

Literature into film: Case studies in adaptation strategies

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1. Introduction

This paper explores *adaptation strategies*, i.e. the tactics and techniques that filmmakers can use when translating a novel or a short story into a film. My exploration is carried out through a number of case studies that exemplify and describe such strategies in detail.

I have also dealt with adaptation strategies in another paper, [From book to screen: The process of adaptation](#), where strategies are described in connection with the (false) assumptions that still circulate about the failure of cinema to provide adequate and worthwhile adaptations of literary works (e.g. the assumption that "Only literature can convey a sense of time (present, past and future)", or that "Subtle shades of meaning, like irony or metaphors, can hardly be conveyed through film"). In that paper, strategies are introduced and discussed with the purpose of demonstrating how film "language" provides the filmmaker with specific tools to effectively translate the written word into cinematic equivalents (e.g. *cross-fades* to introduce flashbacks, *voice-over* to convey thoughts and feelings, *editing* to manage time sequences or to convey symbolic meaning or irony).

The present paper, then, provides in-depth *analyses of film sequences* that clearly illustrate how the written word can find an appropriate translation into the specific "language" of cinema. Mention will also be made of *external factors* that may impact on the process of adaptation and on its corresponding results.

2. *Adapting novels vs adapting short stories*

"You see, the nearest art form to the motion picture is, I think, the short story. It's the only form when you ask the audience to sit down and read it in one sitting."
Alfred Hitchcock (Note 1)

"I think the short story can be a very good jumping off point for a feature. I think novels very often are too complex, too dense to begin with, so you are always trying to weed things out. Risking losing the things that attract you to that material in the first place. The nice thing about a short story is that a simple scene, a simple concept, ... lends itself quite naturally to ... expansion to feature size."
Christopher Nolan (Note 2)

It should come as no surprise that such different directors as Hitchcock and Nolan agree on the advantages of short stories over novels when dealing with their adaptation for the screen. The very first problem a filmmaker must face in this task is the difference in length between a literary work and a feature film. While a novel can average 300 or 400 pages (with "classics" often going well beyond this length), a standard film lasts an average of two hours, often less and rarely (much) more. The length of a short story, on the other hand, can range between a few pages and maybe 30 or 40 pages (with another format, the "novella", halfway between a novel and a short story).

3. *The case studies*

Case study 1: The graduate

The graduate (Charles Webb, 1963) -->The graduate (Mike Nichols, 1967)

Charles Webb, *The graduate*, Copyright © 1963 by Charles Webb, copyright © 2000 by RosettaBooks, LLC.

The first, and obvious, strategy that a screenwriter/filmmaker is forced to adopt with respect to a novel is *cutting* - a strategy that is not without risks and dangers, as Nolan states. In the case of short stories, however, Nolan also mentions the opposite strategy that may be required, i.e. *expanding*.

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Expanding to introduce characters

The novel starts with the simple mention of the fact that Benjamin comes home from college.

Benjamin Braddock graduated from a small Eastern college on

a day in June. Then he flew home.



Video 1

In the film (Video 1) this simple statement of fact is expanded into the opening sequence, which also covers the opening credits (at a time when these were still shown in detail at the start of the film). The expansion serves several different functions, mainly an immediate focus on the mental state of protagonist and a chance to highlight the musical score, which will accompany the development of the story, especially at crucial moments. We thus see Ben on board the plane preparing to land, then at the airport, as he stands on travolators, ending with his looking at his aquarium at home. This introduction is backed up by Simon and Garfunkel's iconic *Sounds of Silence* song, which we will hear again in the film, and which greatly adds to the whole tone of the movie: Ben's rather stiff posture at the airport, where he simply lets himself be carried off by the travolators, is matched by his image which we see through the water of the aquarium, suggesting that this homecoming is not particularly happy.

Condensing dialogue

Given the predominantly *visual* nature of the film medium, dialogues are often condensed: images can immediately and simultaneously convey a larger amount of information, which also help speeding up the action.

The first paragraph of the novel establishes the setting of the next scene:

The following evening a party was given for him by his parents. By eight o'clock most of the guests had arrived but Benjamin had not yet come down from his room. His father called up from the foot of the stairs but there was no answer. Finally he hurried up the stairs and to the end of the hall.



Video 2

In the film (Video 2) we only continue to see Ben musing, which is interrupted by his father coming into the room, asking, "What's the matter? They're all downstairs, waiting for you", thus giving the information about the party. The following dialogue runs slightly shorter than in the novel, with Ben mentioning, "I'm worried about the future", and "I want to be alone", and his mother entering the room. In the novel Ben loses his temper, there is a rather sharp exchange of words, with his father retorting, "Don't you ever swear at your mother or me again".

Benjamin shook his head. Then he walked between them and to the door. "I'm going for a walk," he said. He stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind him.

He hurried to the head of the stairs and down but just as he had gotten to the front door and was about to turn the knob Mr. Terhune appeared out of the living room.

The following sequence in the film does not follow closely the book dialogue, but manages to show the same scene, with the guests meeting Ben and complimenting him in various ways, as he desperately tries to get out of the room.

Adding dialogue to suggest irony

At times, lines of dialogue can be added to suggest subtle shades of meaning. One notable (and funny) addition to the film is Mr McGuire leading Ben outside and saying that he's only got one word for him, "Plastics ... There's a great future in plastics ... Think about it", to which an astonished Ben replies, "Yes, I will". Thus the "future" Ben is so anxious about is ironically reduced to "Plastics" ...

Cutting and replacing dialogue

Conversely, another bit of dialogue is dropped in the film as Mr Robinson asks Ben "to go for a spin" in the brand new car that is Ben's parents' gift. Ben refuses, once again saying that he needs to go for a walk, but the appearance of Mr Robinson is important, as his wife is going to be one of the film's main characters. Other lines of dialogue dropped in the film include Ben's shocking the guests by saying:

"The whole four years," he said, looking up at his father. "They were nothing. All the things I did are nothing. All the distinctions. The things I learned. All of a sudden none of it seems to be worth anything to me."

