulkner. In the Coen brother's movie *Barton Fink* (1989), W.P. Mayhew, played by John Mahoney, is a heavy-drinker writer who tries to delve into the waters of Hollywood scriptwriting. While there are clear differences between Mayhew and Faulkner, the character mirrors Faulkner in his exploration of a Southern writer who, in the 40's, struggles with alcoholism, his writing, and the implied opposition between so-called elitist writing and low culture scriptwriting. Making the central theme of the movie even more evident, the main character is an aspiring and idealistic writer who hopes to make money in Hollywood to be able to devote his time to his more serious writing for the New York theater.

The writing process and the film industry are recurrent themes in the Coen brothers' filmography. There is, in fact, a particular fascination with self-referentiality in cinema. Popular culture references are important to construct the myths that remain in our collective memory. Interestingly enough, Faulkner's figure and remembrance, despite the three-fold connections explored here, have remained somehow separate from the world of the screen. Often seen as an author who is too intellectual and complicated due to his use of language, Faulkner's work demonstrates a mix of both emotional and intellectual power that has greatly impacted the history of literature. As a final note, we may never forget that, after all, as the character Gutiérrez puts it in the 1989 movie by José Luis Cuerda *Amanece que no es poco*, in this town what we have for Faulkner is true devotion.



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SUGGESTED CITATION: Álvarez Trigo, Laura. 2021. "William Faulkner & the Screen: The Writer Through Cinema." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published September 25.