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Stop Being Lost in Translation ©

by Aaron Olson

(Honors English 102)

The Assignment: Write an argument to persuade a resistant audience who may express considerable resistance to your actions, values, and beliefs because your position is highly contestable.

Claim: Because of the inherent differences of film and literature, it is important that both art forms be judged on their own terms in order for a viewer or reader to fully appreciate both as equally artistic.

Every so often there is a novel or short story that is turned into a motion picture and the first question that is always brought up is whether or not the movie is better than the book. Reviewers spend entire columns comparing and contrasting novels with their cinema counterparts, yet most of these debates are left in ambiguity. This is because film and literature are fundamentally different in the way that the public receives them. Books are read without time constraint or length requirement. Also, books are experienced in a personal way according to the reader's imagination and with respect to any of five literary points of view. Films, on the other hand, are absorbed visually by a mass audience and differ from literature in terms of point of view and time constraints. Those who directly compare the two mediums often overlook these distinctions. Overlooking the distinctions can be counterproductive to a reader or viewer whose goal it is to genuinely experience the cinematic and literary forms of art. A viewer or reader must first dispel his or her expectations of the novel or film in order to fully enjoy the work as an individual artistic creation. Because of the inherent differences of film and literature, it is important that both art forms be judged in their own terms in order for a viewer or reader to fully appreciate both as equally artistic.

In order to better understand the distinctions between film literature and written literature, one must first maintain a basic understanding of the processes and conventions of their creation as well as their inherent differences. Books are written, more often than not, by a single author, with more freedom of expression than a director, who is forced to conform to rating standards of the time. Also, the writer has the advantage of working almost entirely with written language—a medium that, though complex in its own right, is easy to control and modify. This, of course, excludes the small amount of illustration that is used in some novels. Film is a far more technically complex medium to work with. Movies work solely with pictures and sounds, with the rare exception of small amounts of text that appear on the screen from time to time. The texts seen on screen in some movies (excluding the credits) are usually used for the purpose of a basic introduction to the plot line, as seen in the opening sequence of every *Star Wars* movie, or to provide some basic information about a character in the story, like in the ending of the movie *Animal House* where all of the main characters' future lives are summarized in a brief paragraph. Neither the incorporation of illustrations into novels, nor the incorporation of texts in movies is proper grounds for deeming books a visual medium or movies a language-based medium. Because film is primarily visual, it offers a great variety of technical challenges in communicating plot, theme, and character depth.

One of the major challenges that directors face in adapting a novel to the screen is the limitation of the camera's ability to represent literary points of view. Of the five literary points of view—first-person, omniscient-narrator, third -person limited point of view, dramatic point of view/concealed narrator point of view, and stream of consciousness or interior monologue—three of them require that the narrator be able to “see” what the characters are thinking by looking inside those characters' minds, which is difficult to depict cinematically (Boggs 679). Some would say that voice-over narration can be

imposed (or superimposed) on a film to give a sense of narration and thus a novelistic point of view. Joseph M. Boggs, refutes this by stating that “This [voice-over narration] is not a natural cinematic quality, and it is rarely completely successful in duplicating or even suggesting novelistic viewpoints. In film we usually simply see the story unfold. Thus the dramatic point of view is the only novelistic viewpoint that can be directly translated to cinema” (680). In elaboration of this point, George Bluestone, states that movies have the ability to present the audience with images and dialogue, which can lead to the inference of thought, but cannot show us their thoughts and feelings directly (48). This limitation can prevent filmmakers from capturing the novel’s essence, which is largely based on point of view (Boggs 680).

Another primary difference between movies and books is the audience that they target and the levels of imagination that are expected by both mediums. For movies, appeal to a mass audience, which is collectively viewing the movie, is necessary. Books, on the other hand, are more personal, targeting one reader’s imagination at a time. This distinction is one key element to film adaptation that causes much controversy. In essence, it is impossible to capture the way that each individual reader imagines the settings, actions, and characters on film because everyone’s perception of literature is different. “It is a mistake if people watch movies through the pages of a novel because I think you have to reconcile yourself as a filmmaker to the fact that each person who reads a novel is playing out a perfect version of the film in their minds,” said writer-director Anthony Minghella (3). This gives people the false expectation that, when going to see an adaptation of a novel that they had previously read, their vision of the novel will be recognized. Keeping in mind the restrictions on film in terms of directly communicating literary elements, it is impossible for moviegoers who make direct comparisons between the book and the adaptation to be satisfied (Eidsvik 669). Instead, they should recognize that the film and the novel are products of two different artistic visionaries, with two very different audiences.

Film’s need for mass appeal also motivates filmmakers to focus on plot and story energy. As stated in Mark Caro’s article, “They [novels] have nothing to do with momentum. They have to do with deep spelunking into the psyche of the characters” (2). That is not to say that films cannot also dive deep into the psyche, only that movies do not always address characters with the same amount of depth or background development as the corresponding novel might (Boggs 683). Although this is not necessarily a bad thing when considering the shorter attention span of a movie audience, the exclusion of this information is, of course, due to the time constraints that are put on film literature in general.