This explicit statement is replaced by Ben's obvious embarrassment and confusion as he tries to dodge the guests, until he manages to get back upstairs and shut himself in his room.

His musing is interrupted by Mrs Robinson stepping inside, her figure framed by the door and Ben in close-up.

"Oh," she said. "I guess this isn't the bathroom is it."

"It's down the hall," Benjamin said.

She nodded but instead of leaving the room stood in the doorway looking at him.

"It's right at the end of the hall," Benjamin said.

Mrs. Robinson was wearing a shiny green dress cut very low across her chest, and over one of her breasts was a large gold pin.



Video 3

These lines of dialogues are the same in the film (Video 3), with Mrs Robinson's appearance obviously shown directly. The next lines of dialogue again follow the book, with Ben trying to be alone and Mrs Robinson clearly ignoring this ... until she goes out of the room, only to come back immediately, asking Ben to take her home.

Adding dramatic action and using mise-en-scène to highlight character description

Here there is a notable difference between the book and the film. In the book, Ben simply reaches for the car keys in his pocket, but in the film, he actually gives them to Mrs Robinson. As the woman states she cannot work a foreign shift, Ben finally gives in: "Let's go". At this point, in the film, Mrs Robinson defiantly throws the keys into the aquarium. We then see through the aquarium Ben putting his hand into the water to recover them, and the two going out.

Mrs Robinson's determined, bossy, self-assured character is thus effectively portrayed in this scene, as opposed to Ben's annoyed (and clumsy) behaviour. Notice how the main source of light comes from the door, with the room in semi-darkness - a *mise-en-scène* which, together with the players' gestures and movements, effectively stresses Ben's irritation and Mrs Robinson's rather explicit seductive mood. It is also interesting to notice that in the film more than once we see Ben's face *through the aquarium*, as if to stress his confusion, his inability to see things clearly - an example of how film can convey a character's state of mind through what film can best do - offer images to (at least partially) replace words.

Condensing events



Video 4

The end of the film (Video 4) follows rather closely the end of the novel - but with some important twists. Benjamin, who has been Mrs Robinson's lover for some time, eventually falls in love with Elaine (the Robinsons' daughter), but, once the affair is disclosed, the Robinsons will not allow him to see the girl, and actually arrange her marriage with another boy, Carl. When Ben learns that the wedding is taking place, he desperately tries to get to the church ... and manages to reach a balcony ...

Then suddenly Elaine appeared. Benjamin rushed closer to the railing and leaned over to stare down at a piece of white lace on the top of her head. He began clenching and unclenching his hands in front of him.

She was walking with her arm in her father's arm and wearing a white wedding dress whose long train followed her slowly over the thick red carpet and toward the front of the church. Benjamin began shaking his head, still staring at her and clenching and unclenching his hands ... Then Benjamin slammed his hands down on the railing of the balcony and yelled.

"Elaine!!!"

Notice that in the book Mr Robinson is leading Elaine towards the altar, meaning that the wedding has not yet started, and when he sees Ben he pulls his daughter towards the minister:

Elaine had turned around and was staring up at him. Behind her Carl Smith was looking up at him with his head tilted slightly to the side. Mr. Robinson made a move toward the back of the church. Then he turned around quickly and took Elaine's hand. He pulled her up toward the front of the church and to the minister ... [He] took Carl Smith's arm and brought him over beside Elaine in front of the minister. The minister opened a small book he was holding.

"No!!!"

Mr Robinson again tries to take Elaine back to the altar, but in the meantime Ben runs down the stairs, confronts Mr Robinson, then a man in black clergyman's clothes, and finally Carl.

[Ben] grabbed a large bronze cross from off an altar beside him and raised it up beside his ear. He rushed at Carl Smith. Carl Smith stumbled backward, then turned and fled back down to the other guests. Benjamin gripped Elaine's hand as tightly as he could and pulled her toward the door.

“Move!!!” he said. He drew the cross farther back behind his head ...

“Run!” he said. He pulled her after him. “Run, Elaine! Run!”

In the film, this excited scene is condensed and arranged into a very fast-edited sequence. Ben's quick climbing of the stairs towards the balcony is accompanied by deep guitar sounds, which culminate in a quick zoom towards Elaine and Carl kissing in front of the minister - a clear sign that the wedding has taken place ... Cut to Ben's close-up, exclaiming, "Oh, Jesus! No ...", immediately followed by the organ music, then a long shot of Ben with his arms raised against the glass panels of the balcony. Cut to the organist, then again to Ben yelling, "Elaine!". Cut to Elaine's very close-up, turning her head up towards the balcony, as all the guests now do. Cut to Mr and Mrs Robinson, he saying, "What's he doing?" and she replying, with a satisfied look, "He's too late!". Once again, cut to another long close-up of Elaine, now starting to walk back from the altar, then, in rapid succession, close-ups of Mrs Robinson, Mr Robinson and Carl, all of them clearly muttering words which we cannot hear. Cut again to Elaine, now yelling, "Ben!". At this very moment Ben quickly runs down the stairs, briefly fights with Mr Robinson, then Carl trying to stop him ... in the meantime, and in the general excitement, Elaine confronts her mother: "Not for me!" and reaches Ben, who has got hold of a cross and keeps the people at bay ... finally blocking the door of the church with the cross. Ben and Elaine run away, smiling ...

They catch a nearby bus. In the book, Ben has some quick exchanges with the driver.

He let go of Elaine's dress and took her hand again to lead her toward the back of the bus. The driver got up out of his seat to watch them.

Most of the passengers stood part way up in their seats and stared at Benjamin's torn shirt hanging down around his knees and then turned their heads to stare down at the train of Elaine's dress.

...

The driver waited a moment, then turned around and climbed back up into his seat. He pulled a handle and the doors of the bus closed.

Benjamin sat back down.

Elaine was still trying to catch her breath. She turned her face to look at him. For several moments she sat looking at him, then she reached over and took his hand.

