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From book to film: The process of adaptation

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1. Introduction

Throughout its history, humankind has never ceased to tell stories: indeed, storytelling is one of the essential features of the human condition. Stories have been created anew, but more often than not they have also been reshaped, condensed, expanded, re-created - in a word: *adapted*. From the oldest tradition of passing them down orally, from generation to generation, to the first cave engravings, to the emergence of literature through written language, stories have been told through a variety of means, including the visual arts, from painting to sculpture to architecture, to the more recent photography, and, finally, cinema.

Crossing the borders of all these means, story adaptation is not an exception, but rather the rule. "Classical" storytelling, from *The thousand and one nights* to Shakespeare to Sherlock Holmes, has always relied on previous texts, which have been reinterpreted and adjusted to fit the changing sensibilities of new generations of readers/viewers. In this way, new stories have been generated, in an everlasting cycle of creation and re-creation.

More recently, and specifically in the past few decades, adaptation has become a keyword for new ways of storytelling, in an ever-expanding multimedia universe that relies heavily on new technologies, while at the same time multiplying the connections among old and new ways and means to both create and consume "texts" (using this term in its widest possible sense). Today we inhabit a system of "signs" through which texts are constantly been adapted to fit an extensive range of *media*. Thus a novel can be turned into a film, which is made available in a variety of ways (from theatrical release to DVDs, from streaming platforms to social networks), while generating in the meantime stage plays, comics and graphic novels, videogames, radio TV series, podcasts, concerts and music CDs, and even reaching out to theme parks and all forms of merchandising (from clothes to food and drink) - until perhaps the film leads to a new novel - thus coming full circle in this process of constant adaptation, mutual completion and contamination.

In this context, there is no doubt that financial considerations are often at the heart of adaptations: if a studio owns the legal rights to a novel or short story, this already provides a good motivation to turn such narratives into a film, a videogame, a TV series etc. - considering also the fact that such studios may own the production industries and distribution platforms that will assist in creating and marketing ever "new" products.

2. From individual experience to intertextual generation

Even before considering adaptation as a process which generates texts in a multimedia environment, it is fascinating to note how the human mind is in itself a source of some kind of "inner adaptation". When we read a book, and, to a different extent, when we watch a film, we are inexorably led to interpret, re-imagine, re-construct the input we receive from the printed page or the screen in ways that are strictly individual, and that produce our own image of the story conveyed by the book or the movie. So, in a way, the first adaptation is conceived within our mind, and therefore there can be as many different adaptations as there are readers/viewers. This already tells us a lot about the way the original text can produce an indefinite number of possible adaptations.

Readers/viewers obviously differ in terms of previous experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, motivations, competences, and this accounts for the different ways in which this process is carried out and for the different outcomes it can produce. There are people who are content with building up a minimum of interpretation or re-construction, confining themselves to some basic aspects of the story and characters, but, at the opposite end, there are other people who "stretch" or even "go beyond" the story in order to re-create a somewhat different world out of the input provided by the text. This process has developed enormously with the advent of the Internet and social networks: fans of a saga, like *Star Wars* or the *The Lord of the Rings*, are very actively involved, not just in interpreting and evaluating the original books/movies and their numberless adaptations, but also in finding out more about their favourite stories and characters, by adding, changing, combining elements in order to go well beyond the original texts and produce additional and alternative "worlds" - which are then shared by online fan communities, generating a constantly changing universe of inter-related stories. This can even involve drastic modifications, like imagining different story outcomes and a different fate for characters (in the *Titanic* story, for instance, Jack may survive the icy waters of the ocean and live happily ever after with Rose ...).

More recently, this creation of alternative world has been associated with the concept and practice of *multiverse* - a container of all the possible stories and their variations that can be derived from endless interpretations and re-construction of the original text - to the extent that this text can lose its very quality of originality and cease to be perceived as the primary source of all these new, alternative worlds. Fans of *Batman* and consumers of the infinite variety of stories that have been built around this character, in movies, graphic novels, TV series and videogames very probably ignore (and are not interested in) the original comic strip dating back to 1939 - thus making it difficult, if not impossible, to establish the original, "authentic" Batman. The same could be said about, e.g. Dracula: given the infinite number of works that see Dracula as the main character, how many readers/viewers will be in a position to link it with the original novel by Bram Stoker (1897)?

It comes as no surprise, then, that alternatives to the "main" or original" version of a story were sometimes conceived by their very authors, for a variety of reasons (including commercial ones). Alternative endings, for example, are both common to literature and films: Charles Dickens provided two different final versions of his highly successful novel *Great Expectations*, with a different fate awaiting the couple of characters; Billy Wilder's *Arianna* (1957) ends with the marriage of the two main characters in the American version, but leaves spectators with a sense of uncertainty in the international version - no doubt the sensibilities of different audiences caused different marketing strategies.

Intertextuality - or the networks of relationships that exist between and among texts, and even within different versions of the same text - is thus at the core of adaptations.

"Filmic adaptations, then, are caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin." (Note 1)

3. Literature vs film: an ongoing dialogue

"Film has nothing to do with literature; the character and substance of the two art forms are usually in conflict."
Ingmar Bergman (Note 2)

Before exploring the nature of adaptation and its different outcomes it is necessary to briefly consider the specific features of the two *media* involved in the process, i.e. the book and the movie. Literature and film use different "languages", or, more appropriately, are in themselves two different *sign systems,* which call for different ways for readers/viewers to engage with the relevant texts. Our discussion will, at least in part, challenge director Ingmar Bergman's statement that denies all possible comparison and "dialogue" between the two art forms.

