



LITERARY TEXTS AND CINEMA SCRIPTS

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is many centuries old; cinema, just over a century young, has imitated its solder sibling unashamedly. Films that are based on books are legion. We humans love our stories and are wont to return to old favorites in their newer avatars. We seek and welcome new ways to enhance our sensory experiences. When Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1439, he created a brand new medium for recording and printing stories; stories which were hitherto passed only by word of mouth now had words and pictures. When celluloid became a fashionable medium in the early 20th century, the content for this medium had to be stories; stories which were hitherto seen only in the static print medium now had moving pictures. Like magnets, new media attract stories, telling and retelling them in black and white, in Eastmancolor, in digital formats and in whatever new form the future holds.

Thus far, romance and drama have been preferred over other genres for the text-to-script experiments. Although the Alistair Macleans and other adventure stories have also made some scintillating silver screen viewing! There is clearly a lot more beneath the tip of this iceberg.

AIM

This paper aims to explore a few aspects of the text-to-script process.

Why do books fascinate filmmakers and how faithfully do they reproduce them? What kinds of texts lend themselves best to filming? How does the script deviate and why? What typical dilemmas do directors face in the adaptation? Do screen dialogues replicate the speech in the book? How is the subtext relayed on screen? How does the script deal with the characters? What are the various types of adaptations? Is it just creative vision or is it a mission to popularize the book? Does the film increase the audience's interest in the book, and vice versa? Why are films rewritten as books?

We will view and review a few popular adaptations with respect to the original text. It will also examine one book and its screenplay in some detail.

THE STORY SO FAR...

Some stories transcend time and geographies; their appeal is enduring because it is universal (Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, for instance). It is repeatedly seen on paper, on stage and on screen. A strong personality based story, a biopic



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invariably vends its way from literature to cinema; a good example is the innumerable films on Mahatma Gandhi in many languages, drawn, no doubt, from the numerous books on and by him. A third type of ‘adaptable’ story is about cultures or struggles; Jawaharlal Nehru’s *Discovery of India* found cinematic expression in Shyam Benegal’s TV series *Bharat, Ek Khoj*. Is there a pattern? Perhaps.

Surely the fundamental reason that any filmmaker selects a particular text is that it speaks to him? Besides, a film has to have a story from somewhere. Why not a tried and tested one? The novelty lies in the changing medium. Technology is on a fast track; it can create whole new worlds in the studio, allowing the filmmaker his pick of fantasy, period drama, sci-fi or anything else. A book has to completely mesmerize the filmmaker, else how will good cinema be born?

1 The Immortal Classics

Be it a film or a book, it must engage from the beginning. The first frame of the film equals the first sentence of a book. Immortal are these first lines -

from *Pride and Prejudice* - “*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife*”

from *Anna Karenina* - “*All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.*”

In both the books, these lines of the omniscient narrator give the reader his

worldview. The stories then proceed to prove him right. **Why would a filmmaker do away with such powerful lines, the tested waters?**

In all versions of both films (and there are many), the first few frames validate the first line, and effectively set the stage for further the action and unfolding of characters. The films typically reproduce the book faithfully. A departure from this trend is Gurinder Chaddha’s *Bride and Prejudice* set in Amritsar, the US and London, with reduced characters and the Indian equivalent of Jane Austen’s dialogues.

No doubt, the box office figures would bear out the popularity of these stories each time they are brought to the theatres.

2 Bringing the Bard to the masses

In 1982, *Angeer*, Gulzar’s screen adaptation of *A Comedy of Errors*, appropriately, **paid homage to the bard** in the first frame. The audience laughed its guts out at the refreshing comedy, but there is no way of knowing if they reverted to Shakespeare post the cinematic experience. Vishal Bhardwaj’s Hindi films – *Maqbool*, *Omkara* and *Haider* (adaptations of *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* respectively) may well have sent some people scurrying back to Shakespeare. The script of the film trilogy has been published by Harper Collins.