"Benjamin?" she said.

"What."

The bus began to move.

In the film, the scene is cut short: Ben and Elaine run towards the back of the vehicle, finally sitting down, then look out of the back windows, laughing. Cut to the other passengers of the bus, turning their heads towards them in amazement ... Ben and Elaine look into each other's eyes, then stare towards the camera ... At this moment, Simon and Grafunkel's *Sounds of Silence* starts again, while the camera lingers on a close-up of Ben and Elaine, both wearing a rather puzzled expression on their faces ... until we see the back of the bus, moving away into the distance ... Fade to black.

Although the book and the film tell roughly the same events, the action in the movie is arranged in a quick sequence through the use of fast editing. However, there are a few significant differences between the two.

a) In the book, contrary to the film, the wedding does not officially take place. In the film, Ben and Elaine's running away when she is legally married adds a note of further criticism against the "establishment" and is clearly pointing to a new sensibility at the dawn of the social and political unrest of the late 1960s. *The graduate* quickly became a "cult" film, coming as it did at a particular moment in time and signalling, at the same time, the movement towards a "New Hollywood".

b) In the film, the cross is used not just as a weapon by Ben but also serves to "lock" the door of the church, preventing the people from running after the couple. The fact that a highly symbolic object as a cross is used to effectively help Ben and Elaine to "break free" of conventions may be seen as a further sign of provocation.

c) On the bus, there is a very quick exchange between Ben and Elaine: *"Benjamin", she said. "What". The bus began to move.* It might seem an abrupt ending, but it clearly points to a sort of "suspended reality". Have Ben and Elaine really "broken free"? We are denied any further elaboration - with their future "frozen" in time. In the film, this ending is given even more strength: after they have stopped laughing, they briefly look at each other but no words are uttered. And when they begin to

stare ahead of them towards the camera, there is no more smiling, but only a hint of puzzlement and uncertainty on their faces. They remain silent, as the words of the song stresses. And, once again, as the bus pulls off and moves away from us, we are not allowed what classical Hollywood would have called a really "happy ending" ...

Case study 2: Rebecca

Rebecca (Daphne du Maurier, 1938) --> *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940)

Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, Doubleday, Doran, New York, 1939 [©1938].

Condensing descriptions and using a voice-over as point-of-view



Video 5

The film (Video 5) starts with a woman's voice-over recounting a dream and describing a place which, we understand, had been her home in the past. The description is a condensed version of the one provided by the novel. Notice that the film uses a **selection** of the original text, which we have highlighted in **bold**.

Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again. It seemed to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive, and for a while I could not enter, for the way was barred to me. There was a padlock and chain upon the gate. I called in my dream to the lodge-keeper, and had no answer, and peering closer through the rusted spokes of the gate I saw that the lodge was uninhabited.

No smoke came from the chimney, and the little lattice windows gaped forlorn. Then, like all dreamers, I was possessed of a sudden with supernatural powers and passed like a spirit through the barrier before me. The drive wound away in front of me, twisting and turning as it had always done, but as I advanced I was aware that a change had come upon it; it was narrow and unkempt, not the drive that we had known. At first I was puzzled and did not understand, and it was only when I bent my head to avoid the low swinging branch of a tree that I realized what had happened. Nature had come into her own again and, little by little, in her stealthy, insidious way had encroached upon the drive with long, tenacious fingers. The woods, always a menace even in the past, had triumphed in the end. [This long paragraph continues with details of the state of the unkempt grounds ...]

On and on, now east now west, wound the poor thread that once had been our drive. Sometimes I thought it lost, but it appeared again, beneath a fallen tree perhaps, or struggling on the other side of a muddied ditch created by the winter rains ...
 [The paragraph continues with details of the unkempt grounds ...]

There was Manderley, our Manderley, secretive and silent as it had always been, the grey stone shining in the moonlight of my dream, the mullioned windows reflecting the green lawns and the terrace. Time could not wreck the perfect symmetry of those walls, nor the site itself, a jewel in the hollow of a hand.

[The next paragraph continues to describe in detail the house, now in a state of decay] ***I left the drive and went on to the terrace, for the nettles were no barrier to me, a dreamer. I walked enchanted, and nothing held me back. Moonlight can play odd tricks upon the fancy, even upon a dreamer's fancy.***

As I stood there, hushed and still, I could swear that the house was not an empty shell but lived and breathed as it had lived before.

Light came from the windows, the curtains blew softly in the night air, and there, in the library, the door would stand half open as we had left it, with my handkerchief on the table beside the bowl of autumn roses. The room would bear witness to our presence ... [The paragraph continues with details of the interior of the house ...]

A cloud, hitherto unseen, came upon the moon, and hovered an instant like a dark hand before a face. The illusion went with it, and the lights in the windows were extinguished. I looked upon a desolate shell, soulless at last, unhaunted, with no whisper of the past about its staring walls. [The paragraph continues to describe fond memories of the past at the house] ***All this I resolved in my dream, while the clouds lay across the face of the moon, for like most sleepers I knew that I dreamed. In reality I lay many hundred miles away in an alien land, and would wake, before many seconds had passed, in the bare little hotel bedroom, comforting in its very lack of atmosphere. I would sigh a moment, stretch myself and turn, and opening my eyes, be bewildered at that glittering sun, that hard, clean sky, so different from the soft moonlight of my dream. The day would lie before us both, long no doubt, and uneventful, but fraught with a certain stillness, a dear tranquillity we had not known before. We would not talk of Manderley, I would not tell my dream. For Manderley was ours no longer. Manderley was no more.***

We can never go back again, that much is certain.

This long description of the present state of the house is condensed in the film into a few essential sentences, but is more than amply replaced by the powerful images that accompany the voice-over: we adhere to the woman's point of view in her dream, as the camera moves along the drive in accordance with the spoken words. The atmosphere is dream-like, eerie and mysterious, with the grounds, and the house itself, partially hidden from view by the mist and the clouds covering the moonlight. The house itself, a sort of Gothic mansion, stands as a haunted castle against the cloudy skyline.

