SAMVAD E-JOURNAL
ISSN (Online) : 2583-8334
(International Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal)
Volume 2, Issue-2, April to June : 2024
Published by Rangmati Publication http://www.rangmatipublication.com/

"Harry Potter on Screen: A Critical Study in Adaptation Studies"

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ABSTRACT

The Harry Potter series has achieved the status of magnum opus for J.K Rowling with its widespread popularity. Its pop-culture status and global reach can be attributed to its transition from page to screen. The films not only garnered economic success but also made an enormous cultural impact. Now the process of adaptation is fraught with several challenges and complexities owing to the fact that the two mediums are essentially very different from one other. This leads to several changes and mutation vis-a-vis the source text. However, a common aspersion on the films tends to be them not being true to the original text.. This paper thus moves beyond the paradigm of equivalence in the novel vs films. It uses the theory of Seven Steps Typology by Philip Shafer to understand the nuances of film adaptation thereby delving into the questions of fidelity, mutation and equivalence.

Keywords: Harry Potter, adaptations, fidelity, equivalence, mutation.

Introduction

The Harry Potter film series is the brain-child of the renowned English writer J.K Rowling. The oeuvre of Harry Potter consists of seven books and eight films, produced over a span of decade. After the publishing of the Harry Potter series by Bloomsbury publication, Warner Bros showed an interest in adapting the book series. The directors Chris Columbus, Alfonso Cuarón, Mike Newell, and David Yates, brought to life the adventurous and magical journey of Harry Potter and his friends to the screen.The story revolves around a young wizard and his quest in defeating the dark Lord Voldermort, who robbed the young boy of his childhood by murdering his parents. The actors Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson and Rupert Grint achieved the mega status with these films. The rich story-telling and the stunning visuals made a significant impact on popular culture. While the actual figure is ever growing, an estimated gross box office business of the franchise is over $7.7 billion, making the "Harry Potter" films a monumental achievement in the fantasy genre and cinema history.

II

What is Film Adaptation Studies?

The history of film and adaptations is extensive and deeply intertwined. Since the advent of cinema, novels have consistently served as a wellspring of inspiration and content for filmmakers. An early example of such adaptation is the biblical recreations by the Lumiere brothers, including works like Vie et Passion de Jesus Christ and La Vie de Christ by Alice Guy-Blaché in 1899. Although the practice of

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adapting novels into films was prevalent, it was often deemed "impure," reflecting a similar sentiment of fidelity concerns in Translation Studies, where translation was once viewed as an act against divine will.

However, as films gained global traction, the practice of adaptation became more common. With the academic growth of Translation Studies, discussions on Adaptation Studies also emerged prominently. Defining Adaptation Studies, whether as a genre or a process, remains challenging. Kamilla Elliott's work, Theorizing Adaptation (2020), which spans over 300 pages, addresses this complexity. Elliott explains that adaptation encompasses various processes such as abridgement, appropriation, condensation, rewriting, re-rendering, remediation, and spin-offs.

In essence, adaptation involves the rewriting or rendering of a text within the same language or medium, or across different languages or mediums. This process includes modifying the original to suit new thematic or structural needs, align with the characteristics of the target language, culture, genre, or medium, and meet the expectations of the potential audience.

Regarding theories pertinent to Adaptation Studies, there is an apparent lack of a cohesive theoretical framework, resulting in analyses that often rely on subjective and value-laden interpretations. Shafers' seven-step typology offers a formalist approach to analyzing adaptations. His categories—Inclusion, Exclusion, Compression, Extension, Substitution, Re-sequencing, and Invention—provide a structured methodology for categorizing changes in cinema and understanding the rationale behind specific cinematic choices (Shafer, 76).

III

Following the aforementioned seven steps typology, the research paper will summarize Philip

Shafer's analysis of the same in his thesis “TRANSFIGURATION MAXIMA!: HARRY

POTTER AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF FILMIC ADAPTATION”. This paper will consider

the first book of the Harry Potter franchise “Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone” (1997).

This book was directed by Chris Columbus and produced by David Heyman. The book

showcases all seven elements of the typology, making it an interesting case study.

Inclusion

Since the novel is the shortest in the series at 223 pages, it was feasible to include numerous elements in the film adaptation. The movie incorporates most of the key characters, locations, events, and situations from Rowling's book. The main child characters in the movie are Harry Potter (Daniel Radcliffe), Ron Weasley (Rupert Grint), and Hermione Granger (Emma Watson). Additionally, the primary adult characters—Albus Dumbledore (Richard Harris), Severus Snape (Alan Rickman), and Voldemort—are present in the film. While adapting Rowling's books for the screen, some character details were altered due to the nature of filmmaking. For example, Harry is described in the books as having bright green eyes, but in the movies, he has blue eyes because Daniel Radcliffe, the actor portraying Harry, was allergic to green contact lenses. Attempts to digitally alter his eye color post-filming were unsuccessful.

Similarly, Hermione is depicted with bushy brown hair and large front teeth in the books. While the filmmakers gave Emma Watson, who played Hermione, bushy hair, they opted not to use prosthetic teeth. The prosthetic teeth hindered her ability to speak clearly, so they decided to let her use her natural teeth instead. There are always going to be differences in character portrayals between books and their film adaptations due to the distinct ways each medium tells a story. Filmmakers strive to make characters resemble their book counterparts, but it is not always possible to achieve an exact match, highlighting the inherent differences between the two forms of storytelling.