Vishal Bhardwaj is a prolific text – to – scriptioner. He has transposed three of Shakespeare’s eponymous tragedies in



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unlikely Indian settings. The noble Macbeth becomes *Maqbool* the chief henchman of a Muslim ganglord. **The rich Urdu - Hindi dialect expertly supplants the bard's poetry, bringing into relief the anguish and guilt of Shakespeare's characters, just as he might have intended.** Othello the moor has become *Omkara* a bahubali, a local underworld kingpin. Bhardwaj's fluent rustic 'khariboli' dialect makes the transposition believable. The suspicion, the jealousy, the needless killing - all impact an audience, whether or not they have read the original play. The film can stand on its own. Shakespeare may not mean a great deal to a vast Indian population, but they have now partaken of his worldview.

Ralph Fiennes' *Coriolanus*, though conventionalized, retains the focus on the overriding pride of its hero.

*High melodrama, superb screenplay by John Logan! They eschewed the costume drama in favor of a more modern setting. Angry graffiti on the walls of the deathlike city speaks louder than the sparing dialogue that the writer has employed. The writer advances the plot through 24*7 News Channels, compressing and presenting the background action - the Roman uprising for grain, the attack of the Volsces on Rome and so on. The characters mouth the bard's words with no incongruity whatsoever; Aufidius' (played by Gerard Butler) "...potch at him in some way..." is an interesting expression of provocation; his "...will I wash my fierce hand in his heart"*

is consistent with the passion displayed by the character. Equally seamless was the dialogue delivery of the guests on a TV News bulletin.

[an excerpt of my review – *Coriolanus*
Adapted - on www.of-prose-and-poetry.com.]

The contemporization of the omniscient narrator or the fools and clowns of the Elizabethan stage into the 24-hour news channel was a masterstroke.

3 Pop Literature to Pop Films

Chetan Bhagat's books caught the imagination of the Indian youth and they were quickly transformed on screen by savvy filmmakers. There was no compromise on production values; however it was clearly **targeted at youth and the box office**. Traces of the characters from the original *Five Point Someone* have been retained in *3 Idiots*, but significant changes (the transformation of Ryan Oberoi into the Muslim Farhan, for instance) have been made with an eye on mass appeal. The Malayali novel-into-film *Chemmeen* ranks here as well. Written by T.S. Pillai in an unbelievable seven days, this haunting romance won its writer international accolades. The novel was translated into many international languages; the film came out in 1965. There was talk of a sequel, which filled the writer with anguish, for surely it would be the death knell of the



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elegantly balanced tale. The recent trend of film ‘franchises’ is another way to kill a good story; e.g the cannibalization of the truly humorous ‘*Pyar ke Side Effects*’ into the lugubrious ‘*Shaadi ke Side Effects*’.

4 Special Effects

Fortunately, all new text-to-script and script-to-script trends don’t spell doom. With VFX adding value to films at reduced costs, there is no end to experimentation. The 3D version of *A Christmas Carol* (2009) is old wine in a really cool new bottle. Robert Zemeckis rang in Christmas cheer with this ‘holiday fantasy drama film’ – the cash registers were set ringing as well. The 2010 *Alice in Wonderland* goes beyond Lewis Carroll into snappy contemporary dialogues and situations. Helena Bonham Carter as the irascible Iracebeth, Queen of Hearts-cum-Red Queen is unforgettable. Her face is a digitally enhanced, exaggerated heart shape and her lipstick forms a perfect little red heart on her lips. Both the 1951 version and the 2010 version were made by Walt Disney films, the genre remained fantasy and, each time, they amalgamated elements of Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. **Tim Burton wrote the screenplay for the 2010 production. He presents a continuation of Alice’s adventures, not written by Lewis Carroll; he takes the adventure tale further.**

5 Epic Ventures

A good story unfailingly works. **Epics, especially, have a tried and tested plot.**

