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## Turning Novel into Film: Criticism of Adaptation

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### **Abstract:**

Adapting a novel into a film is a humongous task than writing a book, yet the critics never favoured a film over the novel. There are limitations to it, and the transformation brings changes at every level of the film and a book is not the same after the film. It is hardly ever that a film has come out better than the book. Adding, subtraction, multiplication and division: it all applies to script while making a film out of a book. The present paper focusses on the disadvantages held by a film during the metamorphosis of the book.

**Keywords: Adaptation, Film, Novel, Literature, Cinema, Book.**

“Cinema, to be creative, must do more than record,” Anais Nin wrote in the fourth volume of her diaries (Nin). Cinema is the mirror of the mind, but it doesn’t actually convey clearly what was put (the book adaptation) and what has been achieved in the process (the film)? Though a mirror never lies, but the mirror also doesn’t tell the whole truth. Films make people dumb enough to think for themselves and they absorb what they find on the screen, while the books make faculty of the mind sharper. Such is the cinema that “the eye licks it all up instantaneously and the brain, agreeably titillated, settles down to watch things happening without bestirring itself to think” (Woolf).

Book stirs the human mind by fuelling up the imagination while keeping its contents intact, whereas “a film is a close adaptation keeping most of the narrative elements from the book, dropping few and not adding many elements” (Desmond and Hawkes 44). To every person, a book travels in a different way, while a film looks the same on the screen to everyone and their minds go haywire, incapable of stretching the brains. A film sucks up creative liberties

of a person, and takes the person to a world it intends to, and sometimes, or mostly, the worlds of the spectators are utterly shattered when they have already read a book before the film. “If it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal” (Ricœur 108). In the same way, no two adaptations are equal—one will be inferior to other and every maker will create a film out of the book by the meaning he has expounded. Blending all the elements of the book properly do not mean an adaptation is successful—adapting a book into film this way is just a concoction from the person who makes the film. Adaptation is adjustment; it is “retelling of a story in a different form where original ideas are expanded in a new way” (“Defining Adaptation”) and, the expansion is, not necessarily, a good one. Books are saviour of the masses of filmmakers, as they have not much clear idea what has to be filmed as everything which has to be filmed has already been filmed. That is why the world turns to books—the richer well of imagination. As the maestro director from India, Satyajit Ray confesses, “‘*Books are not primarily written to be filmed*’ but there is dearth of ideas and filmmakers always turn to books for something new or epic and try to retain the most of its qualities so that they look similar to the book and they expect audience to cherish their film art as they had loved the book” (15).

Adaptation is art, but have not the intricacies of a fine painting or the imagination of a good book. “What is involved in adapting can be a process of appropriation, of taking possession of another’s story, and filtering it, in a sense, through one’s own sensibility, interests, and talents. Therefore, adapters are first interpreters and then creators” (Hutcheon 18). An adaptation works like borrowing where nothing is yours, yet the filmmakers consider the film their own work of art. Though a film might not be as bad as one thinks of an adaptation, but the criticism among the learned has not been friendly:

The conventional language of adaptation criticism has often been profoundly moralistic, rich in terms that the cinema has somehow done a disservice to literature...lamenting what has been ‘lost’ in the transition from novel to film, while ignoring what has been ‘gained’... adaptation discourse subtly puts that many adaptations based on significant novels are mediocre or misguided. (Stam 3-4)

In ‘Introduction’ to the book *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, Robert Stam, one of the best writers on film adaptation, mentions many sources of limitations at which the adaptation is considered inferior to the book:

Firstly, it is assumed that “older arts are necessarily better arts” and “the arts accrue prestige over time. The venerable art of literature, within this logic, is seen as inherently

superior to the younger art of cinema...” (Stam 4). It is seldom false, and it is inscribed on the stone of ages: *Old is Gold*. Literature has an era of history of its own, while cinema, though not nascent, is relatively a child. To judge both on this account is incomparable. While examples of adaptation from literature to films are numerous, very few examples have been of the opposite, i.e., film to a book. So, accordingly, as Stam’s first source of hostility states, with time that has fallen in history, a book is superior to its subordinate which concludes that a film is, and always will be, inferior in quality in contrast to a book.

The second hostile element is the “presumption about adaptation which derives from dichotomous thinking that film and literature had always been bitter rivals” (Stam 4). There is always a contest and it seems book, the fittest one, would survive the film easily. There has always been a war between words and visuals and mutuality between them would be an arduous task. Though a book may seem the father of the film, a film wants quick recognition than the former before being called a son. A film wants to lead the generation in less time, but a book wins in the long run than its relatively young offspring. A good book will always have an upper hand over a better film.

