

Film Adaptation between Translation and Inspiration

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Preface

Coming across an interesting twist to the known saying “don’t judge a book by its cover” and finding that its updated version is “don’t judge a book by its movie,” I had to stop and think for a while. I have to admit that the new saying puzzled me for it reflects a sense of failure on the film’s part, yet knowing that most films based on books actually succeed. At first, I asked myself an involuntary question; as a good reader and also a movie addict, what do I enjoy better? And in case of watching a film based on a book that I read and loved, how do I feel? Do I feel happy or betrayed? The answers to my first question seemed simple and effortless for I, without hesitation, found myself inclined to literature, it being my major scope of study for the past six years. My answer was also based on an unconscious fact that literature has existed before film, it is more prestigious, it is deeper, it is more expressive, and the feeling of holding a book in your hands and turning the pages is just priceless. However, a moment later, I found myself answering the other questions, and the answers were not as simple as I thought. I started to become hesitant because I have also been fascinated by the film medium for such a long time to the extent that I have developed personal wishes of becoming a director one day. Undoubtedly, film is a wide, attractive medium; it creates a sense of wonder and enjoyment. “Is it better?,” I kept asking myself, and that insistent question, in actuality, made me realize that the question is too trivial in the first place. In other words, I reached a logical conclusion that, to start with, the comparison is invalid. Is enjoying both with the same degree considered a violation? Well, a person can indulge in two activities or hobbies of the same level at the same time, then why not treat both separately, even when there is a link between them? I took my confusion and series of questions further when I decided to read about the subject, and here is where it all started. By extensively reading about film, and specifically about film adaptation of literature, it struck me that all those questions are part of a larger critical debate.

Film adaptation of literary works has been an on-going practice, but very little has been said about it until the last twenty years in which studies of this field have been burgeoning in many American universities. Light has been shed on the new study as the practice of film adaptation increases each year. Thus, it cannot be ignored anymore. Admittedly, my subject choice was a challenge, not only because it was a new subject of discussion in the English department of the University of Alexandria, but also because the nature of the subject itself is very risky. There has been a lot of critical debate around the subject and putting this debate into light in a literature-focused department made me reconsider a number of times. Yet, I have always believed in “the road not taken” and I have been raised to take risks, thus, I took it upon myself as a challenge to study this subject thoroughly; after all there is always a first time to everything.

My study is divided into two parts; a theoretical and a practical one. The theoretical part discusses the theory of adaptation in attempt to define the medium and present the critical debate around it, while the application of this theory – the practical part – focuses on giving examples and analyzing them clearly to show the interaction between both media. However, being a non-specialist in the film domain, my main purpose is not to carry out a technical discussion of the subject, but instead to present a clear view point on the collaboration of both media: literature and film.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter one is introductory as it lays down the relationship between literature and film, discusses what is known by “fidelity criticism” and ends by giving a review of literature on the different terms and definitions explaining the process of adaptation. The second chapter is also theoretical but it is more detailed, for it attempts at penetrating each medium in a comparative approach, analyzing the main elements of each and stressing the difference between them.

The third and fourth chapters represent a different kind of challenge to me as I had to choose from an enormous variety of options. My main concern here was to devote each

chapter to discussing one type of adaptation in order to show the results of the intersection of both media.

Chapter three presents a “translation” of Oliver Sacks’s non-fictional memoir *Awakenings* on screen because it faithfully carries out the original material on screen despite the changes made. The book itself mingles medicine and literature for it narrates the true events of Oliver Sacks upon his dealing with Encephalitis patients as well as discusses the disease and its cure from the medical view point. Penny Marshall’s adaptation of Sacks’s book, an Oscar-winning movie, was indeed successful and was able to faithfully portray Sacks’s original story despite the necessary changes it had to undergo.

Chapter four discusses the other type of adaptation, what I refer to as “inspiration,” for it is only an inspirational process of transforming one common idea – that is borrowed from the original source – into a totally different story. The text analyzed in this chapter is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short story *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and David Fincher’s adaptation of it. Also nominated to thirteen different awards, the film is very interesting, entertaining and also carries a deep message within. Surprisingly, it is also one of those adaptations that result in a more interesting story than the original; a *new original* that surpasses the source text.