Filmmakers expect it to work. In India, the Mahabharata has worked every time, in all avatars. Film makers have circumvented the censors by only hinting at (and not expanding upon) Draupadi’s polyandry and her abject humiliation in a royal assembly full of men. The highly textured Mahabharata has sometimes been reproduced faithfully; it has also been recast in a contemporary format. The 19[]..film *Kalyug* and the more recent *Rajneeti* are examples. Using a corporate war setting and political conflict setting respectively, the screenplay reduces the number of characters to fit it into the 2hr 30 min package. *Kalyug* even began with a male baritone explaining the family tree, quickly acquainting the audience with the complicated web of family relationships. These were trendy, slick films, remembered as much for their borrowed plot as for the filmic elements like composition of frames, expert editing, well rounded characters and even the casting. *Kalyug* received the Filmfare Award for the Best Film, that year. History equally inspires great novels (*Gone with the Wind*) and their equally grand cinematic adaptations.

6 The Story and the Hero

Strong characters and stories ensure long-lived popularity. As early as 1971, *Tere Mere Sapne* was modeled on the Citadel by AJ Cronin. In the 1980s, in *Kaala Pathar*, one of the most powerful scenes was borrowed from Joseph Conrad’s Lord Jim. A disgraced captain of a ship walks past jeering crowds with his cap low on his forehead. He later retreats to an island and



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helps the natives and comes to be revered as Lord Jim... similar to Amitabh's character Vijay in *Kaala Pathar*. The plot though relies hugely on the real life Chasnala Tragedy. Thus *Kaala Pathar*, an ambitious film and a definite deviation from meaningless family drama, relied on a strong plot and well defined characters. On the other hand, we have an *Aisha*, a frothily made *Emma* –it just did not work. The character simply did not translate well.

7 Script to Text

In an interesting reversal, a film may be rewritten as a book. *Sholay*, a popular Hindi film of the 1970s has been reborn as a graphic novel. Is it for the same reason that people have recoded the Mahabharata in a hundred or a thousand tweets? One could facetiously call it for pleasure or for money. Pleasure for the older generation who were entranced by the first ever 70mm cinemascope film; money for the filmmaker who targets the children who do not want to really watch a 3 and a half hour film that their parents rave about. **Classics are increasingly getting a new lease of life through graphic novels.**

The text-to-script transformations recorded here are a fraction of what is trending the world over. Google will provide the list while we proceed with analysis.

ANNA KARENINA : A CASE STUDY

There are 12 film versions of Anna Karenina, in at least five languages. We

shall consider some aspects of the 2012 version scripted by Tom Stoppard, and directed by Joe Wright.

What typical dilemmas do the filmmakers face in the adaptation? What advantages do they have? The screenplay and the vision of the director determine the success of an adaptation. The visual medium allows for multiple layers to be projected simultaneously. Pages and pages of expatiation can be compacted in a single frame with effective use of light, background sound, costumes, props, dialogue and movement of characters. Production design - the entire artwork –is crucial to the skilful transition of text to screen.

Anna Karenina, a 1759-page novel, reproduced verbatim, is the sure-fire plot for eight-hour exhaustion. Clearly, the script must work magic. The 1935 film version was only 95 minutes long, suggesting that huge chunks of the book were not part of the script. The 2012 Joe Wright film was 139 minutes long, suggesting that both, the 198 page script and the shoot had paid due respect to Mr Tolstoy's vision.

The story, in a nutshell, is about Anna, wife of a Russian nobleman Karenin in St. Petersburg, and her tragic love affair with Count Vronsky. She visits her errant brother, Stiva, in Moscow, to patch up things between him and his wife Dolly. Stiva's friend Levin loves Dolly's sister Kitty, who loves Count Vronsky. But Anna ends up



meeting Count Vronsky and falls irrevocably in love. She is discarded and then taken back by her standoffish husband, but she dies after giving birth to Vronsky's daughter.

CINEMATIC DEVICES

1 Title Overs

Tom Stoppard has scripted in title overs to connect his short sequences.

TITLE OVER:

**FEBRUARY 1872
POKROVSKOE, KONSTANTIN
LEVIN'S ESTATE
300 MILES SOUTH OF MOSCOW:**

This makes for easy transition from Pokrovskoe to Moscow (which is the next sequence of shots).

