

The Voice Within the Visual – Adapting Literature for Film

Just as readers interpret books differently, so do filmmakers, foregrounding different ideas, angles or ways of thinking about character. Using three different examples, The Handmaid's Tale, We Need to Talk about Kevin and The Great Gatsby, Tionee Joseph discusses how and why some texts are more richly open to adaptation than others.

The Handmaid's Tale

Novel: Margaret Atwood, 1985

Film: directed by Volker Schlöndorff, 1990

Young woman Kate/Offred (Natasha Richardson) attempts to escape the oppressive, patriarchal Republic of Gilead where fertile women are used as breeders for the survival of the human race.

Atwood's use of a first-person narrative enables the reader to connect to the protagonist Offred's inner thoughts as she recounts her former life with her captured husband and daughter. Independent thought is banned in Gilead, and so lack of expression would be accurate representation of this dystopian world. However, there is so little speech and insight into the protagonist's mind in the film that we are too distanced to emotionally invest. In the novel, Offred narrates in the present tense and describes how the past blends into her present. Language is a significant feature of Atwood's novel: she describes Offred's repressed feelings that become cravings for intimacy and love. Schlöndorff decides not to employ a voiceover which is not essential, but perhaps what could have been used to convey these powerful, sensory memories is an integration of very short flashbacks; familiar sounds, touches, and sights that disappear in seconds to give the audience the same transient feeling.

Due to the style of writing, the structure of the narrative is non-linear; the order of events can be joined together as the narrator comes to them in her thought process. The film instead follows a chronological order, but because The Handmaid's Tale is not plot-driven, the pacing may seem to be slow to the audience. Offred offers sufficient explanations for the new radical ideologies and politics of the future era so that it can be fully understood by the reader. However, incorporating this into the film would mean an overly long running time and too much explanation, another hindrance to the audience's viewing experience. Richardson's Kate has been criticised for being dense, but her character in the book is very opinionated about those around her. She analyses their behaviour, categorising them into believers and non-believers, trustworthy and treacherous. This includes her employer's driver Nick – a possible spy – with whom she has a forbidden romance; this is not a main plot of the book, although the film maximises it for commerciality.

The novel's ending is undoubtedly open-ended:

Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers because it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.

As we are as unsure whom to trust as Offred is, we also have to decide on our own beliefs about what happens to her based on our interpretations of the novel so far. In spite of this, the film eliminates all uncertainty about Nick's loyalty and Offred's future. Nick helps her into hiding and in the final shot we see a pregnant Kate living in solitude in the mountains, with some hope that the current regime will be overthrown. Some would be grateful for this added closure which is absent from the book, yet others may consider this as unfaithful as it removes ambiguity – a central theme to the entire story.

We Need to Talk about Kevin

Novel: Lionel Shriver, 2001

Film: Lynne Ramsay, 2011

Right from his birth, a reluctant mother (Tilda Swinton) struggles to love her son Kevin (Ezra Miller), who later becomes a mass killer.

Symbolism is used frequently in Ramsay's film through various film techniques that connect it to Shriver's novel. This implies that it is essential to have prior knowledge of the novel in order to have a deeper understanding of the film. The film's soundtrack is composed of distinctly American country music which juxtaposes with the scenes of horror, but is used ironically as readers will be familiar with Eva's disdain of American culture. 'Mother's Last Words to Her Son' by Washington Phillips with the lyrics, 'you are leaving, my darling boy, you always have been your mother's joy,' is a notable recurring example. This choice of song also seems ironic given the protagonist's strained relationship with her son, although this foreshadows the end of the narrative when Eva shows a willingness to accept Kevin back into her life.

Furthermore, a mirroring technique Ramsay uses is also significant as Shriver insinuates how similar Kevin and Eva are, despite their ambivalent feelings towards each other:

He was watching me and I was watching me, and under this dual scrutiny I felt doubly self-conscious and false. If I found our son's visage too shrewd and contained, the same shifty mask of opacity stared back at me when I brushed my teeth.

Ramsay establishes this likeness at the start of the film by using a close-up shot of Eva washing her face in the sink which transitions into Kevin's reflection in the water. Moreover, in the prison visit scenes, Swinton and Miller mimic each other's body language at opposite ends of the frame, giving an impression of there being a mirror in between them. As we find out in the novel along with Eva, Kevin not only resembles her physically but she has also influenced his personality, opinions and ways of thinking.