3.1. Different sign systems

"A composite language by virtue of its diverse matters of expression—sequential photography, music, phonetic sound and noise - the cinema 'inherits' all the art forms associated with these matters of expression ... - the visuals of photography and painting, the movement of dance, the décor of architecture, and the performance of theater" (Note 3)

While literature can only use verbal written language (i.e. it is a *single-track* system), film relies on a complex range of multiple signs (i.e. it is a *multi-track* system), which uses:

* *language*, both *spoken* (dialogue, monologue), *written* (*in* the image, as a letter read aloud or a newspaper title, *over* the image, as in subtitles and opening/closing credits, or *between* images, as in the intertitle cards used in silent films) or *sung*, as in musicals;
* *images*, both *fixed* (as in photographs or paintings) and *moving*, which are specific to the medium;
* *sound*, which can be *diegetic* (i.e. belonging to the world staged by the film and synchronous with the image; thus it can be heard by the characters) and *extra-diegetic* (i.e. unconnected to the world of film narrative and superimposed upon the space of the filmic world; thus it cannot be heard by the characters).
* *music*, which is a particular type of sound, again being *diegetic* or *extra-diegetic*.

Although "film language" is often used to describe the film's systems of signs, it is with some difficulty that an equivalence between *language* proper and *film language* can be established. While letters combine to form words, words combine into phrases, phrases into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs, we cannot say the same for shots combining into scenes or

scenes combining into sequences. Moreover, the ways in which combinations are realised in language follow precise rules (morphological, syntactical ...) while editing, or the process of combining shots, can follow accepted conventions but no specific rules - so that describing editing as the "syntax" of film is hardly appropriate.

The relationship between words and their meaning is a cultural one: it can be learnt, and can be checked against the information contained in a dictionary. On the other hand, the relationship between an image and its meaning is both universal and cultural, since it depends on the acquisition of a "knowledge of the world" but also of culturally conditioned meanings: everybody can recognize a cat or a dog, but the specific meanings that can be attached to an image of a pet or of cats or dogs used as guineapigs are dependent on cultural interpretations, which vary across individuals and across cultures (and this is why these meanings cannot be fixed once and for all in a "dictionary").

Words and images thus belong to different sign systems, with no intrinsic hierarchy between them. In other words, a house can be identified by its written sign (i.e. as a word), by a simple sketch (as in a road sign), by a photograph (which is bound to carry with it cultural connotations) or by a film shot: in this latter case, however, in addition to connotations, the "reading" of the image is affected by a number of variables, like the size of the image, whether it is in black and white or in colour, the distance, angle, height of the camera, not to mention the images that precede and follow (editing).

3.2 Different user engagement

"My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written work, to make you hear, to make you feel - it is, before all, to make you see."
Joseph Conrad, preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*

"The task I'm trying to achieve above all, is to make you see."
D. W. Griffith (Note 4)

It is interesting to note that both a writer (like Conrad) and a filmmaker (like Griffith) consider as their "task", in the first place, to make people *see* - although they use different systems of signs (the written word *vs* film images). In a way, this seems to blur the distinction between the two systems, but cannot cancel the fact that we "see" in two very different ways. While a description, e.g. of a face or a place, can take up as many words as the writer thinks fit, from a simple sentence to a whole chapter of a book, the corresponding image does provide a host of meanings as soon as it is projected onto a screen: an image is therefore the result of many choices made by the filmmaker and immediately available to the viewer, who cannot "do without" what s/he sees (and hears), although images do not prevent viewers from "adding" other meanings, depending on their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes - in short, images remain open to individual (and collective) interpretations beyond what is actually shown.

In other words, *telling* a story in a novel differs from *showing* the same story in a film (and we might add that *interacting* with a story, e.g. in a videogame, is yet another form of engagement). We engage with different media in different ways, although some overlapping is unavoidable: reading a book is usually a private, individual experience, which in a way is similar to watching a film at home, but rather different from the collective experience of

going to the cinema. And enjoying a stage play is, again, different from watching a movie. Our eyes are involved in seeing both the written word and the film, but the workings of our mind are rather different. Words are separated by empty spaces, although we can appropriate them as a flow at different speeds, and we can also pause and re-read them as we wish. The writer's *telling,* matching the user's *reading,* thus tends to be an analytical, sequential, cumulative experience of meaning construction, with the reader's mind actively engaged in "picturing" what is suggested by the words through the filter of her/his imagination. On the other hand, we perceive moving images as a continuous flow, whose speed we cannot control (unless, of course, we are watching a DVD and home and decide to go back or jump forward). The filmmaker's *showing* does not match the viewer's *watching* in the same way: as we have just mentioned, images already carry a considerable amount of given information, which we cannot ignore or change - although our mind is still actively engaged in re-constructing meanings and interpretations, involving the multi-track system of images, sounds and words heard or seen on the screen. Although we see and hear all these stimuli in a linear way, the decoding process involved in showing/watching is, unlike telling/reading, more synthetic and simultaneous.

Showing/watching, however, involves even more than just seeing and hearing: it is an overall *sensory* experience, which implies our bodily response, in terms of the emotional reactions that we feel and their physical counterparts: this can happen in the telling/reading mode, too, but is enormously amplified by the power of images and their capacity to hold our attention and involvement in ways that go well beyond the effects of the written word. This has marked the history of cinema since its early start: when the Lumière brothers showed one of their first films, *L'arrivée du train en gare de La Ciotat*, the audience was scared to death at watching the train proceed towards them, as if it might jump out of the screen and into the room where the projection was taking place ...