Replacing narratives

Then, in the book, the woman realizes that this is only a dream, and when she wakes up she is deeply aware that she is now "many hundred miles away in an alien land". But this is not shown in the film, which simply ends this opening scene with the words "We can never go back again, that much is certain".

Here book and film diverge substantially: the book goes on with the woman describing her present life in a place "many hundred miles away in an alien land" (which, through words like "that glittering sun, that hard, clean sky, so different from the soft moonlight of my dream", we understand to be somewhere far from England, maybe somewhere in the Mediterranean) and her present life with her husband - with both enjoying "a dear tranquillity" but still deeply aware of the events which happened at Manderley. The woman's description gradually introduces us to the past events which would shape her future experiences.

The film, on the contrary, cuts short the woman's dream and directly leads to her memories of her first encounter with the person who would then become her husband:

But sometimes in my dreams, I do go back to the strange days in my life which began for me in the south of France ...

The scene abruptly changes from the dream-like memory of Manderley to a sea scene, big waves breaking against the rocks ... and this clearly marks the start of a long *flashback*, which will last the whole duration of the film. This makes for a more compact narrative and leads us directly from the present (of the dream) to the past (of the events that would eventually lead to Manderley and what happened there).

Case study 3: Double indemnity

Double indemnity (James M. Cain, 1936) --> *Double indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944)

James M. Cain, *Double indemnity*, Copyright © 1936 by James M. Cain, Copyright renewed © 1962, 1964 by James M. Cain, Orion Books, London, 2002.

Replacing introductions, shifting time sequences and providing point-of-view

Video 6

The film (Video 6) takes a completely different approach from the book: it starts with Walter Neff, an insurance salesman, badly wounded from a gunshot, reaching his office at night and starting to tell the whole story by recording it with a dictaphone. Thus we realize that this is really the end of the story, and Walter is telling it retrospectively as a confession. His words soon introduce a flashback, which will last for the whole film, until we return to Walter (and to the present time) at the end of the movie. It is also clear that we are going to adopt Walter's point-of view.

The flashback starts where the book actually starts, with Walter going to Mr Dietrichson's house to check on an insurance policy (and from there the narrative of the book develops in chronological time sequence). However, even the book's opening paragraphs give us a hint of the tragedy that will follow, as Walter refers to the Dietrichsons' house as "The House of Death":

That was how I came to this House of Death, that you've been reading about in the papers. It didn't look like a House of Death when I saw it. It was just a Spanish house, like all the rest of them in California ... You climbed some stone steps to the front door, so I parked the car and went up there.

Condensing descriptions and expanding characters

The book gives a fairly detailed description of the house, which the film condenses in just a few words, concentrating simply on how much money would be needed to buy a house like this. However, the book and the film then start to diverge in some major ways. In the book, when Walter enters the house, he has a chance to look at the living room and how it is furnished, when suddenly a woman's voice interrupts his thoughts:

"Yes?"

A woman was standing there. I had never seen her before. She was maybe thirty-one or two, with a sweet face, light blue eyes,

and dusty blonde hair. She was small, and had on a suit of blue house pajamas. She had a washed-out look.

They start talking about insurance policies, especially about a possible accident insurance policy which might be taken out on Mr Dietrichson's life (an important detail for the story to come). But, as they talk, Walter cannot help concentrating on the woman and her looks:

I saw something I hadn't noticed before. Under those blue pajamas was a shape to set a man nuts, and how good I was going to sound when I started explaining the high ethics of the insurance business.

The dialogue ends with Mrs Dietrichson and Walter simply agreeing on a further meeting at the house the next evening. Then Walter leaves, musing about the way the woman has been able to catch his attention:

I didn't exactly know. I got in the car bawling myself out for being a fool just because a woman had given me one sidelong look.



Video 7

The film (Video 7) deals with these opening scenes in a very different way, with explicit erotic undertones and a sense of impending drama. We hear Walter's narrative in voice-over. When Walter manages to get into the house, a woman's voice is heard, coming from upstairs, and we get to see her from Walter's perspective (i.e. from a low angle): a beautiful blonde, framed by a grid, wearing only a white bathrobe. The dialogue that follows is already full of "double-entendres":

Walter talking about the insurance): ... and you might not be fully covered ...

Mrs Dietrichson: Perhaps I know what you mean, Mr Neff. I've just been taking a sunbathe.

Walter: No pigeons up there, I hope.

Mrs Dietrichson: If you'll let me put something on I'll be right down.

This sudden appearance of the woman is a clear presentation of a dangerous femme fatale, a typical character in *film noir*.

While he waits for her, Walter takes a look at the living room, described in very different terms from the book. The room is dark and stuffy, with the sun filtering only through the Venetian blinds. Walter sees two framed photographs, one of Mr Dietrichson and one of Lola, his daughter from his first wife (these details are important for the following narrative). There's

a bowl of goldfish, but ...

Walter: But to tell the truth, I wasn't a whole lot interested in goldfish ... or on the renewals for Mr Dietrichson and his daughter Lola ... I was thinking of the dame upstairs and the way she had looked at me, and I wanted to see her again, close, without that silly staircase between us ...

Thus Walter is, right from the start, ensnared by the *femme fatale*. Notice that this whole scene is backed up by the soundtrack, a sombre, suspenseful music which will become the *leitmotif* all through the film, signalling the tragic nature of these encounters. As we hear Walter's voice, we also start to see Mrs Dietrichson's legs, in close-up, coming down the "silly staircase", and we are forced to notice the bracelet that she wears round her ankle.

Adding dialogue to describe characters

She and Walter sit down opposite each other, with her white dress standing out as the main source of light in the dark room. They start talking about the insurance (much in the same line as in the book), but soon the woman brings up the topic of "accident insurance" ... although Walter is ready to catch her attention and starts flirting with her. Notice how the fast-paced dialogue that follows plays with words and their "double-entendres" (at a time when the Production Code, the studios' self-imposed censorship system, still forbade any explicit mention of sexual matters).

