

# On Book to Movie Adaptations

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## Abstract

*Adapting full-length novels, short stories or novellas to movies has become a very frequent endeavour. Filmmakers choose (potentially) iconic literary works and adapt them for the screen so that they become accessible to very large audiences, which is to be quite expected in the digital era. This study aims to take a look at the symbiotic relationship between books and movies.*

**Key words:** *literary text, filmic adaptation, reader, audience*

## Introduction

The relationship between film and literature has existed since the beginning of cinematography, literature becoming a source of inspiration, perspective and ideas. (Corrigan 1999: 28)

A very necessary step in studying the relationship that develops between film and literature is to construe it as a historical pact that has modified throughout history. Dudley Andrew says: "the study of adaptation is tantamount to the study of the cinema as the whole". (Corrigan 1999: 7)

Debates about the mutual relationship between film and literature are still dynamic and there are many publications and intense disputes among the general public.

The value of a novel is governed by the talent of its writer, yet when the idea of a film is debated, many more factors come into play. Not only must the adaptation be managed by a competent director, a skilled script writer and talented ensemble cast, but it is also necessary to guarantee a movie's success. With that in mind, some voices claim that the film adaptation of a novel can only ever be as good as its source material. (*The Guardian*, 2011)

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Despite the fact that the financial motivations for both filmmakers and novelists are very large when we have to consider turning book to movie adaptations, one must remember that it is not always the best books that make the best films. (*The Guardian*, 2011)

### **A brief look into adapting novels to movies**

According to American film theorist and professor Robert Stam, this kind of adaptation is a dialogic process, where various approaches coexist and are comparatively existential and relativistic in their interaction, and which stands in contrast to a dialectic process which describes the interaction and resolution between multiple paradigms or ideologies, leading to one putative solution establishing primacy over the others. (G. W. F. Hegel, internet)

In most techniques used in film adaptations, filmmakers invent new characters; key scenes are interpolated or create new stories that were not present in the source material at all. For instance, because the film studio anticipated a female audience for the film and had a famous actress for the role, her character became a significant part of the film. However, characters are also sometimes invented to provide the narrative voice. (Stam 2000)

Writer, actor and film theorist Béla Balázs wrote in his collection of essays, "Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art" what is an impressive conceptualization: "The screenplay has the capacity to approach the formal design and thematic of the literary model and represent it with a viewpoint incorporating a new aesthetic design and technology, creating thus a new artistic version." (1952: 246-247)

Moreover, he argues that film scripts are an entirely new specific literary "art form", a new entity, a different expression of artistic imagination. (1952: 252) The novel should therefore be considered as a potential base material to be fashionably remodeled by the writer of the screenplay at his will, based on an excellent knowledge of techniques and principles of this type of artistic metamorphosis.

Between 1920 and 1930, the theories of Béla Balázs proved to be of great importance to a historical perspective of the novel-to-film adaptation mechanism. It is also claimed that the literary foundation of the new art, new script, is just as much specific, independent literary form as the written stage play. (McFarlane 1996)

Consequently, even though an adaptation is built around the subject of another work, it is an entirely new creation and, despite being a new work of art, bears an obligation to some kernel of truth, similar to Eisenstein's concept of "initial general image". (Eisenstein 1957: 31)

Again in "Theory of the Film", Balázs asserts furthermore that "a film script writer adapting the play may use the existing work of art merely as raw material, regard it from the specific angle of his own art form as it were raw reality, and pay no attention to the form once already given to the material." (1952: 263) May this imply that the adaptation is a separate work, a provocation which is neither inferior to its source, nor less worthy than the original work? It may be also considered that "the crucial process of adaptation from a literary source occurs not only in the filming but also in the designing of the screenplay." (1952: 177)

A little over two decades later (1957), *Novels into Film* is published in the U.S.A., as an important and impressive critical analysis that goes a good deal beyond the limited and scholarly study suggested by its title. George Bluestone, its author and an American born film writer, offers an excellent reflection on a radical analysis of the limitations, techniques and potentialities of both novel and film by applying the useful touchstone of the changes made when the former is translated into the terms of the latter. (in Rushton and Bettinson 2010: 13)

This work of film theory analyzes the process by which novels are transformed into films. In addition to an extended theoretical analysis, he brings some kind of specific originality and examines in detail the metamorphosis of six novels into film, as follows: *The Informer* (based on Roslund & Hellström's novel, *Three Seconds*, 2009), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident* (a 1943 American western film), which are excellent novels resulting in fantastic films, and finally the sixth one, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, a classic novel that was slaughtered in adaptation, according to analysts. The main analysis technique is the focus on the additions, deletions and other changes made by filmmakers in adapting the source material for the screen.

