

# Jean Renoir's film 'a day



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### Introduction:

A Day in the Country is one of Renoir's early forays into narrative story telling. One can see the tentativeness of a filmmaker finding his feet in the new medium which was only a few years past the silent films era. A characteristic of the fledgling days of cinema was its seeking of ideas and stories from classic literature and theatre. In the context of French cinema, works of such iconic writers as Victor Hugo, Emile Zola and Alexander Dumas were heavily drawn upon. Guy de Maupassant's short story A Country Excursion is one among many instances of early cinema embracing literature. But there are numerous challenges in adapting a work of art to a radically different medium. Theatre and cinema can be said to share some affinity in terms of principles of mise-en-scene, accepted rules of screenplay, shared exploration of genres, etc. But literature to film is a big leap and film theorist Dudley Andrew identifies three basic types of adaptation - borrowing, intersecting and transforming sources. In the case of A Day in the Country to varying degrees all the three types are at play.

### Borrowing:

The film is said to be borrowed from the short story to the extent that there is divergence in their details pertaining to characterization, geographic description, projection of individual motive, etc. In borrowing, "the artist employs, more or less extensively, the material, idea, or form of an earlier, generally successful text...the adaptation hopes to win an audience by the prestige of its borrowed title or subject...at the same time it seeks to gain a certain respectability, if not aesthetic value, as a dividend in the

transaction". (Andrew, p. 422) Renoir's work satisfies some of these criteria better than others. Certainly the literary work is the very basis for the project of the film. Moreover, Maupassant was a household name in early twentieth century France, and thus brings a degree of prestige to the project at hand. But the particular short story, A Country Excursion, does not have the same name recollection as its author does. Renoir's enterprise does succeed in fulfill the twin key criteria of bringing respectability and aesthetic value to the transaction. The cinema produced is no injustice to the artistic standards of its source. The additional provisions afforded by the new medium add more vibrancy and color to the source text. So the idea of the film can certainly be said to have been borrowed, though with certain qualifications.

Intersection:

This form of adaptation is found to be the weakest in A Day in the Country. Intersection is the most infidel methods of transmuting words to film due to its limited objective. The goal of the filmmaker is less constrained, for he/she is not concerned with the entire written work but only one idea/feature within it. The task then is to experiment and find out what 'cinema' as a medium can 'do' to the original. At its heart is creative curiosity and experimentation on the part of the director. Renowned French film critic Andre Bazin has expressed intersection through the metaphor of light. Andrews paraphrases Bazin thus,

" here the original artwork can be likened to a crystal chandelier whose formal beauty is a product of its intricate but fully artificial arrangement of parts while the cinema would be a crude flashlight intersecting not for its

own shape or the quality of its light but for what it makes appear in this or that dark corner" (Andrews, p. 423)

Seen in light of this definition, *A Day in the Country* is the cinematic intersection of the literary work, for it brings to the table unique cinematic qualities of expression. This is most evident in passages in the film where dialogue takes backseat to visual setting, camera angles, dramatic pauses, shot montages, etc. Renoir's application of intersection succeeds because "it produces an experience of the original modulated by the peculiar beam of the cinema." (Andrews, p. 423)

Transformation:

Under this framework of analysis the keywords are 'fidelity' and 'essence'. To study transformation is to measure the extent to which the original text is retained in the film. Andrew identifies two broad classes - those that conform to the 'letter' of the source and the rest that are attuned to capturing the 'spirit' of the original. The

"letter would appear to be within the reach of cinema for it can be emulated in mechanical fashion. It includes aspects of fiction generally elaborated in any film script providing the fiction's context, and the basic narrational aspects that determine the point of view of the narrator (tense, degree of participation, and knowledge of the storyteller, etc...the skeleton of the original can, more or less thoroughly, become the skeleton of a film." (Andrew, p. 423)

Evaluated in the light of this understanding of transformation, *A Day in the Country* is a work of very-high fidelity. Various aspects of the audio-visual narrative, including the characters and their inter-relation, the geographical, sociological, and cultural information, etc adheres to the Maupassant text. Even when evaluated for the transformed work's capturing of the 'essence' of the original, the film in question answers affirmatively. The story, in essence, is one of chance romantic opportunity that eventually turns out to be a nostalgic memory for Henri and Henriette. This is the central feeling that the reader of the short story as well as the viewer of the film carry with them afterwards. It can be claimed that Renoir's faithful replication of various socio-cultural details mentioned in the original is not for its own sake but in order to encapsulate the 'spirit' or 'essence' of its source.

#### Works Cited:

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