Walter: You should tell me what's that on your ankle?

Mrs Dietrichson: Just my name.

Walter: As for instance?

Mrs Dietrichson : Phyllips.

Walter: I think I like that,

Mrs Dietrichson : But you're not sure.

Walter: I'd have to drive round the block a couple of times.

Mrs Dietrichson: Mr Neff, why don't you drop by tomorrow evening by 8.30? He'll be in then.

Walter: Who?

Mrs Dietrichson: My husband. You were anxious to talk to him, weren't you?

Walter: Yeah, I was, but I'm sort of getting over the idea, if you know what I mean.

Mrs Dietrichson : There's a speed limit in this state, Mr Neff. 45 miles an hour.

Walter: How fast was I going, officer?

Mrs Dietrichson: I'd say around 90.

Walter: Suppose you get down your off motorcycle and give me a ticket?

Mrs Dietrichson : Suppose I'll let you off with a warning this time.

Walter: Suppose it doesn't take.

Mrs Dietrichson: Suppose I have to work you over the knuckles.

Walter: Suppose I burst out crying and put my hand on your shoulder.

Mrs Dietrichson: Suppose you try to put it on my husband's shoulder.

Walter: That tears it.

This witty, sharp dialogue appears in the film, not in the book, and, together with the *mise-en scène* and the background music, in a classic *film noir* atmosphere, greatly affects the overall impression that we get of the first-time approach between these two people, who will soon become lovers and accomplices in the husband's murder.

Case study 4: Death in Venice

Death in Venice (a novella by Thomas Mann, 1912) --> Death in Venice (Luchino Visconti, 1971)

Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, S. Fischer Verlag, 1912, Ecco, New York, ©2004.

Condensing and conveying descriptions through *mise-en-scène* and point-of-view

One of the greatest challenges posed by adaptations of books into films is how to convey detailed verbal descriptions through images. Language provides a writer with a range of possibilities to develop descriptions rich in detail and nuances, which can gradually help a reader build a mental picture of a face, a body, a place - anything the author wishes to describe in as much detail as s/he chooses to offer. Thus a verbal description can proceed in an *analytic* way, adding particulars to form the complete picture. In contrast, film takes, in a way, a *synthetic* approach: in just one image, for example, a face or a body appears on the screen, offering viewers a complete portrait: the actor/actress's physical appearance is the basic factor, although it can still be adjusted through a variety of visual cinematic means, e.g. hairdressing, makeup, lighting, camera angles and movements, editing.

Consider how Mann conveys the tone of Aschenbach's first encounter with Tadzio and how the boy is described:

Round a wicker table next him was gathered a group of young folk in charge of a governess or companion - three young girls,

perhaps fifteen to seventeen years old, and a long-haired boy of about fourteen. Aschenbach noticed with astonishment the lad's perfect beauty. His face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture - pale, with a sweet reserve, with clustering honeycoloured ringlets, the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth, the expression of pure and godlike serenity. Yet with all this chaste perfection of form it was of such unique personal charm that the observer thought he had never seen, either in nature or art, anything so utterly happy and consummate.

The scene is seen from Aschenbach's point of view, as he closely watches the people round him. Besides, we are allowed to enter Aschenbach's thoughts and emotive reactions ("astonishment") to what he sees. The boy's "perfect beauty" is described and explained through several gradual approximations: the point of departure is a comparison ("the noblest moment of Greek sculpture"), which can obviously be fully appreciated only by having a knowledge of Greek sculpture; then come details of his complexion ("pale"), hair and facial features, all accompanied by the observer's subjective interpretations (a "sweet reserve", a "winning mouth", a "pure and godlike serenity", "happy and consummate").

In addition, Aschenbach turns his attention to the other people sitting near the boy, and here he acknowledges that what he judges as a "difference in educational method" is *shown* (i.e. through a visual reference) in the way the boy and his sisters are "clothed and treated": this can be (and actually is) *shown* in the film. The observer's still subjective views ("an almost disfiguring austerity", "every grace of outline ... wilfully suppressed, "a vacant expression, like a nun's", "Tenderness and softness, it was plain, conditioned his existence", "something 'rich and strange', a spoilt, exquisite air") are based on close analysis of their clothes and hair style:

What struck him further was the strange contrast the group afforded, a difference in educational method, so to speak, shown in the way the brother and sisters were clothed and treated. The girls, the eldest of whom was practically grown up, were dressed with an almost disfiguring austerity. All three wore half-length slate-coloured frocks of cloisterline plainness, arbitrarily unbecoming in cut, with white turn-over collars as their only adornment. Every grace of outline was wilfully suppressed; their hair lay smoothly plastered to their heads, giving them a vacant expression, like a nun's. All this could only be by the mother's orders; but there was no trace of the same pedagogic severity in the case of the boy. Tenderness and softness, it was plain, conditioned his existence. No scissors had been put to the lovely hair that (like the Spinnario's) curled

about his brows, above his ears, longer still in the neck. He wore an English sailor suit, with quilted sleeves that narrowed round the delicate wrists of his long and slender though still childish hands. And this suit, with its breast-knot, lacings, and embroideries, lent the slight figure something "rich and strange," a spoilt, exquisite air.

Then Aschenbach's attention is drawn to the boy's posture, and, once again, we are afforded a glimpse into the writer's thoughts and feelings, even into the hypotheses he makes about the nature of the boy's beauty and the meanings that can be attached to it:

The observer saw him in half profile, with one foot in its black patent leather advanced, one elbow resting on the arm of his basket chair, the cheek nestled into the closed hand in a pose of easy grace, quite unlike the stiff subservient mien which was evidently habitual to his sisters. Was he delicate? His facial tint was ivorywhite against the golden darkness of his clustering locks. Or was he simply a pampered darling, the object of a self-willed and partial love? Aschenbach inclined to think the latter.

