



IS THE QUEST FOR FIDELITY THE ONLY LITMUS TEST TO EVALUATE FILM ADAPTATION?

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to through light on the important issue of deciding upon the right parameters of evaluation of film adaptations. After dealing with the historical perspective right from the beginning of Hollywood, the definition of adaptation has been dealt with. An interesting observation regarding adaptations that, “second-rate novels make very good movies while great works of prose produced films that have tumbled” has been referred to them. How a creative film maker, like R.K. Narayan raised an important issue is ‘fidelity to the text’ the only litmus test of an ideal adaptation? is discussed in greater details. The task of adaptation of a novel has been further clarified by quoting Balazs, an authority in the field of adaptation. Finally the current vogue of adaptation and theatrical spectacle is the main focus. This research article ends up with the positive note in the future of adaptation.

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Proposition

The present paper is based on the conviction that while evaluating any film adaptation separate parameters of critical evaluation must be applied as any adapted work, based on a poem, a short story or a novel, is a hybrid product demanding a totally new set of parameters of evaluation for proper deciphering Adaptation.

In defense of adaptation

From the beginning of Hollywood, the greatest film producing set up in the world, literature has always established itself as a proven base for the production of films. Hollywood turned to literature as the source which could be utilized for film and therefore they took to the practice of translating books to films. D. W Griffith, the first greatest artist, the man who gave shape to the distinctive film language for the first time, based, his

movies on poems, plays, short stories and novels. He adapted Tennyson in *Enoch Arden*, Browning in *Pippa Passes*, Thomas Hood in *The Song of the Shirt*, Jack London in *The Call of the Wild* and Dickens in *The Cricket on the Heath*. Though Griffith has been looked upon as the father of the adaptation, the pioneers in the field of adaptation were the Italian filmmakers who considered literature worth converting into films as early as 1920. That was the year when George Melies filmed his *A Trip to the Moon* which had its origin in a Jules Verne's novel which was also made a film by Molies bearing the same titles.

In recent times, however the literary text is gaining importance day by day because the literary text is being converted into the medium of the film through adaptations and secondly, the filmmaker has become the critic in its real sense through

his\her interaction with the society. The filmmaker enjoys certain advantageous position due to the handling of the most powerful medium entitled "cinema". Though film is generally considered as a means of entertainment only, time has come now when there has to be some serious thinking and in-depth consideration on the part of the academics and intellectuals. Talented and creative filmmakers and directors like Eisenstein, Godard, Renoir, Antonioni, Fellini, Kurosawa, Ray, Coppola, Polanski, Bengal and Adoor have successfully established the film as a narrative medium. The ever-increasing narrative range of the film medium amazes the observers because a majority of films prove to be adaptations. The adaptations have always held a privileged place in the film industry and at the Academy Awards it's the adaptation more than any other kind of film on which the industry relies completely. Joy Gould Boyum, the only authority in the realm of adaptation

"Take almost any year in fact, since a list of the movies which have either won or at least been nominated for Best Picture sounds startlingly like a library catalogue: *The Way of All Flesh, All Quiet on the Western Front, Mutiny on the Bounty, Arrowsmith, A Farewell to Arms, David Copperfield, The Informer, A Midsummer Night Dream, Pygmalion. The Grapes of Warth, The Magnificent Ambersons, For Whom the Bell Tolls, The Ox-Bow Incident, Hamlet, Henry V, Great Expectations, All the King's Man, The Heiress* (from Henry James' *Washington Square*), *King Solomon's Mines, A Place in the Sun* (from Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*), *Ivanhoe, From Here to Eternity, A Street Car Named Desire, The Rose, Tattoo, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Room at the Top, Elmer Gantry, Sons and Lovers, To Kill A Mocking Bird, Beckett, Zorba die Greek, Dr. Zbivago, Romeo and Juliet, Tom Jones, a Clockwork Orange, Barry Lyndon, One Flew Over the Cuckoo'sNest, Apocalypse Now* (inspires by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*), *Tess, Sophie's Choice* and so on... What is more, since the industry approval implicit in these awards not only reflects a given film "quality" but also its popularity the latter being one of Hollywood's crucial yard sticks of the former." (Boyum : 1989)

Quite a substantial number of Marathi and Hindi novels have been converted into films these days. 'Natrang' is an excellent example of a successful film made out of comparatively less popular novel bearing the same title.