“A third source of hostility to adaptation is iconophobia...that assaults on the ‘imaging’ of literary texts derives, at some deep cultural level, from a desire to affirm one’s faith, in literature” (Stam 5). Turning a book, especially religious ones with deep symbolic meanings, into a film has always been hazardous as it is never universally accepted and the explicit images of the film to the inferred meaning of the book has always been criticized. The visual arts are amoral as compared to the writings of the book as the cinema fills and refills the brains of the audiences with its own version of distorted and desecrated truth, which is fiction arisen from the filmmaker’s mind rather than the spectators. It is easier to burn a book than to negate the experiences of a film from the mind of people completely and it could lead to negative effects on the social, cultural and political aspect of a society. So, watching a film is not the same as reading a book—one is constructive art and that is the book.

“A fourth, related source of hostility to film and adaptation is logophilia, or the valorization of the verbal” (Stam 6). Words are blessed beings and the best refined way of communication and a film adaptation will always be a secondary thing to these polished texts. Book connoisseurs and lover of books reject the film made up of visuals. What is in a book will never be as good on the screen as words heal while visuals have distracting powers. Books take us to the good old days of the past; films bring us the haunting memories of something which is not needed, so words will always have advantage over the visuals created by someone

else for someone else. A book gives freedom to create the world one aspires to, which a film does not.

Stam's fifth source of hostility to film and adaptation is "that film offends through its inescapable materiality, its incarnated, fleshly, enacted characters, its real locales and visceral shocks to the nervous system...films are dismissed as dealing in surfaces, literally 'superficial'" (6-7). It is true that most filmmakers focus more on the subject of 'earning' than 'yearning;' they cherish moolah rather than giving audience the real interpretation of a desired adaptation, so a film never succeeds in representing a book truly. A book relies on giving its readers an experience and it doesn't hurry up things as a film does. A book takes time to write, a book takes time to read, and a book remains in the mind of a reader for a life time—a book invigorates the soul of its reader. While a film titillates the audience and make people weak in their responses by using up all the sensory organs and draining up the energies of the body. As Stam puts, "novels are absorbed through the mind's eye during reading, films directly engage the various senses" (6).

Stam's "sixth source of hostility to adaptation is the myth of facility, the completely uninformed and somewhat puritanical notion that films are suspectly easy to make and suspectly pleasurable to watch" (7). Though films are not that easy to produce, it is definitely not pleasing to everyone. 'Films' are external and 'Books' are internal. This is more truth in favour of a book as a film mostly cares about the external outlook of the presentation—how everything looks to the audience—rather than the internal aspect, which a book cares about, and that is the supply of proper delight to audience and a satisfying experience to every individual reader. Stam agrees on one thing in favour of the film that "like novels of any complexity, films too bear 'rereading,' precisely because so much can be missed in single viewing" (7). But I disagree, as films could not be as sublime as a book and in re-viewing a film it is certain that more disagreements would emerge and it will not be an agreeable companion like a book.

"A seventh source of the hostility to the cinema and adaptation is a subliminal form of class prejudice, a socialized form of guilt by association. The cinema, perhaps unconsciously, is seen as degraded by the company it keeps—the greater unwashed popular mass audience" (7). Stam feels since cinema audience is the popular mass audience which is considered unrefined, uncultured, uncouth and lacking high social skills and have never read classic literature, it is obvious that a film will always be considered inferior to the fine content of the book and will never be able to keep up to "literature's prestige" (7). Literature has a long history

of culture and tradition and it deserves the respect it had procured over the time. Most adaptations are voiceless versions of a fine book, and even the brilliant adaptation would never size up to the great reverence a classic book had attained. So, it is evident that “adaptations are the inevitably ‘dumber down’ versions of the source novels, designed to gratify an audience lacking in ‘cultural capital,’ an audience which prefers the cotton candy of entertainment to the gourmet delights of literature” (Stam 7).