2 Resequencing – protagonist is introduced early

Anna introduced very early, through exciting suggestion that establishes an aura about her.

INT. (ST. PETERSBURG) — DAY

CLOSE— Pretty fingers put on several rings, and then pick up a Fabergé jade paper-knife to slit an envelope and withdraw a letter.

TITLE OVER:

**ALEXEI KARENIN'S HOUSE, ST.
PETERSBURG
400 MILES NORTH OF MOSCOW**

In the book she appears only in Chapter 18, around page 140; in the script, on page 8. The book waxes eloquent about Stiva, Dolly, Levin, Vronsky and Kitty and their interrelationships, the films flits quickly from one to another within 27 pages of script; maybe a half hour into the film, the relationships are established.

3 Casting

Anna's description in the book is -
In the elasticity of her movements, the freshness and the unflagging eagerness which persisted in her face, and broke out in her smile and her glance, she would rather have passed for a girl of twenty, had it not been for a serious and at times mournful look in her eyes,....'

This description demanded a vivacious, attractive actress; the actresses who have played the part at various times are Greta Garbo, Vivien Leigh, Sophie Marceau and Keira Knightley (2012), all with enviable filmography and epic roles. Joe Wright's Anna is spontaneous and passionate.

4 Costumes

The vibrant details in the novel give it a cinematic quality. Costuming becomes easy.



A gesture translates the moment brilliantly in a few screen seconds.

From the book -

‘It was one of Kitty’s best days.The black velvet of her locket nestled with special softness round her neck. That velvet was delicious; at home, looking at her neck in the looking glass, Kitty had felt that that velvet was speaking.’

From the filmscript -

Kitty and her parents enter the ballroom and are received by their hosts.

Everything has come together for Kitty—her dress, her hair, her skin, her moment. She radiates happiness.

Anna is described equally deliciously, and the film does complete justice to the sartorial distinctions.

Stiva has a long session with the barber to groom his side whiskers; it establishes him as a handsome ladies’ man, quite in love with himself. And the director allows his audience to gently laugh at the pretentiousness of it all.

5 Dialogue

This description (of Kitty) precedes the famous dance scene. The book devotes two chapters and 15 pages to the ball. It demands from a discerning reader acquaintance with the quadrille, the mazurka and the waltz, and the significance of proposing one, and not the other, to a young lady. The film makes

no such demands, instead it focuses on the emotions of the characters. Stoppard speaks through a character to let the audience know why mazurka is special.

countess nordston :

He’ll dance the mazurka with Kitty, you’ll see. I call the mazurka the now- or- never.

6 Production Design

Most of the film was shot in a studio outside London. All art forms including painting and puppetry, were used to effectually create the Imperial Russia of the late 19th century. ‘Setting the stage’ acquired new meaning.

7 The Auteur Director

Anna’s discomfort and subsequent dance with Vronsky is conveyed in a few telling lines of the script and translates to four minutes of footage.

‘Anna and Vronsky dance slow, they dance fast, gaily, solemnly, gazes locked.

Others are noticing too: Countess Nordston, Princess Shcherbatsky, and eagle-eyed matrons. Anna, oblivious, has found a release in herself.’

A half-sentence from the novel – ‘they felt themselves alone in that crowded room’ – takes up a full minute of a 4 minute dance sequence. The other dancers are kept motionless and then it’s just the two of them for those few seconds. The director thus



succeeds in establishing the attraction between the two.

Joe Wright also blends stage and cinematic conventions. Anna moves freely through the hangar like structure of the London soundstage which is first done up as her son's bedroom, the train to Moscow in the next shot and finally, Moscow station itself. The impact lingers.

CONCLUSION

In the text-to script process the filmmaker may choose to highlight only a few aspects. His personal touch makes his version of the film distinct from the many others. There are no set rules. The film maker may borrow an idea and develop it, may transfer the story frame by frame or take it to a different level with his treatment of it, employing cinematic devices to flesh out the subtext and enhance the flavor.