...

The close observation of this group of people is interrupted by the arrival of the children's mother, whom Aschenbach describes by referring, once again, to the clothes and the jewels she wears: these details allow Aschenbach to make inferences ("the simplicity prescribed in certain circles", "something faintly fabulous, after all, in her appearance") and to ask himself questions about her origin and social status ("she might have been, in Germany, the wife of some high official"):

The governess, a short, stout, red-faced person, at length gave the signal. With lifted brows she pushed back her chair and made a bow to the tall woman, dressed in palest grey, who now entered the hall. This lady's abundant jewels were pearls, her manner was cool and measured; the fashion of her gown and the arrangement of her lightly powdered hair had the simplicity prescribed in certain circles whose piety and aristocracy are equally marked. She might have been, in Germany, the wife of some high official. But there was something faintly fabulous, after all, in her appearance, though lent it solely by the pearls she wore: they were well-nigh priceless, and consisted of earrings and a three-stranded necklace, very long, with gems the size of cherries.

Then this group moves to exit the hall, and Aschenbach continues to follow their movements closely - although the most important moment comes when the boy turns, before going out, and his eyes meet Aschenbach's, suggesting some kind of ambiguous contact:

The brother and sisters had risen briskly. They bowed over their mother's hand to kiss it, she turning away from them, with a slight smile on her face, which was carefully preserved but rather sharp-nosed and worn. She addressed a few words in French to the governess, then moved towards the glass door. The children followed, the girls in order of age, then the governess, and last the boy. He chanced to turn before he crossed the threshold, and as there was no one else in the room, his strange, twilight grey eyes met Aschenbach's, as our traveller sat there with the paper on his knee, absorbed in looking after the group.

It is clearly impossible to render all these verbal descriptions through a visual image - much will necessarily be lost in the filmic translation.



Video 8

If we compare the book with the film (Video 8), we notice that every possible detail that can be translated into a visual image has been preserved: the camera identifies with Aschenbach's eyes, which focus on a close-up of the boy, followed by a zoom back to reveal the group of the children and the governess. Then Aschenbach witnesses the mother's arrival, with the boy's kissing her hand and the other children slightly bowing to her. As the mother sits down, we see the boy in exactly the same posture as described in the book; the camera slowly zooms towards her face, which we then see in close-up. Once again Aschenbach's eyes turn to the boy, whom we see in close-up, followed by another zoom back from him, with the camera now once again framing the whole group. And we finally see them standing up and moving towards the door, with the boy turning briefly to meet Aschenbach's eyes.

Clothing, hairdressing, postures, gestures and movements - anything that can be rendered *visually* has effectively been captured by the camera, and the focus is clearly on the match between Aschenbach's eyes and the people he observes. All that we see is filtered through his eyes, i.e. through the camera's shots and movements, and we are thus invited to *infer* what he is thinking and feeling. However, the complex train of thoughts and considerations described by the language of the book cannot be replicated on the screen. Instead, through the ways in which we alternatively switch between Aschenbach's eyes and the people he sees, we are led to *make inferences* about the interest that he is showing in the boy's beauty and the somewhat ambiguous contact that, it is suggested, has taken place between them.

Managing points of view

The story in the book is narrated in the third person, suggesting,

but only superficially, that we are being addressed by a neutral, omniscient narrator. In fact, several pages at the beginning are devoted to a presentation of Aschenbach and his personality, but readers are often allowed ample access to his thoughts and feelings, so that they may wonder whether this narrator is indeed Aschenbach himself, disguised as a third person. As we have already mentioned, when Aschenbach meets Tadzio and his family for the first time, although the narrating voice is still in the third person, we actually see the whole scene through Aschenbach's eyes and are also allowed to appreciate his thoughts and feelings.

In the film, the whole story is clearly told from Aschenbach's point of view, as is suggested by the editing, which alternates close-up shots of his face and shots of what he is actually watching. The movements of his eyes invite viewers to direct their attention, not just to the people that are the object of his gaze, but also, and most importantly, to his reactions to what he sees. Notice that the whole scene is filmed through a careful matching of *visual* clues, since the *audio* component, i.e. the voices of the family, including the governess and the mother, is practically indistinct (the volume of their voices is rather low, we can hear them only against the background of the other voices in the hall and the diegetic music that is being played by a small orchestra, and the languages used are foreign, even to Aschenbach himself).

Case study 5: A judgment in stone

A judgment in stone (Ruth Rendell 1977) --> *La cérémonie/The ceremony* (Claude Chabrol, 1995)

Ruth Rendell, *A judgment in stone*, Bantam Books, 1979, Copyright © 1977 by Kingsmarkham Enterprises Ltd.

Changing narrative structure and reader/viewer expectations

The book and the film have quite different departure points. Chapter 1 of the book spells out in very clear terms some very basic information: what the story is about (the murder of a family), the identity of the murderer (Eunice), the aftermath of the crime (disaster for Eunice), the fact that there was an accomplice, and even the reason behind the murder itself (the fact that Eunice could not read or write, which is indeed the shocking piece of information that makes this story so compelling):

Eunice Parchman killed the Coverdale family because she could not read or write.

There was no real motive and no premeditation. No money was gained and no security. As a result of her crime, Eunice Parchman's disability was made known not to a mere family or a handful of villagers but to the whole country. She accomplished by it nothing but disaster for herself, and all along, somewhere in her strange mind, she knew she would accomplish nothing. And yet, although her companion and partner was mad, Eunice was not.

...

The chapter also provides some basic information about the Coverdale family, but also some details about the murder itself:

Four members of this family—George, Jacqueline, and Melinda Coverdale and Giles Mont—died in the space of fifteen minutes on February 14, St. Valentine's Day. Eunice Parchman and the prosaically named Joan Smith shot them down on a Sunday evening while they were watching opera on television. Two weeks later Eunice was arrested for the crime - because she could not read.

But there was more to it than that.

