

THE GREY AREA BETWEEN BOOKS AND SCREEN ADAPTATIONS

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Avid bookworms tend to go through a book twice. Once via reading it, and once when viewing its television or silver screen adaptation. As the trend of book adaptations continues to grow, reading and viewing these stories have become something of a package deal.

However, one question needs to be asked: *How should book-to-film adaptations really be treated?*

The practice of creating film adaptations of books has been around since the late 1800s, with Georges Melies' *Cinderella* (1899) being the earliest possible example in the field as a six-minute long silent film. Film enthusiasts will also cite Erich von Stroheim's 9.5-hour-long silent film *Greed* (1924), an adaptation of Frank Norris' *McTeague*, as being the most popular from the early film adaptations.

Stroheim's work was initially a flop upon its release, due to MGM Studios axing over seven hours of the film's runtime prior to its screening. The final two-hour long cut of *Greed* (1924) was poorly received by audiences and critics alike, and ended up discouraging plenty of directors henceforth in attempting to adapt books into films.

So how did book-to-film adaptations eventually come to gain such solid footing in pop culture? In the book *Adaptation: Studying Film and Literature*, author John Desmond states that "...film is a pedagogical medium useful for introducing literary masterpieces in England, where generations of film producers have adapted the Great Books."

The evidence of Desmond's statement can be found in the widespread popularity of BBC's programmes adapted from literary classics penned by the likes of Agatha Christie, Jane Austen, Arthur Conan Doyle, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and many more.

In Bengal, filmmaker and writer Satyajit Ray received critical acclaim and won the hearts of many with his film adaptations of Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's *Pather Panchali* (1929) and Rabindranath Tagore's *Nastanirh* (1901). The aforementioned films and television programmes helped readers find solace in quality literary adaptations, and gave non-readers the ability to enjoy literature through cinema. The audience clearly responded well to their favourite novels being adapted for the screen, but only when they did justice to the source material: the original literary texts in question.

Here is where the never-ending debates stem from: whether or not the screen adaptation of a book succeeded in preserving the book's legacy. There have been countless cases of screen adaptations failing to impress the book's readers, from Ronald Joffe's critically panned adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) to Nikolaj Arcel's poorly received adaptation of *The Dark Tower* series (1982-2012).

While cinema buffs might get their fair share of on-screen drama and action, book readers longing for faithful representation are left feeling thoroughly disheartened with the mistreatment of their beloved works of fiction.

The distress caused by an insincere screen adaptation is quite palpable. As a reader myself, it hurts to see the legacy of a literary text that I'm so fond of being torn apart just for the sake of film studios maximising revenues.

However, despite my reservations, I also have to acknowledge the kind of effort put in by filmmakers to ensure maximum fidelity on their part when it comes to translating literary texts to comprehensible content on the screen. This particular feat is mostly complicated by the dialogues present in the original work of fiction. Filmmakers frequently struggle with adeptly recreating the kind of atmosphere built and the gravity exhibited by the words of a book's author. The original messaging, and the book's very essence, occasionally disappear in the translation from words to pixels.

There's also the issue with lack of details provided by the author of the book which leads the filmmaker to improvise using their interpretation of the original text. Every now and then, this is a tactic that pays off, as the filmmaker or director manages to improve on the source material, as seen in Netflix's

Shadow & Bone adaptation. In other cases, this tactic falls flat in its face, throwing the book's fan base into a furor, much like what the two *Percy Jackson* (2010, 2013) movies managed to do.

In the present day, we have been through over a century's worth of book-to-film adaptations. What has changed? Back in the day, filmmakers and directors were either testing the waters with literary adaptations, or earnestly trying to put forth their vision of what a timeless literary classic would look like on screen.

Cinema and television have come a long way since then. The primary incentive behind adapting a book for the screen is the original text's popularity amongst readers – a fandom, if you will. The adaptations don't necessarily exist to add to cinema, but to appease the fandom, thereby giving rise to a franchise combining the successes of both the book sales and the box office numbers. It is the numbers in a fandom that determine the fate of book-to-film adaptations now, making room for insincerity in production.

There are well-established authors by the likes of Stephen King, Dan Brown, and Jane Austen who have proven themselves to be bankable for all seasons in this new business, with almost all of their works being hastily adopted in the form of remakes and retellings repeatedly as per a formula. Even as I write this article, there's yet another *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation in the works, while a cheesy Wattpad fanfiction glorifying toxic relationships is being signed on as part of a multi-film deal purely because of the number of shares it received on the internet.

I have nothing against books being adapted for the screen, unless they're subjected to callous treatment at the hands of insincere filmmakers and directors. But I must admit, I have grown quite weary of the formulaic nature of it all. Advent of original content dries up, and the film and TV industries immediately turn to books as a safe option to keep the showbiz running. I mean, Reese Witherspoon practically built an entire production company out of it.

It's just that the marriage between books and cinema is on the verge of losing its spark. All I can do now is pray that they're not headed for divorce.

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