3.3. Choice of medium and its consequences

The choice of a medium has obvious direct consequences on *what* can and is actually told/shown and *how* this can and is actually realised:

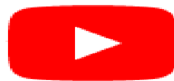
> *"If an artist stands before a landscape with a pencil in hand, he or she will "look for those aspects which can be rendered in lines"; if it is a paintbrush that the hand holds, the artist's vision of the very same landscape will be in terms of masses, not lines."*
> E.H. Gombrich (Note 5)

Thus, description and narration through the written word must necessarily be translated into visible, concrete signs through the "language" of film, which is made up of more "tangible" elements like speech, actions, sounds and images. The resulting representation has an impact on the way stories, characters and themes are eventually portrayed on the screen. And while literature can make ample use of symbols, metaphors and other allegorical figures, film must find alternative ways to translate such elements into concrete images, involving people, objects, places that fill in the *mise-en-scène* which is captured by each shot.

Case study: *The killers* (by Ernest Hemingway) adapted into *The killers* (by Robert Siodmak, 1946)

The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in. They sat down at the counter.
"What's yours?" George asked them."I don't know," one of the men said. "What do you want to eat, Al?" "I don't know," said Al. "I don't know what I want to eat."
Outside it was getting dark. The street-light came on outside the window. The two men at the counter read the menu. From the other end of the counter Nick Adams watched them. He had been talking to George when they came in.
"I'll have a roast pork tenderloin with apple sauce and mashed potato,"the first man said.
"It isn't ready yet."
"What the hell do you put it on the card for?"
"That's the dinner," George explained. "You can get that at six o'clock."
George looked at the clock on the wall behind the counter. "It's five o'clock."
"The clock says twenty minutes past five," the second man said.
"It's twenty minutes fast."
"Oh, to hell with the clock," the first man said. "What have you got to eat?"
"I can give you any kind of sandwiches," George said. "You can have ham and eggs, bacon and eggs, liver and bacon, or a steak."
"Give me chicken croquettes with green peas and cream sauce and mashed potatoes."
"That's the dinner."
"Everything we want's the dinner, eh? That's the way you work it."
"I can give you ham and eggs, bacon and eggs, liver—"
"I'll take ham and eggs," the man called Al said. He wore a derby hat and a black overcoat buttoned across the chest. His face was small and white and he had tight lips. He wore a silk muffler and gloves.

The opening of the short story takes the reader immediately into the action, with minimal introductory descriptions of time and place (there are no details of "Henry's lunch-room", and we soon learn that "it was getting dark" and, a few lines later, that it is around five o'clock, from which the reader is led to infer that it must be wintertime). Four characters are introduced, but we only get a very short description of one of them (Al) and what he is wearing.

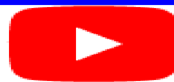


If we compare the original text with its filmic equivalent, we immediately understand that moving images are *forced* to provide a minimum of concrete detail in what is often called an *establishing shot*, i.e. a scene which "fills in" the absent or scanty description of the written word with visual information. We thus see the interior of a car speeding along a road at night, with the silhouettes of two men in the front seats, and we glimpse a road sign ("Brentwood, New Jersey"), which locates the story with a precise reference point. The next shot is an image of the diner (Henry's lunch-room) over which run the opening credits, with the two men now walking towards us. The long shot gradually turns into a middle shot, clearly focusing on their faces. The black and white film makes the most of lighting, with sharp contrasts which add to the dramatic impact of the scene. Then the two men start

walking towards the diner, which they enter through the two opposite doors. This entire sequence is missing from the original text, which starts with the two men walking in. We are also introduced to George, the bartender, and to Nick Adams, who is not "talking to George", but reading a paper at the counter; and we learn the name of one the two men (Al).

From now on, the film follows the dialogue from the text almost to the letter. The film has been *forced* to turn the short description of Al, which interrupts the dialogue in the text, into an immediate image at the very start of the scene. This proves how film cannot do without adding *concrete* details about time, place, characters and actions to the otherwise concise introduction provided by the original text.

The transition from literature to film can often imply a change in *genre*, too. The case of *Romeo and Juliet* is illuminating in this respect. Shakespeare's tragedy, in itself relying on previous accounts of this classic story, has been adapted countless times, and this has often resulted in a shift in film genres: for example, a stage musical (1957) was adapted into a musical film (*West Side Story*, by Robert Wise, 1961), where Leonard Bernstein's score and Jerome Robbin's choreography used the power of music and dancing performance to highlight both the romantic side of the love story and the conflict between social and ethnic groups; and these themes were taken up in Steven Spielberg remake (2021). Once again, director Baz Luhrmann filmed a version of the story (*William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, 1996) updating the location (Verona beach in Los Angeles) and the ethnic clash between the characters (Romeo coming from a white, aristocratic family *vs* Juliet of Latin-American origin), perhaps addressing young generations of viewers with a "pop", rather kitsch mise-en-scène, but curiously maintaining Shakespeare's original text.



William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet (Baz Luhrmann, 1996)

3.4. Literature into film, and vice-versa

It is interesting to note how literature has provided film not just with content, like stories and characters, but also with storytelling techniques and narrative strategies, witness to the close relationships that have always developed between these two art forms. However, early adaptations of novels have also proved that the transfer from the written word to the moving image could not be a mechanical, automatic process. For example, when innovative and extravagant director Erich von Stroheim adapted a novel by Frank Norris, *McTeague, A Story of San Francisco*, he tried to reproduce Norris's narrative technique of building a story by accumulating detailed descriptions and faithfully translating them into images. The result was a 10-hour film, clearly difficult, if not impossible, to market, and Von Stroheim was forced to cut down the duration several times, with an ongoing battle between director and producers, until a final version was released (*Greed*, 1924) which turned the adaptation into an unsatisfactory compromise - considering Von Stroheim's original intention (Note 6).

