

**A Galaxy of Critical Insights Into  
Comparative Literature**

**J. SAMUEL KIRUBAHAR  
R. SELVAM**



**Virudhunagar Hindu Nadars'  
Senthikumara Nadar College (Autonomous)  
Virudhunagar – 626 001  
Tamil Nadu, India**

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# THRICE REMOVED FROM REALITY: A COMPARISON OF THE BOOK AND FILM ADAPTION OF *THE BOOK THIEF*

ANGELINE SORNA

Film adaptation is reimagining a literary narrative. Plato in his theory of Mimesis says that 'Idea' is the ultimate reality and any art that imitates this idea is twice removed from reality. Movies and films, though as independent art forms, have their own place in popular culture, film adaptations of books continue to stay in the lower rungs of the hierarchies of value that privilege literature over film. In analysing the literature and film narrative of *The Book Thief* and focusing on the issue of adaptation from one medium to the other, the paper examines the divergence and the confluence of the two media forms – visual and textual. In order to discuss the novel-film distinctiveness and affinity, the paper draws attention to various aspects of the film medium and its fidelity to literary narrative.

The interconnection between writing and visual proves to be an interesting and ancient one. Even as early as the Middle ages, before the invention of the printing press, reproduced by hand, books themselves served as artistic artefacts with illuminations decorated with gold and bright colours to portray entire scenes. Blake painstakingly adorned his poetry books with illustrations, paintings and engravings and in later period many famous novels like that of Charles Dickens were illustrated. Till date, graphic novels and comic books receive immense popularity and continue to ignite the imagination the readers. The concept of the literary text serving as a visual object has sometimes been suppressed, but not for long as this connection has been brought to the fore with the rise of cinema, the interaction of writers with film and the screen adaptation of literary texts.

Since the invention of movie pictures, countless books have served as the sources for films. As it is almost impossible to bring in all the nuances of a book into a movie, and as it may take much running time to portray the entire story as presented in the book, the director may be forced to consider Compression and Selection with regard to the narrative in adaptation of the book. This sometimes leads to omitting subplots, entire characters being discarded and sometimes the endings are subjected to Narrative Resolutions that unclutter the complexities of novelistic prose. For practical reasons the film adaptations are invariably subjected

to elision or interpolation which in most cases evoke the contempt of the readers and critics alike. Studies of adaptation tend to privilege literature over film in two ways: By arranging adaptations around a strong authorial figure, they establish literature as a proximate cause of adaptation and by organizing themselves around canonical authors, they establish a presumptive criterion for each new adaptation. Professor and critic Robert Stam in his introduction to the book, *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* indicates that studies of screen adaptation have tended to inscribe hierarchies of value, privileging literature over film and he suggests eight reasons for this:

1. Anteriority equates with seniority (literature is the older form);
2. Dichotomous thinking leads to a sense of literature and film in conflict with each other;
3. Iconophobia (a prejudice against the visual arts);
4. Logophilia (a corresponding inclination towards linguistic forms);
5. Anti-corporeality: the idea that 'seen' is 'obscene';
6. A myth of facility: films are easy to make and to consume;
7. Class prejudice;
8. 'Parasitism': that film 'preys' upon the original literary text.

In Robert Stam's *Literature through Film* (2005), specific literary works and literature in general continue to be stipulated as touchstones. In film adaptations the most expected quality in reviews and film discourses is "faithfulness". Character and Narrative are the two most important elements that reflect fidelity, closely followed by dialogue, location, setting and faithfulness to the 'Spirit' of the text. Adapting a book into a movie is more likely to remain a gamble, for the screen adaptation is always judged twice: once as a film in its own right, and once against the film-watcher's own experience of the novel or play that has been adapted. Critics are divided in their opinion regarding the subjectivism of this approach. Art and film critic Sarah Cardwell in her book *Adaptation Revisited* opines that viewers and critics should bracket off the source text entirely and treat adaptations as a film genre or mode, rather than in comparison with a literary 'original'. A correlative of the issues of what and how a literary text is adapted is the question of authorship: "whose text is this?" This remains a difficult question to answer as there are theories as that of Roland Barthes' famous pronouncement, "the birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the Author", is a call to decentre the 'author' from the production of textual meaning and thereby undo presumptions of the author's importance and literal 'authority', as well as suggesting that the text itself

is not an 'original' artwork fabricated from the author's consciousness, but a product of language and of other texts. Another school of critics feel that screen adaptations do not work in a cultural vacuum but the film or television version dramatises the literary text in intertextual relation to other, prior adaptations of the same or similar texts.

