

Passage 6. Books, Films and Plays

The novelist's medium is the written word, one might almost say the printed word; the novel as we know it was born with the invention of printing. Typically the novel is consumed by a silent, solitary reader, who may be anywhere at the time. The paperback novel is still the cheapest, most portable and adaptable form of narrative entertainment. It is limited to a single channel of information - writing. But within that restriction it is the most versatile of narrative forms. The narrative can go, effortlessly, anywhere: into space, people's heads, palaces, prisons and pyramids, without any consideration of cost or practical feasibility. In determining the shape and content of his narrative, the writer of prose fiction is constrained by nothing except purely artistic criteria.

This does not necessarily make the task any easier than that of the writer of plays and screenplays, who must always be conscious of practical constraints such as budgets, performance time, casting requirements, and so on. The very infinity of choice enjoyed by the novelist is a source of anxiety and difficulty. But the novelist does retain absolute control over his text until it is published and received by the audience. He may be advised by his editor to revise his text, but if the writer refused to meet this condition no one would be surprised. It is not unknown for a well-established novelist to deliver his or her manuscript and expect the publisher to print it exactly as written.

However, not even the most well-established playwright or screenplay writer would submit a script and expect it to be performed without any rewriting. This is because plays and motion pictures are collaborative forms of narrative, using more than one channel of communication.

The production of a stage play involves, as well as the words of the author, the physical presence of the actors, their voices and gestures as orchestrated by the director, spectacle in the form of lighting and 'the set', and possibly music. In film, the element of spectacle is more prominent in the sequence of visual images, heightened by various devices of perspective and focus. In film too, music tends to be more pervasive and potent than in straight drama. So, although the script is the essential basis of both stage play and film, it is a basis for subsequent revision negotiated between the writer and the other creative people involved; in the case of the screenplay, the writer may have little or no control over the final form of his work. Contracts for the production of plays protect the rights of authors in this respect. They are given 'approval' of the choice of director and actors and have the right to attend rehearsals. Often a good deal of rewriting takes place in the rehearsal period and sometimes there is an opportunity for more rewriting during previews before the official opening night.

In film or television work, on the other hand, the screenplay writer has no contractual right to this degree of consultation. Practice in this respect varies very much from one production company to another, and according to the nature of the project and the individuals involved. In short, while the script is going through its various drafts, the writer is in the driver's seat, albeit receiving advice and criticism from the producer and the director. But once the production is under way, artistic control over the project tends to pass to the director. This is a fact overlooked by most journalistic critics of television drama, who tend (unlike film critics) to give all the credit or blame for success or failure of a production to the writer and actors ignoring the contribution, for good or ill, of the director.

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Do the following statements agree with the claims of the writer in the Reading Passage?

Write

YES if the statement agrees with the claims of the writer

NO if the statement contradicts the claims of the writer

NOT GIVEN if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this

- 1. Novelists have fewer restrictions on their work than other artists.
- 2. Novelists must agree to the demands of their editors.
- 3. Playwrights envy the simplicity of the novelist's work.
- 4. Music is a more significant element of theatre than cinema.
- 5. Experience in the theatre improves the work of screenplay writers.
- 6. Playwrights are frequently involved in revising their work.
- 7. Screenplay writers usually have the final say in how a TV drama will turn out.
- 8. TV critics often blame the wrong people for the failure of a programme.