Thus the reader's *expectations*, which shape her/his interpretation and appreciation of the story, are not the classical questions of crime stories (e.g. Who was the murderer? Why was the crime committed?) but are condensed in the final sentence (*But there was more to it than that.*). In other words, the reader is informed that what follows is not just a detailed record of the crime, but also, and most importantly, an analysis of the rather exceptional circumstances under which all this happened.

Chapter 2 starts in the present, with a description of how Lowfield Hall, the place of the crime, looks today, a long time after the murder:

The gardens of Lowfield Hall are overgrown now and weeds push their way up through the gravel of the drive. One of the drawing-room windows, broken by a village boy, has been boarded up, and wisteria, killed by summer drought, hangs above the front door like an old dried net. Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

...

Before Eunice came, before Eunice left and left desolation behind her, Lowfield Hall was not like this. It was as well kept as its distant neighbors, as comfortable, as warm, as elegant,

and, seemingly, as much a sanctuary as they. Its inhabitants were safe and happy, and destined surely to lead long secure lives.

But on an April day they invited Eunice in.

The phrase "*Before Eunice came*" is the actual starting point of the story, the time in the past (*on an April day*) when everything began - it marks the beginning of a *flashback* that will take up practically the whole of the following narrative. This dramatic turning point works as an invitation to the reader to follow the narrator in the telling of the story, starting from the circumstances that put Eunice and the Coverdale family in contact with each other.



Video 9

The film (Video 9) takes a completely different approach, a more "classical" one for crime stories, we could say, since it begins with Mrs Coverdale meeting Eunice in a cafe in town. This is the "interview" during which Eunice introduces herself to her prospective employer, who is looking for a housekeeper. The two women briefly talk about the basic aspects of the job (like the tasks Eunice will be expected to perform, her working times, her salary, the situation of the house, etc.). Then we see Mrs Coverdale driving back home and telling her family about Eunice. We thus get to know Mr Coverdale and his daughter. The story will then develop with Eunice's arrival at the mansion and her first days in the new job. It is not until much later that we will learn that Eunice cannot read or write, since for quite some time she manages to keep this information secret. In the film, therefore, the story is narrated in chronological order, with viewers gradually introduced to the personality of Eunice and her friend/accomplice, and with the tension building up in subtle ways from the moment Eunice's secret is discovered, until the final horrifying scene of the murder and the police arriving at the mansion. In other words, viewers are presented with a rather traditional narrative along the lines of a typical crime story - creating very different expectations than the book.

Case study 6: Rear window

Rear window (Cornell Woolrich, 1942) --> *Rear window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)

Cornell Woolrich, *Rear window*, 1942, Simon and Schuster, London, 1988.

Expanding the establishing shots and describing characters

The book's opening paragraphs set up the basic situation which will be so crucial for the whole story - a man (no more information about him is given) is almost unable to move (we don't know the reason for this), and can only pass the time by sitting (or lying) near the window of his flat and watching the lives of the other tenants in the building unfold before his eyes. He justifies this behaviour (lest we think he is some sort of a voyeur) and then proceeds to describe a few of the people whose life he has access to. He concentrates on a couple - the woman "in chronic poor health" and the man, who "seemed to be out of work". We will soon understand why this couple draws the man's particular attention as a suspicion of murder is introduced.

I didn't know their names. I'd never heard their voices. I didn't even know them by sight, strictly speaking, for their faces were too small to fill in with identifiable features at that distance. Yet I could have constructed a timetable of their comings and goings, their daily habits and activities. They were the rear-window dwellers around me.

Sure, I suppose it was a little bit like prying, could even have been mistaken for the fevered concentration of a Peeping Tom. That wasn't my fault, that wasn't the idea. The idea was, my movements were strictly limited just around this time. I could get from the window to the bed, and from the bed to the window, and that was all.

...

Just to pick a few at random: Straight over, and the windows square, there was a young jitter-couple, kids in their teens, only just married. It would have killed them to stay home one night. They were always in such a hurry to go, wherever it was they went, they never remembered to turn out the lights.

...

The next house down, the windows already narrowed a little with perspective. There was a certain light in that one that always went out each night too. Something about it, it used to make me a little sad. There was a woman living there with her child, a young widow I suppose. I'd see her put the child to bed, and then bend over and kiss her in a wistful sort of way.

...

I felt sorry for the couple in the flat below. I used to wonder how they stood it with that bedlam going on above their heads. To make it worse the wife was in chronic poor health, too; I could tell that even at a distance by the listless way she moved about over there, and remained in her bathrobe without dressing. Sometimes I'd see her sitting by the window, holding her head. I used to wonder why he didn't have a doctor in to look her over, but maybe they couldn't afford it. He seemed to be out of work.



Video 10

The film (Video 10) takes this basic setting and situation as the starting point of the narrative, but expands them to offer both a full portrait of the man watching and a glimpse into several of his neighbours' lives. At the start, the camera shows a window opening onto a courtyard. As soon as the opening titles end, the camera (and us, the viewers) goes out of this window to pan around the courtyard. With just one cut, we make a complete tour of the courtyard and come back through the same window, only to discover a big close-up of a man, sleeping in his sweat. The next shot shows us a thermometer, reading well above 90 degrees Fahrenheit (well over 30 degrees Celsius). From the thermometer, the camera takes us out of the room again. The following images show that it's early morning: a man is shaving, a couple wakes up after sleeping outside on the balcony; a young girl making coffee while stretching her legs; a street, which we can only barely see in the background, where a tank truck is spraying water on the sidewalks; somebody shaking the bedsheets out of the window ... until we come back to the close-up of our man, still sleeping. We find out that he has a leg in plaster and is sitting in a wheelchair. The camera moves on in the room: now it shows a broken camera, then a few photographs of a car crash, other photos, the cover of a magazine and other cameras - Fade - We see our man again, now shaving, then receiving a phone call, although his attention is drawn by a pair of young girls preparing to sunbathe on their terrace, and even more by the young girl dancing in the flat opposite his ...