Another advantage of the film medium is the ability to depict changes in time, which is appropriate for *We Need to Talk about Kevin* as Eva constantly shifts her narration of events from the present to the past throughout the novel. It is arguably easier to keep track of whether the older or younger Eva or Kevin is part of the action through signifiers such as costume, the actor's age (in Kevin's case) and haircut (in the case of Eva). These visual markers of time help us to align the characters' feelings and behaviour at various points in the narrative.

As the epistolary narrative is formed by Eva's perspective of events, we only know the external Kevin: what he chooses to show and how Eva interprets it. It is up to us to decide whether she is deductive and right to be cynical about her child, or simply paranoid and guilty. Likewise, in the film we only see what Kevin is like on the outside, when he is presenting himself in front of his mother and his father differently. Ramsay decides not to tell his side of the story or to really get inside his mind. This is not necessarily a negative point; unlike in *The Handmaid's Tale* we do not need to know his thoughts: to know them would eliminate the mystery of his character.

The Great Gatsby

Novel: F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1925

Film: Baz Luhrmann, 2013

Nick Carraway's (Tobey Maguire) self-made millionaire neighbour Jay Gatsby (Leonardo DiCaprio) resumes a doomed love affair with former girlfriend Daisy Buchanan (Carey Mulligan).

Luhrmann decides to give the film a heavily stylised look by focusing on the visual aspects of the story using lavish sets, costumes and locations to connote the excess of the wealthy living in the 1920s. The effect created is almost dream-like, linking it to one of the novel's main themes: aspiration towards the American Dream.

The *Great Gatsby* appeals because the reader enjoys voyeuristically peering in to view the lives of those who are ridiculed as being exotic, foolish and beguiled, and is grateful not to be a part of it. Introduction to *The Great Gatsby*, Collins Classics edition.

At the beginning of the film Nick establishes the context of the story by narrating over clips of Wall Street brokers, stacks of money, parties, high-rise buildings and alcohol production. The montage editing captures the accelerated pace and the frenzied lifestyle, and in this way the experience of the Jazz Age can be conveyed in a short space of time. Although footage and newspaper clippings are constructed, editing effects make them look old and grainy, giving an impression of authenticity.

As well as keeping some elements true to the period, some are also given a modern update such as the jazz-inspired soundtrack including contemporary artists such as Beyoncé, Lana Del Rey, and Florence and the Machine. This soundtrack is probably not too unlike what a modern audience would hear during their usual film experience and by choosing these instead of purely 1920s music, Luhrmann prevents the audience from becoming too distanced from a story set almost a century ago.

Through the medium of film, the audience can literally see through Nick's eyes; the next step up from reading his account of what he sees. There are many sweeping overhead camera shots from the sky

over the city and car chases that connote the whirlwind adventure that Nick is taken on. As he is drawn into Gatsby's world, so are we.

I was within, and without. Enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.

However, an issue with the novel's narration is its reliability. Whilst Nick oversees most of the action, he is not with Gatsby all of the time and so we do not have a complete view of his life as we would with an omniscient third-person narrator. At these points, the film can have more freedom and is less restricted. During the scenes in which Gatsby and Daisy are alone, Luhrmann increases the passion and the intimacy of the affair, making it a conventional film of the romantic genre that an audience expects to see.

On the other hand, Nick is not just a by-stander to all the action, he is part of it and has his own opinions that we find out in the novel and the film respectively. The film suitably uses a framing device; when we first meet Nick he is a recovering alcoholic, re-telling specific events to his doctor which implies the tragedy of Gatsby's story and his involvement in it has left him psychologically damaged.

Like Fitzgerald, Nick is a writer and the film acknowledges this by bringing the story back to the written form as he writes the account on a typewriter whilst he tells it. Sections of the dialogue are also shown on screen, and so it retains the visual style.

What Does this Reveal?

So why is all of this useful for an English student? The points raised in this article are examples of close-text analysis; a skill that demonstrates an ability to pick out smaller details of a text to show a more complete, overall understanding. When applied, it suggests active reading and an awareness of authorial intentions and context. Being able to argue for or against changes made through the process of adaptation shows critical engagement with the texts. When this leads to further exploration of other critical opinions, a more rounded argument can be created which is especially beneficial for writing essays, as it shows to markers that you can widen your interpretations of the primary text. So whatever you decide to read next or are assigned to read, if the film is also available to you, why not consider them both? You may find that one form of narrative works better than the other: that is now for you to explore.

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