Bluestone draws attention upon the similarity of the remarks at the start of his study titled "The Two Ways of Seeing", suggesting that "between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image lies the root difference between the two media." (1961: 1) In this way he admits the strong connection of "seeing" in his use of the word "image". In the same time, he outlines the fundamental difference between the way images are

produced in the two media and how they are perceived. Moreover, he acknowledges that “conceptual images evoked by verbal stimuli can barely be distinguished in the end from those evoked by non-verbal stimuli’ and, in this respect, he shares common ground with several other writers concerned to establish links between the two media.” (1961: 47)

In Bluestone’s opinion, a successful screenwriter in adaptation must fully understand the limitation of the film medium and make a serious adjustment to a set of different and other conflicting conventions that have historically distinguished literature from the autonomous entities. (1961: 55) An adaptation, therefore, is a type of raw material that paraphrases thematic content and must link these conflicting conventions. (1961: 31) It would be misconstruing this conflict, however, to say that it is entirely external, a battle of opposing forces. The conflict is also strong inside the head of the average consumer. This is because the basic act of adaptation has a dilemma at its heart. If an adaptation can maintain fidelity to the original, it will be criticized for being unoriginal. If, conversely, it attempts to interpret the earlier work or provide a new twist, it will be criticized for violating the integrity of the original. (Hollands 2002: 2)

Important elements, such as new characters, key incidents, interpolation of scenes and thematic representative aspects, become essential qualities for the film bringing authenticity. In the language of fidelity, literature and film are never equal; texts are always judged differently and in a fewer extent in comparison to other art forms, particularly in films, and only the adaptation is capable of being “unfaithful” to the text. (Stam 2000: 205)

An extraordinary concept was raised when Bluestone concludes with a premise that “the adapter thus becomes a true author, not a mere translator of someone else’s work.” (1961: 62) The film adaptation will inevitably become a different artistic entity from the novel which it is based on. Consequently, to a thoroughly documented work based on both in-depth research into film archives and libraries and on interviews with the screenwriters, directors and producers who worked on these films as well, the *Novels into Film* conclude that because the novel lends itself to states of consciousness and the film to the observed reality, the adaptation of one from the another produces a new and complete autonomous art form. (1961: 6)

The epicentre of Bluestone’s central thesis is that the adapter “looks not to the organic novel whose language is inseparable from its theme, but to characters and incidents which somehow have detached themselves from language, and like the heroes of folk legends have assumed a

mythical life of their own.” (1961: 61) He goes even a little beyond the ordinary frame work in saying much more as a figure of speech that a novel cannot be compared as much of the same critical level to the film into which it was made, for the transformation of a great novel is not particularly excused by the differences in media. (1961: 59)

The modern novel characteristically deals with time and the complexities of interior motivation; the film, on the other hand, basically unequipped to render these effectively, finds its forte in rendering motion and action. Both its external quality and the unfortunate compression rate required by a maximum viewing time, determine the limit of the film.

A novel, for instance, can easily take around forty hours to be read and can indulge in the luxury of leisurely expression, whereas the movie is at the mercy of the speeding celluloid that cannot turn back, replaced or diverge. The novel can give pages to the description of minutes and skip over years in a sentence, while a film can dismiss time and it cannot expand it or hold it back to examine it in many facets.

Perhaps the most important part of the book is the highly compact and difficult to understand discussion of the nature of time in the two media and the difference between “psychological” and “chronological” time.

The foundation of formal difference is that literature and film have different signifying systems. Novels deal with words, films with images. Nevertheless, films are also limited: for one thing, there are no time constraints on a novel, while a film usually must compress events into two hours or so. This is the second formal difference between novel and film. While pictures greatly condense descriptions, a paragraph of sequential events can take several minutes to portray on screen. For instance, the 2002 adaptation of *David Copperfield* compresses a novel of 800 pages into just 180 minutes of feature-length film. On the other hand, the meaning of a novel is controlled by only one person, the author, while the meaning we get from a film is the result of a collaborative effort of many people. Film also does not let us the same freedom a novel does - to connect with the plot or characters by imagining them in our minds, which, for many film consumers can be very frustrating. Also, the film has a certain unity of expression that the discrete quality of language - subject, verb, and object - denies to the novel. Finally, the non-verbal experience cannot be conveyed by language. There are times when “a picture is worth more than a thousand words” (Flanders 1911: 18), without wearing subtitling or any other description.