The challenges faced by a film adaptation crew are multiplied manifold when the story is based on abstract or difficult-to-picturise narratives on sensitive themes. It becomes a herculean task when the source book revolves around war and other unimaginable, inhuman destruction like the Holocaust. Though occasionally movies like 'Schindler's List' handle adaptation sensibly to create a successful production, most of the directors find it a challenge and this is the kind of predicament the makers of the movie adaptation, *The Book Thief* find themselves in.

*The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, an Australian author, was published in the year 2005. Winner of many prestigious prizes, the book has been translated into 40 languages and has stayed in the best seller list for more than a decade. Described as 'Extraordinary, resonant and relevant' by critics and reviewers, the book tells the story of Leisel Meminger, a preteen girl living during the troublesome times of the Second World War. The book gives the German perspective of civilian survival and hardship during the Third Reich. The narrative is unconventional in structure and non-linear in arrangement. Poignantly narrated by Death, the story shuttles between past and present weaving a tale of love and human goodness, even in the bleakest of times.

The story begins when Leisel is nine years old and devastated by the death of her brother and separation from her mother. She is sent to live in a foster home with kindhearted Hans Hubermann and his sharp-tongued wife Rosa. Along with the struggles of adjusting in a new environment, the traumatised little girl experience nightmares for months till Hans comforts her and teaches her to read. Starting with *The Grave-digger's Handbook* she has taken from the cemetery where her brother was buried, they read together many more books that open to Leisel a world of beauty and meaning. Through the story of Max Vandenburg, a Jew who hides in the basement of the Hubermanns, the author simultaneously chronicles the miserable plight of Jews under the Third Reich. An unlikely friendship cements Leisel and Max together as they relate to each other's nightmares and their common hatred for Hitler. Leisel's obsession for books grows

as the story progresses and she doesn't hesitate to even steal a book or two from the Mayor's library. Understanding her passion, Max makes Liesel two books about their friendship, both of which are reproduced with illustrations in the novel. Just as Liesel begins to settle down in her new life, her foster father is recruited to a dangerous mission in the army as a punishment for publicly showing sympathy to an old Jew on his march to a concentration camp. Max is captured soon after and taken to the concentration camp at Dachau. Liesel loses hope and begins to disdain the written word, having learnt that Hitler's propaganda is to blame for the war and the Holocaust and the death of her biological family, but Ilsa, the mayor's wife encourages her to write. Liesel writes the story of her life in the Hubermann's basement, where she miraculously survives an air raid that kills Hans, Rosa and everyone else on her block. Liesel survives the war and so does Max. Their pure affection and friendship shine through the storms of destruction, loss, pain and agony, offering hope and belief in the goodness of man.

In 2013, *The Book Thief* was adapted into a movie of the same name by British Film Director, Brian Percival. The movie was a commercial success winning prestigious awards but proving the adaptation theorist like Robert Stam right, the adaptation pales out to be a mere skeleton in comparison to the rich and complex literary narrative.

Critics and theorists of screen adaptation like Seymour Chatman, Brian McFarlane and Robert Stam focus on narrative as a means by which the filmic and literary texts can be compared. Narratological approaches focus on how narrative is structured, on how the underlying chronology of events is told to us, in what order and by what means; and also might consider character actions, or setting as narrative functions through which a reader makes meaning of a text. Prof. Porter Abbott in his, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, defines narrative as the representation of an event or series of events. As an old adage goes that Death and War are friends, it is not a surprise that Death serves as the narrator of a war story. Markus Zusak has effectively used Death as a narrative device in the book to assemble the fragmented story of Liesel. Death- the narrator doesn't remain a featureless cardboard, a 'Flat character' or an emotionally neutral one-dimensional figure but serves more than a standard first person narrator by constantly acting and reacting to and interacting with Liesel. In *The Book Thief*, the narrative is interrupted with distinct micro narratives, observations and comments about characters and events. These interruptions might be described as

'embedded narratives' or a story within a story, framed by the larger narrative. In the movie adaptation the narrator's voice is heard only in the beginning and the end robbing the story of its mystical atmosphere.

