



From Page to Screen: Directors' Choices



A director has many choices to make when adapting a novel to fit the requirements of the movie screen. Both time and money force directorial decisions. A novel might take fifteen to twenty hours to read; a movie must fit into a space of two to three hours. The reader supplies the visual effects, the props and the characters through her or his imagination; the director must pay for all these out of a budget. The director must, inevitably, make choices to fit his or her interpretation of the novel into the narrower scope of a movie. Given the fact that a director will make changes when adapting the original, it is instructive to analyze the specific changes she or he chooses to make. A director's choices both depend on his or her interpretation of the original text and affect your own understanding or interpretation of the text.

Director's choices can range from casting choices to changes in time period to changes in the plot and dialogue. Changes can be divided into five types:

- Point of View,
- Chronology,
- Deletions/ Omissions,
- Additions, and
- Changes/ Substitutions.

Additionally, a director, working in a visual rather than print medium, has different tools than an author. Where an author's symbolic tools are words, the director's are

- Lighting,
- Colour, and
- Camera Technique.

M. Night Shyamalan, for example, chose to use the colour red as a visual symbol throughout his movie *The Sixth Sense* to denote moments when his main character was closest to being revealed as dead. In *Sophie's Choice*, Alan J. Pakula uses a soft filter to designate moments when the main character is at her most reflective, immersed in her creation of a past that never was. In *Saving Private Ryan*, Steven Spielberg chooses a red lens filter and many closeups, Dutch tilts, and water spots on the camera lens in the opening scene to communicate the horror of battle. In *Goodfellas*, Martin Scorsese uses Dutch tilts and other crazy camera angles as he follows the characters in through a passageway, foreshadowing the manic insanity of their behaviour.

Preparing to write -- Analyzing the film

After reading the novel completely, view the film adaptation. Based on the themes or issues you have identified in the novel, identify eight to ten choices made by the movie's director that have an impact on the meaning created by the film. Use the guidelines below to help you organize your thoughts.

Considerations for novel/ film comparison

Point of View

1. Who is telling this story?
2. What is the narrator's agenda?
3. How does the difference between narrative technique in film and in print affect the presentation of themes or issues?

Chronology

1. Does a change in the time frame (either in duration of events or in order of events) cause us to pay more attention to a theme or issue than we would have in the original text?

Deletions/ Omissions

1. How did the missing episode or detail shape our understanding or emotional response to the character or situation in the novel?
2. Does the omission diminish or erase an important theme?
3. How does the omission change the novel's original emphasis?
4. How does the director's omission change our attitude to characters and the issues that they face?

Additions

1. Does the addition make up for or replace a missing scene?
2. If so, why was the change necessary?
3. What secondary themes or complexities of an issue are lost?
4. Does the addition reinforce or emphasize something that was only a minor suggestion in the original?
5. If so, what has been cut from the novel to make room for the addition?
6. What issues or elements have been lost?

Changes/ Substitutions

1. Have several characters been rolled into one?
2. If so, how does the difference affect your response to the character?
3. Has a character's gender, age, or race been changed?
4. How does the change affect your understanding of the issues or themes originally presented in the novel?
5. Has the novel's major setting (either in time or place) been changed? If so, what viewpoint is served by moving the novel's events to an alternate environment?

Lighting, Colour, Camera Technique

1. Are certain moments marked out with unusual colour or lighting intensity?
2. What might be the symbolic effect of the special treatment?
3. Do you notice the director using high or low camera angles to diminish or enlarge the viewer's perception of a character or setting?
4. In what ways are the viewers responses guided by these technical treatments?
5. Does the director use close ups or long shots to emphasize particular moments?
6. How do these techniques add meaning to the visual moment?