If film can hardly adopt storytelling strategies from literature, the reverse can also be noted: some novels and short stories appear to have a sort of "cinematic qualities" in the way they describe situations and characters and the way they stage actions. Flashbacks, for example,

are common even in literature, as are transitions from one state of mind or situation to a different one. Indeed, some novels seem to have been structured as if they were already a collection of filmed scenes and sequences, so that their adaptations becomes paradoxically problematic: a famous example is the Harry Potter cycle (which has nevertheless eventually been adapted for the screen).

To complete this brief excursion in the ongoing dialogue between literature and film, mention must be made of the now established practice to produce a new novel from its film adaptation, obviously capitalizing on the success of the film. In this way, the process comes full circle (original novel --> film --> new novel), proving, once again, that texts generate other texts in a constant movement between and among media and genres.

4. Literature and film: questioning some current assumptions

If we focus more specifically on the *process* of adaptation of literature (further restricting the field to novels and short stories) to film, we may be surprised to learn that approximately 30% of films are adapted from novels, and that 80% of best sellers are regularly adapted to films (Note 7) - giving us an indication of how extensively the process of adaptation has become an essential part of filmmaking. On the receptive side, readers and viewers have long been used to considering books and movies as two closely related ways of enjoying a story - witness such everyday exchanges as, "The film was better than the novel" or, "No, but I saw the movie" (which, incidentally, is the title of an excellent collections of short stories made into films - see Note 8).

"I found the work exceedingly difficult, beyond anything I had anticipated. And, I should add, depressing: I care about words more than images, and yet I was constantly sacrificing words and their connotations. You might tell me that through images film conveys a vast amount of information that words can only attempt to approximate, and you would be right, but approximation is precious in itself, because it bears the author's stamp. All in all, it seemed to me that my screenplay was worth much less than the book, and that the same would be true of the film."

Novelist John North in Louis Begley's novel, *Shipwreck* (2003)(Note 9)

These words, expressing a novelist's sense of frustration during the task of adapting one of his own novels for the screen, show how deeply rooted is the feeling that original works are necessarily better than the film, and that in any case, something is "lost" or must be sacrificed in the transition from the former to the latter. As a matter of fact, although the relationship between a novel or short story and the movie adapted from it is a commonly recognized feature of both film production and reception, *adaptation* (as a *process*) and *adaptations* (as *products* of that process) still suffer from a number of clichés, false beliefs and biases, which are interesting to consider in detail since they offer valuable starting points for an in-depth discussion of the topic.

a) Adaptations can never match the original texts

This belief is based on a concept of *hierarchy* between texts, both in terms of *time* and in terms of *quality*: because the original text (e.g. a novel or a short story) is the primary source, coming as it does *before* the film, it must necessarily be viewed as superior (in any number of

ways) to its later adaptation. The belief has a stronger appeal if the original text has become part of a *literary canon*, gaining its status by having entered a recognized corpus of "classic" works (e.g. Shakespeare's plays, or Jane Austen's novels). In other words, priority in *time* is associated with *quality* assessment: "older is better".

This belief can only be challenged by questioning the *nature* and *role* of adaptation as a process. Using the original text is only the starting point of this process, which, as we will see, may impact on various features of the text itself, from its story to its characters, from its narrative structure to the ideas (values, attitudes, ideologies) it conveys. In the process of adaptation, one may choose to work on one or more of these features. The focus must clearly be on the *end result* of this process, i.e. on how well the adaptation (as a product) has used the original material in order to re-create a new, original, coherent text, and on how the *intention* behind the process is reflected in the resulting text. To this end, we must assume that the new text (e.g. a movie) can and should be evaluated *in its own terms*, for *what* it has to say and *how* it says it - by, in other words, assessing the extent to which the original text has given rise to a valuable new text.

b) Film can never match the written word

Closely linked with the "priority" issue, this belief assumes that literature, i.e. the written word, with its long-standing tradition and related high status, must necessarily claim a sense of authority (and thus of intrinsic value) over more recent media, like cinema. This belief runs counter to the fact that film, although "only" 130 years old, can boast an impressive array of works which begin to shape into another, if different, "canon", and to the fact that new technologies show such an amazing speed of development that cinema, as part of these technologies, has been in a position to quickly take advantage of additions and improvements, both in the "language" it uses and in the corresponding ways of telling its own stories. A "rivalry" between literature and film is a concept that risks hiding the respective merits and possibilities of both forms of expression.

c) Verbal is richer than visual

Another aspect of the literature *vs* film relationship relies on the presumed higher value of the written word when compared to the predominantly visual character of cinema. This reflects the higher status that literature, in all its forms, has traditionally had over iconography, i.e. the visual representation of meanings. This belief runs counter to the fact that the written word was not, in itself, the very first human way of expression, based as it was on oral storytelling, which for a long time has been the major, if not unique, way of preserving and re-creating stories. Besides, as already mentioned, visual arts (e.g. painting, sculpture) have long established themselves as important alternative, or complementary, "languages" side by side with the verbal ones.

d) Film is a fleeting medium with low degrees of corporeality

The physical "weakness" of film when compared with the "hard" reality of the printed word can hardly be taken as a strong argument, especially today, when, on the one hand, with the digital revolution new ways have been found to preserve film as a lasting resource, and, on the other hand, the written word is becoming increasingly "digitized" with, e.g., the advent of eBooks, and, more generally, with the new uses of the written word that Internet is making available in a variety of contexts - and, most importantly, with the increasingly closer

integration of the visual and the verbal in today's forms of communication.

e) Film is only a popular form of mass entertainment

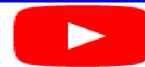
This is clearly a form of prejudice that can no longer be held as true. Although the origins of cinema saw its development alongside with other, pre-existing forms of popular entertainment, such as vaudeville and stage shows, it quickly developed its own peculiar aesthetics, both in mainstream and in avant-garde, experimental cinema, already producing its own "classics" within the very first few decades of its existence. It cannot be denied that cinema has, since its very beginnings, become a form of popular entertainment, thus contributing to the richness and versatility of "popular culture" - but this can hardly be considered a negative feature, unless we want to dismiss "popular culture" altogether, as an insignificant part of cultural expression.