In the book Zusak uses effective structural devices in crafting the narrative like Prolepsis (Flash Forward) and Analepsis (Flash Back) to create suspense, anticipation and sometimes a sense of foreboding. The narrative is not chronological but as Death cannot be bound by time frames and occupies a continuous present in the lives of humans, the non-sequential narrative discourse only reflects this fact of life and adds to the effect. In the movie the story moves in a chronological and linear pattern offering no complex yet delightful effects.

After narrative, much importance is given to the character by adaptation critics. In the book the author offers a wide array of characters that are full of life, vigour and motive, both good or evil. The characters are portrayed in a way that they evoke a multitude of emotions in the reader. The Hubermans are presented as seemingly very different characters but with a common love for the weak and vulnerable. Along with Leisel, the readers too are soothed with Hans Huberman's accordion music and warm silver eyes and terrified by Rosa's constant swearing. In the movie, though the cast is well chosen, the characters fail to produce any distinct emotion on the viewers. Neither Leisel nor Max is made to look stricken, afraid, dirty and hungry as portrayed in the book. Whole characters like the two adult children of the Hubermann's, neighbour Frau Holzappel, Victor Chemell and Arthur Berg are removed from the movie plot rendering the story lifeless. The mayor's wife Ilsa, with her involvement with Leisel goes through a spiritual recovery and emotional healing in the book which is not given importance in the movie.

The setting of *The Book Thief* is the small and fictional town of Molching, just outside Munich, Germany. Molching is pictured as being on the way to the concentration camp Dachau. Himmel Street, where the Hubermans live, is where much of the action takes place. The movie gives a fairly faithful picture of the setting that succeeds in transporting the viewers to Swastika decorated German streets of 1940s, though sometimes the small town with its rosy-cheeked children and snow filled streets create an idyllic setting belying the reality and horrors of living through one of the most difficult times of history.

The plot of the movie has been altered in innumerable places and this considerably changes the storyline and makes the movie lacklustre.

melodramatic moment letting Rudy Steiner, Leisel's friend die in her arms. The book refrains from such excesses and presents war and the Holocaust without having to be overdramatic.

Many events and occurrences like the apple-stealing escapades of Leisel and her friend Rudy, imaginary boxing matches Max keeps having in the basement with the Fuhrer, Hans trading his cigarettes to buy books for Leisel, Hans getting whipped for trying to give an old Jew a piece of bread are completely omitted in the movie version.

Prof. George Bluestone in his *Novels into Film* says that the determining specificities of each medium – literature and film – mean that the two cannot really be compared. In adaptation, he argues, 'changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium.' He suggests that although the two media involve 'ways of seeing', literature's reliance upon a 'mental' image and film's use of a 'visual' image construct a fundamental incompatibility between them. However, it is important to stress that literary texts were, and continue to be, a primary source for narrative material in for cinemas, as Bluestone himself acknowledges: 'the moment the film went from the animation of stills to telling a story, it was inevitable that fiction would become the ore to be minted by story departments.'

The Holocaust, the murder of eleven million people who did not come under Hitler's concept of an ideal society including six million Jews, remains an unprecedented and brutal crime that shook the world. The pain of living through the Holocaust times and surviving the Nazi atrocities was an ordeal that survivors could never effectively narrate in words or art forms as they fail to find metaphors that can explain their pain and loss. Philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno painfully



that "there can be no poetry after Auschwitz". Though notable books are found on the Holocaust, the highest authority is the authentic life writings of the victims and survivors like journals, autobiographies, memoirs, semi-fictionalizedographies and the least recognition is given to imaginary fiction by who were "never there". Holocaust survivor and activist Elie once said that "there can be no novel on Auschwitz". Markus being an Australian writer who never experienced life under the e has described in the book falls into the last category of writers Holocaust. Though, to an extent he succeeds in reminding the not to forget the brutalities by creating a story that pivots around me of human goodness and transporting us to the life under Nazi ;, the literary narrative does remain twice removed from reality and n adaptation on the book fails to capture even the poignancy, life irit of the book and presents a mere shadow of the book stays thrice ed from reality, thus all the more ineffective. Proving all the tion critics who believe in the supremacy of the literary genre above nematic one right, the film adaptation of *The Book Thief* pales to ificance as it has a heart but lacks the soul.

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