What is adaptation?

Adapting something means changing it, altering it, modifying it, deconstructing it for the purpose of preparing a screenplay. It also means cutting and simplifying.

Adaptation or the filmed novel is a specific genre in which a film is either based on a poem or a short story or a play or a novel. In the filmed novel, literature and cinema both overlap. In spite of the obvious similarities there are certain hidden differences that startle the filmmakers and the critics. These differences always prove to be problematic to the filmmakers. The basic difference between the novel and the film is in the form of certain distinguishing traits of both the mediums of expression. The novel is conceptual and discursive in form while the film is perpetual and presentational in form. The novel is a linguistic medium, the film is essentially visual (as music and dialogue reinforce the images and can be subsidiary lines in the total film composition). The governing conventions of each medium are also conditioned by different modes of production. The novel is supported by a small, literate circle and is produced by a single person 'the novelist.' The film, on the other hand, is supported by masses and produced by a group of artists called 'the production crew' and is restricted by certain cinematic conventions. One discovers, therefore, in the film version of the novel an inevitable desertion of 'novelistic elements.' As a result, the characteristic contents of language in the form of tropes are converted into the images of physical reality.

As far as adaptations are concerned it has been observed right from the beginning that second- rate novels make very good movies while great works of prose have produced films that have tumbled. The Variety Books of Movie Lists, edited by Spencer Beck, comments on the indecisive nature of the successful film adaptation thus:

"The cinema learned quite early on that basing films on established material from another

medium provided a pre-sold quality that often cushioned a picture's financial risks. And while films often stumbled with great works of literature, it sometimes scaled great heights with lesser work of prose." (Beck: 1994).

It should be noted that the success or the failure of a film made out of a novel doesn't depend on certain set principles of adaptation or a proven formula of adaptation. As a result it remains a difficult to transpose a great novel into an equally great film. Basically the form and content create great hurdles in the process of transposition. No filmmakers can guarantee the success of the film adaptation in spite of his/her expertise in the field of making the film adaptations enjoy certain sense of uncertainty as far as the box-office considerations are bound to evaluate the success.

Film critics and cinema aficionados are quite curious about this illusive nature of the adaptations. Simon John makes the point when he writes, "Nonetheless it remains true that great novels and stories make such sovereign use of their form - indeed, to a large extent, are their form- that any kind of transposition becomes a diminishment. It follows, then, the greater the fiction, i.e., the more its form and content are indissoluble, the greater the loss incurred by transposition. Here however, film comes through with another possibility: it can turn a mediocre novel or a story into a fine movie, precisely because what the writer may have been able to outline and adumbrate only in his prose, the filmmaker can flesh out and make filmically exciting by finding cinematic equivalents or better-than-equivalents without learning us frustrated or indignant over the verbal beauties that have been jettisoned" (John: 1970).

It should not be assumed that the worse is the book, the better will be the film version. Adaptation process here is not just the process of transposition or transfer but it ends up with the translation of the source material into the new and versatile medium. In this context it should be remembered that the great filmmaker remains to be more faithful to the film medium in which he has mastery. Hence the reputed filmmakers will not want to adapt anything pre-existent will want to establish in and with the medium, unhampered by

any considerations of fidelity to anything but his own cinematic intellect. And this can be an answer to the question asked while redefining the relationship between literature and film-The question is: should an adaptation be necessarily a lesser form because it lacks originality in its mainframe and must it means that the filmmaker has no scope to display his genius? Gold Boyum hits the nail on the head when she says "The rhetoric of fiction is simply not the rhetoric of film, and it's in finding analogous strategies whereby the one achieves the effect of the other that the greatest challenge of adaptation lies" (Boyum: 1989).