Exclusion

Some characters from the book don't appear in the movie, like Mrs. Figg, Piers Polkiss, Madam Malkin, Peeves the Poltergeist, Madam Pomfrey, and Professor Binns. Leaving out these characters doesn't change the overall story of the movie. The filmmakers either hint at these characters indirectly or decide they're not crucial to the plot and don't include them at all.

The movie doesn't show some places from the book, like Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, Flourish and Blotts, Professor Binns's History of Magic classroom, the Apothecary, the Eeylops Owl Emporium, or the secret harbor under the castle. Most of these places are shops in Diagon Alley. Not including them doesn't really change the story of the movie.

Compression

In Columbus' film adaptation, the Sorting Ceremony is streamlined and rearranged. Hermione Granger is called first, followed by Ronald Weasley, and then Harry Potter. The dialogue between Harry and the Sorting Hat remains faithful to the book, but after Harry is sorted into Gryffindor, the scene quickly ends with a nod from Dumbledore. The movie only depicts the sorting of five students, making the scene approximately four minutes long. The filmmakers likely focused on the sorting of key characters, with Susan Bones being sorted off-camera, allowing more screen time for Harry's interaction with Snape without missing crucial character introductions. This scene demonstrates how a film can retain elements of the source material while effectively condensing them. These acts of narrative compression showcase one of film's strengths: the ability to suggest much more than it explicitly shows. While a novel may take pages to describe an event, a film can convey it in seconds through various expressive techniques.

However, this should not lead us to automatically prefer the literary source over its adaptations. The precedence of a source text does not inherently make it superior, nor should adaptations be deemed lesser because they follow the original. Instead, we should recognize and value the distinct ways each medium—whether film, literature, or painting—achieves its effects and communicates its meanings.

Extension

In the film's depiction of the Quidditch match, much of the action from the book is still included. However, some parts are extended to build more tension for the audience and to emphasize the differences between the Slytherin and Gryffindor teams. One noticeable change is that in the film, the players fly onto the field instead of walking. This not only adds visual interest but also highlights the fast-paced and dangerous nature of Quidditch.

Substitution

In the film adaptation, there's a significant change in the detention scene involving Harry, Hermione, Ron, Draco, and Neville. In the book, they're caught out of bed because they were delivering a dragon to Charlie's friends, resulting in all four students receiving detention. However, in the film, they're seen by Draco while witnessing the birth of the baby dragon in Hagrid's hut. Draco immediately reports them to McGonagall, leading to all four receiving detention. The change from Neville to Ron being present at the dragon's birth in the film isn't just because Ron is a more prominent character than Neville. It's a consequence of compressing the narrative, as replacing the dragon delivery scene with a brief dialogue exchange in the film leads to this adjustment. Keeping Neville in the detention scene instead of Ron would have caused more storytelling problems for the filmmakers, requiring additional shots, sets, and visual effects, ultimately leading to a longer runtime and higher costs. So, from both a narrative and practical standpoint, Ron's substitution for Neville makes sense.

Re-sequencing

In the film, there are instances of event re-sequencing, particularly with classroom scenes like McGonagall's Transfiguration class, Flitwick's Charms class, and Quirrell's Defense Against the Dark Arts class. These scenes are often moved around within the film for various reasons: to provide comic relief, to create pacing contrasts, or to create a more cohesive narrative structure. While the rearrangement of these classroom scenes doesn't always achieve the intended effects, it's evident that the film embraces the strategy of narrative relocation to convey more story with fewer parts, similar to how it utilizes compression in adaptation.

Invention

At the very beginning of the film, there's a brief but expressive image that the filmmakers added, not found in Rowling's novel. After the Warner Bros. logo, the film fades in from black to show a single owl perched on a street sign labeled "Privet Drive," illuminated by a lone street lamp in the distance. John Williams' musical score adds to the eerie and mysterious atmosphere of the scene. This departure from the novel, starting the film at night instead of during the day, enhances the sense of strangeness and the unknown.The initial image of the owl on the street sign serves as more than just a marker for the Dursleys' house; it also acts as a visual metaphor for the entire film. On one hand, a street sign is a common sight in everyday life. On the other hand, owls have a long history of being associated with the mysterious and unfamiliar. Thus, this opening image hints at one of the film's recurring themes: the blending of the ordinary and the extraordinary.

IV

Conclusion

The seven steps typology offers an insightful framework for studying adaptations within the formalist strain. This approach is inherently descriptive, which allows researchers to move beyond the conventional value judgments typically associated with cinematic works. By emphasizing the process of adaptation rather than the final product, i.e., the film itself, this methodology encourages a more nuanced understanding of how adaptations are crafted. This shift in focus helps researchers transcend the simplistic paradigm of labeling films as merely "good" or "bad." Instead, it opens up a broader analytical perspective that appreciates the complexities and intricacies involved in the process of transforming

source material into a new medium. This approach enables a more comprehensive exploration of the artistic, technical, and interpretive choices that shape adaptations, providing deeper insights into the creative processes behind them.

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