



THE QUESTION OF INTERPRETATION: UNDERSTANDING ADAPTATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *STORY OF YOUR LIFE AND ARRIVAL*

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Abstract: Since the dawn of cinema, filmmakers have sought to present great pieces of written text onto the big screen. It is the most popular form of the amalgamation of literature and visual arts, though not always a successful endeavor. This study aims to analyze the adaptation of the Academy Award-nominated film '*Arrival* (2016)' directed by Denis Villeneuve from the short story '*Story of Your Life* (1998)' by Ted Chiang to understand how literary text can be turned into a cinematic text and the difficulties faced by the filmmakers in their attempt. This study draws from the concepts of adaptation presented by the screenwriting guru and story consultant Robert McKee in his book '*Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*' to examine the process of adaptation. Both the short story and the film tell us about the arrival of an advanced extraterrestrial species while, in the subtext, really making it about ourselves, i.e., humanity. The changes made by the director and the screenwriter make the story fit the mold of cinema. This is in accordance with Robert McKee's concept of adaptation: the aesthetics of the screen often demand reinvention of the story. This reinvention and reinterpretation results in the expansion of the conflict and the themes and makes the film more relevant.

Index Terms: Adaptation, Visual Storytelling, Literature, Cinema, Arrival, Story of Your Life

I. Introduction

Throughout the history of cinema, many filmmakers have attempted to turn a monumental work of literature into a feature film or a TV show. The famous examples of successful film adaptations are *Gone With the Wind* (1936), *Harry Potter Series* (2001-2011), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), *The Hunger Games* (2012-2015), *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Life of Pi* (2012), *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1962), *Fight Club* (1999), *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), etc. But more often than not, filmmakers and screenwriters have failed to turn a written text into a successful and rich cinematic text. Adaptation is a tricky business. A screenwriter may think it easier to write a screenplay based on an already well-written novel or play since the matter or content is already there. But in reality, adaptation is far from easier because most of the time the written work is so well written and well suited in its own art form that its content will lose its effect if it is presented in any other form. Hollywood story consultant and

screenwriting guru Robert McKee writes in his book *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* that,

The attempts to adapt 'pure' literature fail for two reasons: One is aesthetic impossibility. Image is prelinguistic; no cinematic equivalences or even approximations exist for conflicts buried in the extravagant language of master novelists and playwrights. Two, when a lesser talent attempts to adapt genius, which is more likely? Will a lesser talent rise to the level of genius; or will genius be dragged down to the level of the adapter? (McKee 367)

In contrast to a novel or a short story, cinema is an audio-visual art form. Cinematic language isn't a verbal one; it uses images and sounds instead of words to convey information and emotions. A novelist, in the pursuit of storytelling, is preoccupied with the inner world of his protagonist. He subtly explores and expresses the thoughts and feelings of a character and projects poetic images into his readers' imagination. A playwright's area of interest is personal conflict, i.e., the conflict between the protagonist and his immediate surroundings. To convey this personal conflict, the playwright exercises his right to create poetic dialogues. In a play, the actors convey their emotions by loudly and artfully uttering these dialogues and with the help of dramatic gestures. However, according to McKee, "Film gains great power in nonverbal communication. With close-up, lighting, and nuances of angle, gestures and facial expressions become very eloquent." (McKee 366) While the novel is the perfect art form to portray inner conflict, and the play is the most suitable medium for dramatizing personal conflict, the cinema specializes in the portrayal of extra-personal conflict. McKee contends,

The unique power and splendor of the cinema is the dramatization of extra-personal conflict, huge and vivid images of human beings wrapped inside their society and environment, striving with life. This is what film does best, better than play or novel. (McKee 366)

Hence, he states, the first principle of adaptation is: the purer the novel, the purer the play, the worse the film. But this obstacle can be dealt with if the filmmaker or the screenwriter possesses a sound understanding of literature and the difference between the effects and purposes of distinct art forms. To remedy the problem mentioned above, the cinema artist must reinvent and reinterpret the written text to turn it into a cinematic text of equal or surpassing value and impact. He must make certain tweaks "to tell the story in filmic rhythms while keeping the spirit of the original." (McKee 368) Cinematic texts cannot exist mentally. Their existence must be physical. Therefore, the filmmaker must find ways for the concrete and physical representation of what is abstract and psychological in the written text.