With the camera panning around we already have a clear idea of the setting (a backyard, with a variety of tenants) and the character, who, as we easily deduce, is a photographer/reporter who has had an accident and is now confined to his room, with his leg in plaster - which, however, does not prevent him from appreciating young pretty girls ... Notice that most of the scene has no dialogue, only some kind of jazzy background music, and even when the man starts talking on the phone, we don't really pay attention to what he says, since he keeps watching out of the window, and we are as interested as he is in his neighbours. This is a triumph of Hitchcock's visual art: with practically no words, but only through camera movements and careful editing, he is able to draw a portrait of his main character and at the same time to enrich the range of people he is watching from his window. Thus this is a clear example of how a basic situation from a book can be expanded and enriched by using cinema's peculiar tools. As Hitchcock happened to say:

"When we tell a story in cinema, we should resort to dialogue only when it's impossible to do otherwise. I always try first to tell a story in the cinematic way, through a succession of shots and bits of film in between." (Note 3)

4. *External factors impacting on adaptations*

Any process of adaptation does not take place in a vacuum: the decision to turn a literary work into a film is, as for any other movie project, first and foremost a financial and commercial one, and as such is affected by a host of factors other than the mere working of the scriptwriter/filmmaker. Marketing strategies often dictate the features that the final product will exhibit, keeping in mind the prospective audiences and their tastes and expectations. Since most movies are marketed worldwide, filmmakers have to take into consideration the features and demands of possible different cultural contexts: how the movie will be "received" in diverse cultural, national and political contexts is often at the core of several choices that inevitably impact on the adaptation process.

A fairly obvious example is the influence of the Hollywood conventions and of the audiences that expect such conventions to work in the movies that they are going to watch. The traditional "happy ending" is a case in point: a typical Hollywood movie includes endings in which, e.g. the "hero" achieves his goals, order and justice are restored, an heterosexual couple is formed, and so on, leaving the audience with little or no ambiguity as to the final outcome of the story. "Unhappy" endings are not the rule, and are usually reserved for the "villain" who rightly gets his punishment. When the "heroes" meet an unhappy fate, the final images of the movie can be "frozen" in order to avoid showing their death, as the famous examples from *Butch Cassidy* and *Thelma and Louise* clearly show.



Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (George Roy Hill, 1969)



Thelma & Louise (Ridley Scott, 1991)

The power of censorship cannot be underestimated, too, especially when it touches on issues like violence or sex. A comparison between different adaptations of the same literary work at different times is illuminating in this respect. *The postman always rings twice*, originally a novel by James M. Cain published in 1934, was adapted by Italian director Luchino Visconti in 1943. The story is about a wandering tramp (Massimo Girotti) who stops at a small roadside tavern and petrol station run by a woman (Clara Calamai) and her older husband - whom the two lovers will soon plan to kill. The sexual "obsession" is only suggested, mainly in the glances that the two lovers exchange and in their physical proximity. When director Tay Garnett adapted the same novel in 1946, he was able to take advantage of the presence of a Hollywood star (Lana Turner). In one of the early scenes, the man (John Garfield)'s attention is drawn by a lipstick which is "accidentally" rolling on the floor towards him. The camera, following Frank's look, slowly moves upwards to reveal a woman's feet, then her legs. Frank's gaze, almost awe-struck and fascinated, frames the whole body of the woman, dressed in scanty white shorts and blouse, plus a towel arranged as a turban. The man, almost in a trance, picks up the lipstick and, handing it to the woman, says, "Did you drop this?". The woman nods in assent, the two of them look at each other intensely (and we get a

close-up of her), then she walks slowly towards the man, takes the lipstick from his hand and puts it on looking at herself in a small hand-mirror, and finally closes the door behind her. This highly erotic scene is probably the most a director could dare to show with the strict censorship rules of the time. But when Bob Rafelson shot a new adaptation of the same story in 1981, starring Bob Nicholson and Jessica Lange, he included explicit sex scenes (which are not available on YouTube ...).



Osessione (Luchino Visconti, 1943)



The postman always rings twice (Tay Garnett, 1946)

On the other hand, filmmakers have always been able to "circumvent" censorship requirements by using ambiguity and "double entendres" to full effect, as we have seen in the case of *Double indemnity* above, or in the famous "happy ending" of Hitchcock's *North by northwest* (1959), where Eva (Eva Marie Saint) is hanging from Roger (Cary Grant)'s hand on the edge of a precipice on Mount Rushmore. With a last desperate effort, Roger manages to heave the woman onto himself, thus saving her from certain death ... but as he heaves her up, a sudden cut shows Roger heaving Eva up ... into his bed in a sleeping car, thus anticipating the happy end. Immediately after this, the train enters a tunnel and, with Hitchcock's typical irony, the audience is left to imagine what is going to happen next ...



North by northwest (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959)

Filmmakers certainly have a far greater amount of freedom in dealing with sexual matters than they had in the past, but even this freedom has certain limits: by allowing explicit scenes to be included in a film, their movie might incur in a R (restricted) or even X (suitable only for adults) rating, with may jeopardize the distribution and limit the kinds of audiences that may be reached - a serious marketing consideration.

More generally speaking, when the movie touches on sensitive issues like ethnicity, religion or politics or on controversial ones like homosexuality, euthanasia or abortion, care must be taken to prevent the movie from being rejected, particularly in some cultural contexts where explicit scenes may look and sound disturbing or offensive to viewers. And sometimes movies must be re-edited to keep them up to date with events that may have occurred after the end of production: this was the case, for example, of several movies which showed the Twin Towers in New York after their destruction on September 11, 2001.

Note/Notes

1. Kittredge W. & Krauzer S.M. 1979. *Stories into film*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, p.1.
2. Desmond J.M. & Hawkes P. 2006. *Adaptation: Studying film and literature*, Mc Graw Hill, New York, p. 128.
3. Truffaut F. 1986. *Hitchcock by Truffaut*, Paladin Grafton Books, London, p. 73.



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