Peter M. McIsaac

Taking Doris Dörrie Seriously: Literature, Film, Gender

The essay aligns Doris Dörrie’s film and literature to complicate prevailing critical assumptions that the commercial orientation of Dörrie’s filmmaking means it accommodates, rather than challenges, viewers. The essay traces the transformation of short stories from Doris Dörrie’s Für immer und ewig: eine Art Reigen and Bin ich schön? into the film Bin ich schön?, focusing on its intermedial and intertextual aspects. This approach reveals that the film conveys its insights through a mode of inclusive referencing or transclusion, originally a term introduced to describe the dynamic interconnectedness of hypertext media. This approach shows, among other things, that Dörrie’s film presents critical theoretical and meta-filmic commentary on its reliance on the conventions of the road movie, travel narratives, and north-south identity discourses. In particular, the film critiques the gender constructs typical of travel narratives as well as the “work” of northerners’ imaginings of the south in producing its “happy ending”.

Productive insights into the contemporary relationship of film and literature can be gained with a focus on writer and filmmaker Doris Dörrie. More than an artist who can works capably in separate media, Dörrie begs to be recognized as a figure who consciously transforms characters, stories, and concepts from one medium into the other. This movement between media proves particularly fascinating in light of Sabine Hake’s observation that in the era after New German Cinema, German society increasingly seems to dismiss film’s ability to deal with troubling, complex, or vexing matters. Rather, topics of serious cultural import demand literary treatment. Aside from regarding culturally relevant film at best as an exception to the rule, such expectations would furthermore suggest that as they diverge, film and literature have little in common and little to reveal about each other.

At first glance, such a strict division of cultural labor would appear to describe Dörrie’s cultural production. After all, Dörrie directed Männer, the highly successful 1984 film that for many initiated the wave of commercially successful Beziehungskomödien (for instance, Der bewegte Mann, Abgeschminkt!, Stadtgespräch). For many critics and film scholars, these films came to represent the (lamentable) state of post-Wende German cinema. With Dörrie representing the commercial turn in German film, her work is often read as preferring to

“engross and accommodate” audiences rather than spur critical engagement. In contrast, critical acclaim for Dörrie’s creative fiction has drawn attention to her cultural and political insights, her economic use of the German language, and her command of the short story genre. Her short story collections in particular have led critics to describe Dörrie as “the best short story writer of her generation” and she is also an acclaimed writer of children’s fiction. Though for some time Dörrie’s projects have appeared in print before she converts them to film (most recently she has published a novel and a play that subsequently became films), Dörrie has always tended to use writing as a tool for developing her cinematic projects. Seen this way, the critical acclaim for her writing represents not so much a deep change in how Dörrie works as an opportunity to rethink the critical potential of Dörrie’s motion pictures. In this paper, I propose to do just this by tracing how she refigures the insights of the literary realm in order to work in the cinematic medium. Such a focus on intermedial and intertextual transformations in Dörrie’s cultural production, I maintain, can accomplish two things. First, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that has sought to advance categories more nuanced than “commercial” – a generally pejorative label typically opposed to critically valorized terms such as “art” or “counter-cinema” – for thinking about Dörrie’s work within the nexus of post-Wende cinema. Second, it provides a nuanced model of the possible interdependencies of (post-Wende) literature and cinema.

In pursuing these two points, this paper will align two of Dörrie’s acclaimed short story collections, Für immer und ewig: eine Art Reigen (1991) and Bin ich schön? (1994) with the 1998 film largely drawn from these texts, Bin ich schön?”

---