Obviously, adapting a novel into a screenplay is not just a matter of extracting dialogue from the pages of a book. Maybe, the major difference between films and books is that visual images stimulate our perceptions directly, while written words can do this indirectly. Reading the word *chair* requires a kind of mental “translation” that viewing a picture of a chair does not. Film is a more direct sensorial experience than reading-besides verbal language, there is also colour, movement, expression and sound.

Consequently, the film script is a completed art form, which is exactly what Béla Balázs suggested in “Theory of the film.” (1952: 253) One author writes the book and one reader reads the book one at a time. If it is an excellent book, many people, even millions will read that book with so much eagerness. While each reader will see the story through their own imagination and personal interpretation, the printed words will never change. Very few people will ever read the original screenplay. The screenplay will enhance with input from collaborations between the director and the creative team, from pre- to post-production. The screenplay is a fluid and continuously improving referencing document.

### **Movies based on books. A form of authentic-to-text or successful transformation?**

We know already that writing a screenplay is not like writing a book. This transformation involves many challenges. If we start with a definition of screenplay, a screenplay, or script, is a written work by screenwriters for a film in our case. These screenplays can be original works or adaptations from existing novels. A screenplay for a film is an instrument or blueprint by which words are transformed, by a collaborative effort, into images and sound in film. (English 2002)

While the writer of the screenplay and the creators of the film analyze the changes made to adapt a novel, it is quite clear that they are in a big dilemma. On the one hand they certainly want their film to be as authentic to the novel as possible, but at the same time everyone wants the movie to be successful.

It is therefore not easy to engineer the screenplay to meet both criteria, and the final result of the filmmakers is not very well balanced out. It shows that the wish for success dominates the authenticity to a certain degree. This can be seen in the many changes that have only been made to the appearance of characters, the look of landscapes, and the use of new special effects. In many cases, however, the conversions are justified, for

they do not basically interfere with the action of the novel. Screenplays hardly run longer than 120 pages. Figuring one page of a screenplay is equivalent to one minute of film, a 120-page screenplay translates into a two-hour motion picture. If the source material has 400 pages to tell the story, how could it be possible to tell the same story in 110 pages, the ideal length for a screenplay by today's industry standards?

Some screenwriters look to capture the substance and spirit of the story while others do not. Some determine the through-line and major subplot of the story and then viciously cut everything else. 'Through-line' here means WHO (protagonist) wants WHAT (goal), and WHO (antagonist) or WHAT (some other force) opposes him or her?

No one can blame a director or a producer for the wish for some beautiful-looking scenes in their movie. Their goal is to excerpt the most memorable parts of the novel. The goal of these transformations is clear as well: The public is to be emotionally implicated in the same way they can enjoy the many extraordinary - looking scenes.

Music, on the other hand, has a great power in the success of the film. The founder of the Moondance International Film Festival and competition, Elizabeth English, explains that it needs 30 to 40 minutes of music, one of the most important elements in a film, which can be artfully used to arouse, to manipulate, to frighten, or to soothe and calm, to aid in transitions, to punctuate, to comment, to move plot along, to focus, to add sense of continuity, to add information, to heighten tempo, add dramatic tension, to change mood, to add character and to define, as well as to add dimension and give the film new or different meaning. All those elements that make the world of the film believable to the audience: set design, lighting, sound, special FX, continuity, locations, props, extras, stunts, costumes, hair and makeup, music. Most screenwriters and filmmakers are just trying to keep one step ahead of whatever it is they think the audience is going to pay to see. (English 2002)

Finally, it cannot be said in all honesty that films are better than the books they are based on; they can often both evoke quite similar emotions and experiences but go about doing so with much different executions. In fact, movies often inspire viewers to seek out their source materials. William Goldman replies in the three words that ultimately define Hollywood: "Nobody... knows... anything!" (English 2002)

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