f) Film "simplifies" literature

This was not an uncommon view, especially in the early stages of cinema history: Virginia Woolf is quoted as considering film "a parasite" and literature its "prey" and "victim" (although, to be fair, she also recognized the potential of film to develop a language of its own and to offer new and powerful ways to express emotions) (Note 10). With the advent of cinema studies in the second half of last century, film has become an object of serious theoretical and academic study, establishing itself as what has become to be considered as "the seventh art", capable of producing important contributions to human heritage. The transposition of literary works to film involves, as we shall see, a complex arrays of operations, which can by no means be reduced to a mere "simplification" of the original texts.

g) Only literature has the ways and means to express intimacy and subjectivity

This belief tackles the very essence of the "languages" employed by literature and by film. Literature, it is argued, has a wealth of devices to give voice to inner thoughts, emotions and feelings, while film, with the supremacy of visual and aural over verbal, has problems in portraying what cannot be expressed through the "materiality" of action and movement. This belief could easily be challenged by mentioning how apparently "unfilmable" works like Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and *Mrs Dalloway*, which rely, in different ways, on forms of "stream of consciousness" narratives, have actually been adapted to film. The fact is that cinema has its own means to convey the intimate life of characters, e.g. through *voice-over (*when we hear a character expressing her/his thoughts and feelings), or through *close-*



Bitter victory (Nicholas Ray, 1957)

During the Desert Campaign of World War II, two officers lead a dangerous mission behind German lines. Major David Brand, a regular army officer who lacks command and combat experience, and Captain Jimmy Leith, an amateur volunteer with extensive knowledge of the area (and who had been Brand's wife's previous lover). During the mission, Brand lets Leith die in pain during a sandstorm and the other soldiers believe he killed him. Back to Head Quarters, Brand is immediately awarded the Distinguished Service Order, but in the closing shot ruefully pins the medal on a stuffed training dummy. This shot effectively conveys Brand's feelings (the awareness of his own cowardice and self-contempt) through facial expressions and eye movements: no words are spoken, but the man, backed up by a sombre musical score, looks at his medal and then pins the medal on the dummy's heart - the dummy becoming a powerful symbol of what he feels about himself.

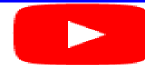
up shots (when facial expressions and eye movements convey a character's intimacy). And, in more general terms, film can create images that effectively convey states of subjectivity by using those very visual (and aural) elements which are superficially considered as signs of its limitations: for example, through the use of various forms of lighting, different lenses, aspect ratio, colours, sound effects and music. Above all, perhaps, editing can provide ways to deal with the need to handle space and time, e.g. with the possibility to vary the speed of motion (from very slow to very fast), and the juxtaposition of shots - these are filmic conventions viewers have become used to, so that they can recognize when a character is dreaming, fantasizing, recalling past events or anticipating the future. And, even beyond the visual and the aural, film can stimulate viewers' sensory experiences, as when a music soundtrack has the power to make their own bodies respond physically and not just mentally.

So dark the night (Joseph H. Lewis, 1946)

In this scene, a detective investigating some crimes suddenly realizes that he is the killer (and is actually diagnosed with schizophrenia). Left alone in a room, but under custody, the camera slowly zooms onto his face, which, as the light of the room fades out, is suddenly lit by a beam of light from below ... until the light in the room fades in again, and the camera slowly zooms out of the man's face. Through a careful use of lighting and camera movements, we are shown the man's "split personality".

h) Only literature can convey a sense of time (present, past and future)

Although prose can use both the variety of verb tenses and other grammatical categories (e.g. adverbs like *later* or *meanwhile*) to express time relationships, film has a range of accepted and recognizable conventions to suggest changes in time: *flashbacks* and *flashforwards* are the obvious examples, but other powerful means help viewers to locate actions and events in a time sequence: for example, *cross-fades*, when an image slowly dissolves *(fade-out)* while another image replaces it *(fade-in)* can convey a sense of time passing but also of changes in space. Editing, too, can, once again, express time relationships, for example through a quick succession of calendar shots, a hand



In this sequence, a man obtains a list of painters who might be able to help him find the person he's looking for. A series of fades, which show him while he's talking to some of the painters in the list, alternate with the image of the shoes of the man, who is walking from one contact to the next: in this way a few shots compress time, giving the audience the sense of a long and difficult search. This series of fades ends with an image of the face of the man, clearly frustrated in his search, superimposed with the image of the list.

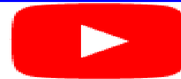
turning the pages of a book, or a montage of shots of the same characters clearly aging. Music too can powerfully contribute to make viewers recall previous scenes, as when a leitmotif is heard again and again, becoming associated with particular events, but also with characters' memories of people and places. Besides, the level of detail that a writer can choose (and the related time that the reader spends) for a particular description of characters or events, is matched in film by, e.g. varying the duration of a shot or the depth of field (establishing whether we can see people in close-up only or in medium or long shots too) and by the particular combination of sound and images made possible by various kinds of editing. And, of course, *mise-en-scène*, costumes, hairstyles and décor help define the times and spaces of the narrative.