The final source of hostility to adaptation that Stam addresses is parasitism: “Adaptations are seen as parasitical on literature; they burrow into the body of source text and steal its vitality.... adaptations ‘drains the life out’ of the original?” (7). Films feed on written words, yet they never produce the exact words. A film always tries to be original, but it never even becomes a sub-par clone to its predecessor. “A ‘faithful’ film is seen as uncreative, but an ‘unfaithful’ film is a shameful betrayal of the original” (Stam 7). A film could never become a standard for a good adaptation, as there are always going to be loopholes through which something will miss out that is essential to the main story of the book. A book is a ‘thinking pad’ of a person, a film is a picture book moving very fast to please its audience. “An adaptation is only ‘the Classics Illustrated’ version of the novel....” (Stam 8). Film adaptations are an activity of excessive indulgence at one single time, giving hangover throughout which takes time to recover from the ill-treatment given to the book. As per Kamilla Elliot:

Adaptations are perceived as doubly ‘less;’ they are less as novels because they are only copies of the original, but they are also less as films because they do not represent ‘pure film;’ they lack ‘representational fluency on [their] own grounds. (27)

Film adaptations do not give us what we want from it. A film representing a book must listen to the voice of the words embedded in it, but its creators do the things which they rather have not done. “In order to make us experience physical reality, films must show what they picture.... To the extent that painting, literature, the theater, etc., involve nature at all, they do not really represent it” (Kracauer 300). The makers picture a world they want to, not what the book have inside; they consider the classical words only brick and mortar to create a house of their own choice and in the process forget the book completely. A filmmaker judges through the camera and words becomes meaningless when he shoots his version of the false truth. He infuses life inside the film by the dead remains of the book. “The difficulties confronting the adapter of novels are frequently traced not to the kind of universe which the novel renders but to the specific ways in which it shapes any world it encompasses” (Kracauer 234).

A film is very different from the novel, as ‘the book suggests, the cinema digests.’ While a book focusses on its words, a film goes by outward appearances created on the set. The power of the book lies in the implications and descriptions of the written words while a film adaptation focusses on chewing and digesting after the book has been churned completely. A book develops inside the mind; the cinema is a half-cooked development served to the audience. A book is music, a film is sound. A book is wisdom, a film is blabber most of the time. A book is real eye mirror, a film is rear view mirror. A book lasts in the spirit, while a film does not. The film never gives a book the adaptation it needs, as it could not carry the weight of the book and the book really doesn’t rely on a film to make it serve in a proper manner. A book has endless imaginations to carry on indefinitely but a film would not sustain for a long time.

An adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum.... Many adapters deal with this reality of reception by updating the time of the story in an attempt to find contemporary resonance for their audiences.... (Seger 65)

It is an error of judgement which filmmakers commit and spoil the whole broth; an adapter needs to learn the basics and find a way to reach a way where his adaptation suspire; though he will not succeed entirely but he would have a story to tell, and he will have the context to which his adaptive story belongs. There are not efficient hands to turn a book into a good adaptation, but a good filmmaker while adapting would sufficiently understand the wisdom behind it. He will adapt, readapt, and unadapt, and begin the process again to get the adaptation he deserves. As Thomas Hardy has once said about adaptation, “The dramatization of a novel is really only an ingenious piece of carpentry” (Hardy 312).

Time has meaning and as Kracauer mentions that there is a contrast with respect to time in “...the novel’s flexibility in handling all imaginable modes of time with the rigidity of films” (234). A book can take us to various places where a person can switch from present to past and then back to the future; a movie does not have such flexibility—it cannot stretch as a book can go beyond any realm. “The only means by which film can evoke the past is flashback” (Kracauer 234). A film can only go to the past in the present and it does not have such fluidity as a book has, so a film adaptation cannot be treated the same as the book when the time comes knocking at the door. A film is bounded by time, but a book is not—a book is limitless.

In defining a character, a book can go to any lengths, but a film adaptation has fewer options. As Kracauer asserts:

The novelist is at liberty to place himself any of his characters and, accordingly, set the outer world, or what then appears of it... Film on its part is incapable of proceeding for this particular angle of approach. The camera cannot achieve complete identification with a screen character in the fashion of the novel; all that it can do is to suggest intermittently what he sees and how he feels about it. (235-236)

The camera is the eye of a film and it gives to the audience what it sees and never more than that; it records and explores what is ahead of it—the reality. While a book can take us to streams of consciousness where a mind can do whatever it wants, i.e., think in its own way. A film maker might devote his life in rereading a great novel, but he cannot be capable enough to adapt the book perfectly what he had perceived throughout. A book is an experience which moves along all the years and each time it looks different and sweet, but never sour. A director may have the theme of the novel, but he will not ever have the correct tempo of the book. Psychology changes when a person changes but a book will never give a person an unsatisfactory learning. A book is full of life—it's a reader's life jacket. You can construct anything while reading a novel, but in a film, there are boundaries to everything—a book is everlasting. A book absorbs us completely in its world while a “film is ‘staring at the world entirely from the outside’” (Kracauer 286). If a book is a ‘God,’ its adaptation is a pupil who is willing and unwilling to learn at the same time.

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