An intelligent filmmaker has to exert very greatly to put his \ her mark over the film in question. He has to decide upon the mode of adaptation befitting to the kind of film he tries to make out of the source novel. He has to honour the conventions of the cinema and perhaps neglect or wink at the niceties of the novel. Actually in the process of filmmaking the filmmaker does not convert the novel into a new form at his disposal. He even doesn't rely on the novel as a whole or novel in toto. There is every possibility that the film director might be completely unaware of the novel itself. The director may use just the paraphrase of the source-novel or even a one-page synopsis of the base novel. What he adapts is mere skeleton-like synopsis which is his interpretation of that novel. Here the film maker merely treats the novel as a raw material and ultimately creates his unique structure. That is why a comparative study which begins by finding resemblances in the source-novel and the film adaptation ends by proclaiming their differences. So finally there is no necessary correspondence seen between the excellence of a novel and the quality of the film in which the novel is transfigured in the process of adaptation. Under this situation it is quite natural that most of the novelists grumble about the lack of fidelity shown to their most revered novels.

In India the filmmakers had some different considerations in the past and those considerations disturbed the novelist in R. K. Narayan. He had to encounter similar experiences with regard to the interpretation of characters. The characters in the film were drastically changed. It can be concluded that R. K-Narayan, the creative writer had every

right to feel annoyed and humiliated at the tinkering and tempering done to his novel by the so called 'creative' filmmakers! R K Narayan case raised an important issue:

Hence the question: Is 'fidelity to the text' the only litmus test of an ideal adaptation?

The quest for fidelity

The novelist appears to be greatly confused due to the new medium. In the adaptation process the destruction of the novelistic features is unavoidable. In the fullest sense of the word 'Adaptation'- the film maker becomes not a translator for an already established author, but a new author in his own right. Balazs has established the relationship most clearly. He grants the possibility of achieving successful results in converting the subjects, story, and plot of a novel into the cinematic form. Success is possible because, while the subject, or story, of both works is identical, their content is nevertheless different. It is this different content that is adequately expressed in the changed 'form' resulting from the adaptation. A character along with his/her thoughts can be transformed into the new artistic context through the powerful means of emphasis- which again is expressed through the images in the visuals- in the making of the film.

In this context the filmmaker who undertakes the task of adaptation of a novel, according to Balazs may use the existing work of art (the novel here) merely as raw material and look at it in the perspective of raw reality. Balzaz's writes.... "the fully conscious filmmaker who sets out to adapt a novel may use the existing work of art merely as raw materials, regard it from the specific angle of his own art from as if it were raw reality, and pay no attention to the form once already given to the material. The playwright, Shakespeare, reading a story by Bandello, saw in it not the artistic form of a masterpiece of story-telling but merely the naked event narrated in it" (Balazs: 1952).

After the current vogue of adaptation and theatrical spectacle has run its course, the film will doubtless rediscover its central principles. What remains clear, however, is that the cinema continues to be at once the most mechanized and most spatially free of the arts. Machinery and imagination

continue to interact, each conditioning the other. Similarly, the film as a separate artistic entity against thematic and technical limits will undergo a significant innovation and that will affect the age-old adaptation convention. The Big screen, 70mm Multiplex screen, Mirror screen, and the Dome screen where the modern spectator enjoys film like *Gladiator*, *Matrix*, *Terminator I, II and III*, *Spider man I and II* and *Star war III* (The Revenge of me Syth). The element of sound is also responsible for the promotion of adaptations Big screen and Great Sounds like Surround Sound, Dolby digital and DTS need the raw material of epic and classic stature. In fact sound effects are about to overshadow the visual effects. Once the sense of surprise produced by the computerized images subsides, it is the sound that counts much in the modern film. Hence this may also affect the present convention of looking at the source novels for the sake of adaptations. Perhaps thematic and technical innovation can join to bring the cinema to the unknown point whatever the future development in the field of cinema; it is still true that cinematic will continue to be so. The film and the novel remain separate institutions, each achieving its best results by exploring unique and specific properties. At times, the differences tempt one to argue that filmmakers ought to abandon adaptations entirely in favour of writing directly for the screen. More often the very prestige and literary charm of the classics has an inhibiting effect, shriveling up the plastic imagination.

As long as the cinema remains as omnivorous as it is for story material, its dependence on literature will continue. The best one can hope for, then, is a minimal awareness of that metamorphic process which transforms pieces of fiction into new artistic entities and words into images.

Thus it can be positively asserted that Adaptation, being a hybrid product having totally different constitution, demands, by its nature a completely new set of parameters for the foolproof evaluation of Adaptation.

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