Citizen Kane (by Orson Welles, 1941)

A series of events which take up a very long time in the story can be compressed in the plot through editing very short shots: in this sequence, the very successful career as a singer of the protagonist's wife is summed up through a very fast editing of cross-fadings, superimpositions and other special effects that show newspaper headlines reporting the singer's triumphant performances, her appearances on the stage, close-ups of her face, etc.

i) Subtle shades of meaning, like irony or metaphors, can hardly be conveyed in film

Once again, cinema has often proved that the uses of its own language can, and indeed does, suggest and express shades of meaning which would, on the surface, seem to be the exclusive domain of verbal language. A whole corpus of films, sometimes gathered under the label of *metafilms* (or films that reflect on themselves), for example, use specific elements of film language to produce ironic or parodic effects, as when classic features of certain film genres (e.g. horror, western, science-fiction) are deliberately subverted in order to question the meanings of what we see and thus bring those meanings to another level, like parody or satire. Films can also combine different elements of their own language in order to suggest ambiguity and challenge viewers' interpretation of what they see and hear. For example,



Blazing saddles (Mel Brooks, 1974

In this sequence, a parody of the western genre, we first see a bag with the brand "Gucci" ... which belongs to a sheriff riding a horse in the desert, while an incongruent (supposedly extra-diegetic) jazz music plays in the background ... until the sheriff reaches ... Count Basie and his orchestra actually playing the music in the desert! The incongruity immediately gives place to the comic effect of this highly satirical look at the world of cinema.

Upon entry (Alejandro Rojas and Juan Sebastián Vásquez, 2022)

The film recounts the unpleasant vetting and questioning procedures that a couple suffers at Newark Airport upon moving from Barcelona to

dialogues or voice-overs can be made *not* to match the visual component - a discrepancy that alert viewers to become aware of a deeper meaning, like an ironical stance. The same effects can be realized by using sound, particularly the musical score, to contradict what is actually shown theough images. And editing is, even here, a powerful tool to assist filmmakers in conveying particular meanings: a classic example would be *montage of attractions* editing, where the quick juxtaposition of contrasting images manages to create, in viewers' minds, associations that are used in much the same way as verbal language uses metaphors or symbols - in other words, ambiguity can be created by both literature and film by having recourse to their own systems of signs.

the USA. When, after being detained for hours by Customs officers, they are eventually summoned at the Customs desk, the officer stamps their passports and says, "Welcome to the United States!" and immediately afterwards, as the ending credits roll, we hear a song, "Congratulations" ... The irony of this "happy ending" is conveyed through a simple line of dialogue and the juxtaposition of the images we have seen throughout the movie with a musical score that sounds like bitter sarcasm ...

Fury (Fritz Lang, 1936)

In the so-called *montage of attractions*, non diegetic shots, i.e. shots which do not belong to the space and time of the world staged by the film, are inserted into the flow of diegetic shots, thus acquiring a symbolic or metaphorical value. This kind of editing creates associations which tend to promote a particular final effect: for example, making viewers experience a conflict, or prompting them to find a further connotational meaning in the images. In this sequence, the babbling of a group of women, gossiping on the recent arrest of a man believed to be responsible for a child's kidnapping, is compared, in a brief shot, to a groups of hens in a poultry pen ...

5. The question of fidelity

"A 'faithful' film is seen as uncreative, but an 'unfaithful' film is a shameful betrayal of the original. An adaptation that updates the text for the present is upbraided for not respecting the period of the source, but respectful costume dramas are accused of a failure of nerve in not 'contemporizing' the text. If an adaptation renders the sexual passages of the source novel literally, it is accused of vulgarity; if it fails to do so, it is accused of cowardice. The adapter, it seems, can never win." (Note 11)

"Infidelity *resonates with overtones of Victorian prudishness;* betrayal *evokes ethical perfidy;* deformation *implies aesthetic disgust;* violation *calls to mind sexual violence;* vulgarization *conjures up class degradation; and* desecration *intimates a kind of religious sacrilege toward the 'sacred word'*" (Note 12)

A long tradition in studies on film adaptation of literary works assumes *fidelity* to the original text as the main, if not exclusive, criterion to judge the success (or failure) of a particular adaptation. This position is largely based on the assumptions we have just analysed, particularly on the value of the original text as the standard against which any adaptation should be compared. As the above quotations clearly suggest, by establishing such a hierarchy of values the adapter's work becomes almost an impossible task: she/he runs all sorts of risks, as the original text seems to prevent any "translation" of its form and meaning. The degree of fidelity is also often mentioned in both film critics' and film viewers' discourses, as when a movie is judged to be "worse" (or, less frequently, "better") than the book: in all cases, the standard of reference is the supposed value and status achieved by the literary work, especially when it has become part of the "classical" canon.

What this perspective implies is a denial of the specific achievement of a literary work *vs* a film, as well as of the specific tools that each medium uses to realize such an achievement. A book and a movie can certainly be compared, but without ignoring the features that each medium employs to reach its goals, i.e. the different "languages" that they use. Only by treating an adaptation as a new and different "text" can we start to recognize its own merits: the standard of comparison cannot be *external* to the adaptation (as when the original text is taken as the only reference point), but rather *internal*, i.e. the degree to which the adaptation is successful in the use it has made of the original text *to achieve its own specific purposes.* Such a change of perspective allows us to "bypass" the mere criterion of *fidelity* to embrace a new set of standards by which an adaptation can be critically examined.

The question then becomes what sort of use a film has made of the original material (both in terms of narrative content and in terms of overall meanings) and the degree to which what the film has actually achieved matches its own particular intention. The filmmaker's *purposes* in adapting a literary work can thus be taken as an internal, independent standard of reference: for example, she/he may have wanted to "simply" translate the narrative of the book by using the specific language of film; or she/he may have wanted to convey the core narrative structures of the book by re-interpreting them; or she/he may have wanted to use the original material "simply" as a point of departure to create an entirely different, original work. Identifying the filmmaker's own intention provides the standard by which we can judge, rather than the *fidelity* to the original source, how well the adaptation matches the intended use of the original text - and the degree of creativity and competence involved, which also becomes a measure of the autonomy of the new text *vis-à-vis* the original one. This points to a range of possible ways of adapting a literary work, on a *continuum* between two extreme (and rather abstract) positions: *absolute fidelity/faithfulness*, on one side, and *absolute creative interpretation* on the other. The dynamic negotiation that takes place between the two extremes lies at the core of any adaptation task. These considerations lead us to investigate the possible *content* of adaptations and the *aims* they intend to reach.

