Introduction to Robert Olen Butler

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1 The second annual occurrence of the CRILA’s conference on The Short Story and Cinema took place in collaboration with the research group Suds d’Amériques (University of Versailles-St-Quentin-en-Yvelines) which hosted the event. Our guest of honour, Robert Olen Butler, whose short story collection *A Good Scent from a Distant Mountain* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993, is an Eppes Distinguished Professor at Florida State University. Prominent film producers Jason Kilot and Paul Cohen are in the process of making an independent film of his latest novel, *A Small Hotel* (2011), based on the screenplay Butler has just written.

2 Robert Olen Butler’s interest in the correspondence between film and fiction techniques takes formal expression in *From Where You Dream* (2005), a compilation of illuminating lectures which argue that the sensorial register must play an active role in the fictional medium, itself organically linked to the cinematic register. In Chapter 4, “Cinema of the Mind,” Butler explains how basic film concepts, familiar to us all, are deeply rooted in literature and in the short story medium, in particular: “When you read a word of literature, the characters and the setting and the actions are evoked as images, as a kind of dream in your consciousness. The primary senses—sight and sound—prevail, just as in the cinema, but in addition to seeing and hearing, you experience taste and smell, you can feel things on your skin as the narrative moves through consciousness. This is omnisensual cinema. Consequently, it makes sense that the techniques of literature are those we understand to be filmic” (64).

3 The chapter “Cinema of the Mind” bore particular relevance to our one-day conference on the Short Story and Cinema as it offered a response to a number of questions that our research group has formulated in conferences over time. In 2011, the subject of debate focused on the manner in which the passage from the written to the filmic medium takes place. As a starting point, the précis for the conference proposed to explore the technical affinities between the fictional medium of the short story and the filmic medium. Under the aegis of Robert Olen Butler, the debate centered on considering how the short story is inherently linked to cinema, and consequently favorable to adaptation. From the point of
view of Butler, it is a kind of memory shot which plays out “the cinema of the inner consciousness” (64).

The extent to which the cinematic channel can be carried over to a fictional medium of concision like the short story was of core interest to our conference. Some of the points of concern which came up were: how the short story, with its elliptic precision and its capacity to dispense with extensive narration, could serve as an ideal medium for expressing the primary senses and immediacy. Here again, the connection between film technique and short story technique proved to be, de facto, a given—all of this despite two seemingly diverging genres. As Butler has noted: “What we think is film technique has already existed in fiction writing for centuries” (84). To support this conviction, he examined the writing techniques of Flaubert, Dickens and Hemingway, all of which use cinematic devices.

It is with immense gratitude that we reach out to Robert Olen Butler, extending warmest thanks to him for having come all the way from Capps, Florida to Versailles, France in order to participate in our conference. Butler’s enlightening observations about fundamental filmic concepts and how they function within the framework of the short story medium brought our conference an invaluable artistic and intellectual contribution which we will continue to draw upon in the future.

AUTHORS

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Alice Clark-Wehinger is an Associate Professor of Literature at the University of Nantes. Her work on Shakespeare and Nerval: Le Théâtre romantique en crise, Shakespeare et Nerval, Paris: Harmattan, 2005, was short-listed for a research prize by the SAES and the AFEA. She is the author of a collection of poems in French and English (Imaginaires, University of Nantes, 1997) and numerous critical articles in French literary reviews. She has also co-authored a book on the Anglo-Saxon short story (La nouvelle anglo-saxonne, une étude psychanalytique, Paris: Hachette, 1998). Alice Clark’s short story collection, A Darker Shade of Light, received Technikart Manuscript’s first prize award at le Salon du Livre (March 2011).