Length is another important variable in the film adaptation equation. As stated by Boggs, “...the average novel contains more material than a film could ever hope to include, so the screenwriter or director must choose what to leave in and what to take out” (675). This is a great source of disappointment for moviegoers who expect to make direct links between the film and the novel. In most movies, the time spent on back-story, extended character development, as well as the exploration of themes, is often cut short. However, because of the difference between novel and film audiences, as discussed above, some of that detail would be counterproductive to a director wishing to hold his or her audience’s attention. Knowing the differences in length, audience, and point of view is essential to a person who wishes to explore a different way of viewing film adaptations and the books that inspired them.

More often than not, those who do directly compare film adaptations to literature are left feeling disappointed in one way or another. If attempting to read a book that corresponds to a particular film adaptation after watching the film, a reader will most likely take on the film director’s perspective of the novel. Taking on the director’s perspective destroys the sense of individual imagination one gets from reading, which can limit the reader’s enjoyment of the book. If, after reading the novel, the reader attends a screening of its film adaptation, the reader will more than likely be inclined to weigh the director’s interpretation (visually or thematically) of the novel to his or her own experience when reading it. This comparison can cause the viewer to be disappointed in the movie simply because of the incompatibility of perspective. In both of these cases, the reader or moviegoer is unable to experience both the book and the film with the same level of intrigue and appreciation. Certainly, most people recognize the importance of equally appreciating works of art in different mediums.

How does one properly prepare one's self to view a film adaptation or read a book as an individual work of art without directly comparing the two? The key to this equation is dropping one's expectations. This can be done by acknowledging the fundamental differences between the visual art of a film director and the verbal art of the writer as discussed above. If reading a book after seeing its film adaptation, a reader must first realize that artistic liberties were taken by the director to reinvent what he or she envisioned after reading the book. With that in mind, the reader must then free him or herself from that director's interpretation and be ready to creatively interpret and experience the book personally. This can give the reader more freedom to imagine characters, settings, and scenarios on their own terms, thus creating a more unique reading experience. The reader must allow him or herself to mentally dive deep into the book and experience it on a personal level, not relate it to his or her experience with the film adaptation in a public setting. A moviegoer who is attending a screening of the film adaptation of a novel he or she had previously read must also achieve a similar mindset.

After reading a novel, every person has certain ideas about what the characters and settings look like, as well as what the themes and main plot entail. When watching a film adaptation, it is important to recognize this inherent difference in interpretation from person to person, and how ludicrous it is to compare two interpretations. Those interpretations, though different, have equal intrinsic value. For example, if two people with different life perspectives were to read a novel and then discuss it, finding that they both perceived the story differently, would they argue that one person's perception of the story has higher merit than another's? No. People generally recognize that no individual's imagination works in a set way; people are all unique. Likewise, a film adaptation is the product of the filmmaker's vision, which is undoubtedly different from anyone else's. For this reason, film adaptations should be viewed as a fresh outlook on the original story, not as "accurate" or "inaccurate" because that distinction is far too subjective. Viewing film adaptations with a fresh outlook requires that the viewer drops any expectations of the movie conforming to his or her interpretation of the novel. Also, the viewer must be sure not to criticize the movie in terms of time, visual perspective, or literary point of view, as discussed above. If this is accomplished, and the viewer remains open-minded to the director's different interpretation of the novel, his or her movie going experience will be far more enjoyable than that of a person who directly compares the novel with the film.

Lost in translation is the individual reader's ability to imagine stories in different ways at different times and to translate that interpretation through different artistic mediums, much like a painter creating a rendition of a sculptor's work. It would be foolish to think that one person's outlook on a story could encompass the different artistic elements in every other person's interpretation. Furthermore, the differences between visual and written communication as well as the limitations to both mediums are the sources of film art and are what creates the important distinction between the cinematic and literary art forms. Because of this distinction, direct comparisons between film and literature cannot be used to determine whether or not the film was better than the story or vice versa. The very nature of both mediums and the intrinsic restrictions to means of communication that they both possess makes clear that no direct comparison between the two can be reasonably offered. Yet, many viewers insist on directly comparing them. Comparison is bound to leave the reader or viewer unfairly disappointed in either the film or the book. Because directors and writers are, in essence, completely different kinds of artists, both the original story and its film adaptation must be judged on their own terms, not criticized for their dissimilarities. The reader or viewer must lower his or her expectations of the "accuracy" of the film's translation of the novel, or the novel's effectiveness of the novel after watching the film adaptation. If this is accomplished, their experiences with both forms of works are bound to be more satisfying. Obviously, the ultimate goal is to appreciate both the novels and their film adaptations for what they are: amazing, and often moving, works of art.

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