6. What exactly gets adapted and for what purposes?

> *"The most successful screen adaptations of literature have, I would argue, one or all of three main characteristics. They aim for the spirit of the original rather than the literal letter; they use the camera to interpret and not simply illustrate the tale; and they exploit a particular affinity between the artistic temperaments and preoccupations of the novelist and filmmaker."*
> (Note 13)

Filmmakers can be interested in adapting a literary work for a variety of reasons, and the decisions they make in this respect concern the *aspects* of the original work they take into consideration (the "what") as well as the *aims* they set themselves in carrying out this task (the "why").

6.1. Adapting stories

There is little doubt that filmmakers' very early interest in literary works (particularly novels and short stories from the classical, western "canon") was mainly due to the fact that such stories offer, as a sort of ready-made menu, interesting characters and plots, which lend themselves rather well to being transposed to the screen.

However, the extent to which stories are changed (*cut* or *condensed*, in the case of long novels, or perhaps *added to*, in the case of short stories) varies a great deal, depending on the filmmaker's intention. An illuminating example is *The killers*, which we have discussed in Section 2 above. In Hemingway's short story, we soon learn that the two patrons are actually hitmen hired to kill Ole Andreson, a Swedish boxer, who is expected to arrive at restaurant soon. However, when Andreson does not arrive, the hitmen leave to search themselves and George sends Nick to warn Ole. Nick finds Andreson in his room, but is surprised when he does not react to the news, and simply tells Nick there is nothing that can be done to save him. The short story practically ends here - and it is clearly too short, and rather ambiguous in terms of dramatic impact, to warrant a screen adaptation. So what the filmmakers did was to add to the original story a "sequel", in which we learn that Ole had joined a gang and had ended up falling in love with the gang boss's woman - hence the hitmen' mission to kill him.

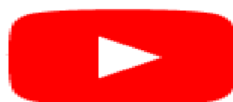
Although this is a somewhat extreme example, it points to the need for filmmakers to rely on a script that provides enough material in terms of plot and characters as well as a line of dramatic events to sustain viewers' interest and suspense.

However, stories and their narratives (which we may consider as the factual "content" of a literary work) are by no means the only aspects which can be adapted. Other, perhaps even more interesting, features can be taken into consideration.

6.2. Adapting themes

In fact, what are often used in considering an adaptation are the *themes*, or *core meanings*, that can provide the starting point for a film script. A classic example is *2001: A space Odyssey*, which director Stanley Kubrick adapted from a short story by Arthur C. Clarke *(The sentinel*), together with the same novelist. The short story is about the crew of a space mission to the Moon, who casually find a strange object, a small pyramid which soon appears to have been placed on the surface of the Moon by some remote civilization, maybe millions of years before life even started to appear on Earth - opening speculations about the possibility of life in the universe. Kubrick was fascinated by this story, but its content, particularly the strange pyramid found on the Moon, provided only the starting point for a whole new series of concepts, and corresponding images, that were included in the script - the film turning out to include a number of philosophical and symbolic ideas that were not present in the original short story. Kubrick's intent in using Clarke's story mainly as a springboard for a much larger investigation of the meaning of life in the universe was clear from the start: *"I tried to create a visual experience ... that bypasses verbalized pigeonholing and directly penetrates the subconscious with an emotional and philosophic content"* (Note 14). Notice that here, in just a few words, Kubrick declares its belief in the power of images, well beyond the verbal language, to convey not just factual information but also, and more importantly, emotions and ideas that directly impact on the viewers' subconscious mind - thus addressing an interesting aspect of the relationship between verbal and filmic "languages".

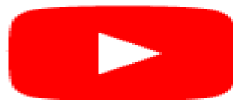
Another illuminating example is *Blow up,,* for which Michelangelo Antonioni took inspiration from a short story by Argentine-French writer Julio Cortázar's 1959 short story (originally entitled *Las babas del diablo*, literally "The Droolings of the Devil"). In the short story, a writer happens to take a few photographs while taking a stroll in Paris, and later starts making interpretations about the people in the photos and their relationship - however, we already know, from the events that this writer recounts, and, above all, from the strange, confused way of recounting them, that this man is by no means a reliable witness, and that the photos can provide no clues to his hypotheses and interpretations. Antonioni was thrilled by the theme of the ambiguity of reality and the impossibility to use apparently "objective" evidence, such as photos, to establish any kind of "truth". However, the setting, plot and characters were completely changed, with the main protagonist being a professional photographer based in London, who happens to take some ambiguous photographs where there might be a hint of a murder (thus pointing to the "unreliability" of images and cinema itself. (The plot also makes some concessions to the "counterculture" of the late 1960s, thanks to the iconic "Swinging London" setting.)



Blow up (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966)

6.3. Adapting characters and points of view

Themes can also be reconfigured by changing or adapting *characters*. For example, when director David Lean adapted E.M. Forster's novel *Passage to India* for the screen, he shifted *points of view*: while the novel conveys its cross-cultural theme of Western *vs* Indian civilization mainly through the relationship between the two male characters (Englishman Fielding and Indian Aziz), the film places a female character (Adela) centrestage, with the woman's story charged with the task of highlighting the same cross-cultural considerations.



A passage to India (David Lean, 1984)

6.4. The impact of cultural contexts

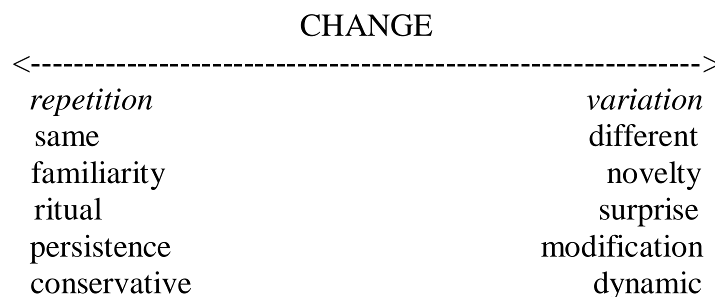
The core themes of a novel often get re-interpreted according to the changing cultural contexts and the corresponding shifting sensibilities. This concerns in the first place the works belonging to a well-established literary "canon": Jane Austen's novels, and particularly *Emma*, easily come to mind here. Austen's critique of her times, closely linked to the sociocultural backgrounds of her times, carried over through her masterful use of irony, has obviously been taken up by old and new feminist approaches, which have highlighted the role of women (and men) faced with the demands of a patriarchal society - an updated version of a core theme recurring in Austen's novels. Incidentally, we may also mention the fact that such classical works have also, and most frequently, been adapted for the screen by preserving what appears to be their traditional, established interpretation as "heritage" works: witness the BBC's "faithful" adaptations of English classics as *period* or *costume dramas*. But when the same literary works become the object of Hollywood adaptations, with all the conventions typical of the American movie industry, the results can be quite different.

"Adaptation is how stories evolve and mutate to fit new times and different places ... Evolving by cultural selection, traveling stories adapt to local cultures, just as populations of organisms adapt to local environments ... Temporal precedence does not mean anything more than temporal priority. Sometimes we are willing to accept this fact, such as when it is Shakespeare who adapts Arthur Brooke's versification of Matteo Bandello's adaptation of Luigi da Porto's version of Masuccio Salernitano's story of two very young, star-crossed Italian lovers (who changed names and place of birth along the way) ... In the workings of the human imagination, adaptation is the norm, not the exception." (Note 15)

7. Contexts of reception: audiences and their reactions

All adaptations require and produce *change*. However, as we have already mentioned in discussing the question of fidelity, the quantity and the quality of change involved in any adaptation vary depending on the relative position that an adaptation chooses to occupy on

the *continuum* between repetition, on one side, and variation, on the other, as the following figure illustrates. Notice that *repetition* and *variation* can further be qualified through a variety of other related terms.



The *degre*e of change is primarily the result of a filmmaker's choices, but, whatever the results achieved through these choices, the final impact of an adaptation depends on what happens *at its receiving end*, i.e. on how audiences perceive, interpret and value their experience with the new text. The role of viewers/spectators can hardly be underestimated, since the new text actually comes alive as an adaptation only when its prospected audience perceives it *as an adaptation*. For this to take place, viewers must have some knowledge, albeit at different degrees of depth, of the original text, so that they can compare, more or less consciously, the "new" with the "old". If such knowledge is absent, the adaptation will be perceived as a totally "new" text and the point of considering levels of change will be lost. Only if I know the story of Romeo and Juliet, and have possibly read Shakespeare's play, and/or have seen previous films on the same story, and/or have seen operas and ballets inspired by it, am I in a position to recall my previous experiences and perhaps (although by no means necessarily) make comparisons with the adapted work. In other words, audience

reception of an adaptation is a process of personal recognition and interpretation. And, most importantly, it is the recollection provided by memory that triggers the affective side of this process, i.e. the *pleasure* it provides:

"[A]daptation as repetition is arguably not a postponement of pleasure; it is in itself a pleasure. Think of a child's delight in hearing the same nursery rhymes or reading the same books over and over. Like ritual, this kind of repetition brings comfort, a fuller understanding, and the confidence that comes with the sense of knowing what is about to happen next. But something else happens with adaptations in particular: there is inevitably difference as well as repetition." (Note 16)

Notice that this pleasure is a complex feature involved in experiencing an adapted text *as an adaptation* (and not as a completely "new" text). The pleasure derived from watching an adaptation comes from perceiving its *novelty* as much as from perceiving its *familiarity* (cf. the figure above). Setting out to watch an adaptation creates *expectations*, which will be the standard against which the adaptation itself will be experienced, appreciated and valued: much of the pleasure involved indeed derives from judging how the "new" interacts with/supplements/enriches the "old". A parallel can be drawn with *film genres* expectations: part of the motivation to watch (and pleasure in watching) a new western or science-fiction film, particularly if it belongs to a "saga" like *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones* or J*ames Bond*, comes from the *expectation* to see how familiarity with the genre is challenged by the novelty and surprise provided by the experience of the "new":

"[H]uman desires in every present instance are torn between the replica and the invention, between the desire to return to the known pattern, and the desire to escape it by a new variation" (Note 17)

These considerations point to another important aspect of reception: the fact that audiences are made up of individuals, each of whom carries with her/him the weight of *individual differences*. This means that the previous knowledge, competence, beliefs, attitudes, motivations belonging to each individual lead to different expectations, and thus to different degrees of appreciation and value judgments. This should come as no surprise, since it is merely another proof of the fact that texts (whether "old" or new") are subject to as many different readings and interpretations as there are readers/viewers. Incidentally, this takes us back to the already discussed (false) assumption that an original text has a higher status than any subsequent adaptations: if *multiple* interpretations of a text are the rule, rather than the exception, which of these multiple readings are we actually referring to when we judge an earlier text as superior to/better than any later adaptations?

Related paper: Literature into film: Case studies in adaptation strategies

Notes

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