II. Analysis

It is interesting to look at the Academy Award-nominated science fiction film *Arrival* (2016) from the above-mentioned points of view. Directed by the Canadian filmmaker Denis Villeneuve, the director who, in 2010, successfully adapted into film Wajdi Mouawad's tender yet haunting play, *Incendies* (2003), it is a feature film adaptation of a short story by the American writer Ted Chiang named *Story of Your Life* (1998). Both the short story and the film tell the story of a linguist, Louise Bank, and her illuminating encounter with extraterrestrial beings who have arrived on earth unannounced and uninvited. Both the short story and the film remain faithful to the spirit that pure and thoughtful science fiction is never just about aliens or other worlds or exciting visions of the future. At its core, hard sci-fi is about humanity; our hopes and fears, principles and behaviors. They both are the stories of characters trying to understand an alien species, but in reality, they are designed to let us further understand ourselves. Ted Chiang, the writer of the short story says,

To me, science fiction - it's not about special effects or giant battles between the forces of good and evil. Science fiction is about using speculative scenarios as a lens to examine the human condition. (Tucker)

On the surface, they both tell the story of an advanced alien species' arrival on earth and their encounter and brief stay with humans. But under that, in the subtext, it explores and lays out a number of themes representing and resonating with humanity, its nature, and its fears. Though gigantic and monstrous looking, the alien entities, called the Heptapods, in this tale aren't predatory beings who have come on this planet to eradicate or enslave humanity and make the planet their own. Though they are received as a potential threat, they are actually here to enlighten humans. The protagonist, Louise Bank - a linguist, is called to communicate with the Heptapods. While trying to establish a common ground for communication between two totally different species in their two radically different languages, Louise is presented with knowledge and dilemmas she hasn't either asked for or prepared for. She finds out that the Heptapods' approach to language is totally

different than humans. And as language is the ‘master-key’ to every other institution built by humans or any other sentient beings, the Heptapods’ understanding of everything else is also different. (Harari) Since humans perceive and practice language as something linear, their perception of every concept and every phenomenon is linear, i.e., moving from one point to the other. The Heptapods write their language using circular logograms with each part of speech like the verb, the noun, preposition, conjunction, etc. connected to each other in such a way that one part can’t be taken out of the sentence without disturbing the others and without dismantling the structure and meaning of the whole sentence. The Heptapods’ sentences don’t have a beginning and an ending. This non-linear approach to language has made the Heptapods’ perception of time unlike humans: they can see the future. Keeping in accordance with the controversial Sapir-Whorf theory that the mind restructures itself as it learns a new language, Louise begins receiving brief visions - glimpses of the future - as she starts learning the alien language.

This knowledge of the time to come presents Louise with the dilemma: whether to try to alter it or let it happen despite knowing what is coming. This is the principal theme that dominates both the short story and the film: knowledge vs free choice. In the film, the director, Denis Villeneuve, and the screenwriter, Eric Heisserer has made certain changes to amplify this theme. Michael Tucker, a filmmaker, and a YouTuber, mentions in his YouTube video *Arrival - Examining an Adaptation* that one of the three screenwriting basics is “emotional impact through choice.” (Tucker) In *Story of Your Life*, Louise understands and accepts with almost no struggle the Heptapods’ version of awareness, which doesn’t see free will and the future determined in advance as contradictory concepts as revealed in these lines:

The Heptapods are neither free nor bound as we understand those concepts; they don’t act according to their will, nor are they helpless automatons. What distinguishes them Heptapods’ mode of awareness is not just that their actions coincide with history’s events; it is also that their motives coincide with history’s purposes. They act to create the future, to enact chronology. (Chiang 137)

And,

Instead of using language to inform, they use language to actualize. Sure, Heptapods already knew what would be said in any conversation; but in order for their knowledge to be true, the conversation would have to take place. (Chiang 138)

And,

From the beginning I knew my destination, and I chose my route accordingly. (Chiang 145)

This absence of the protagonist making a conscious choice simply wouldn’t resonate with the audience of the screen. As a remedy in the film, Louise is made to choose consciously and clearly. In the short story, her visions tell her that her daughter Hannah will die in a mountaineering accident. The accident can be avoided and thus the impact of Louise’s choice to have a baby despite this knowledge is somewhat diminished. In the film, on the other hand, Hannah is going to die of an incurable disease, making her death an unpreventable event. This makes Louise’s choice to conceive Hannah replete with meaning and impact. It adds an extra dimension to the principal theme of the story. On the screen, the concrete visual manifestation of the protagonist’s choice matters more than it matters in the written text because unlike the written text the film doesn’t have the time or the means to elaborately describe the inner emotions and dilemmas of the character. Louise’s choice is concretely stated in these lines that contrast with those in the short story:

Despite knowing the journey and where it leads, I embrace it. And I welcome every moment of it. (Arrival 01:46:27-01:46:42)

And in the lines she says to her daughter:

I know something that’s going to happen. I can’t explain how I know it, I just do. And when I told your daddy he got really mad, and he said I made the wrong choice. (Arrival 01:34:13-01:34:30)

This is an excellent demonstration of reinventing and reinterpreting prose literature for the screen.

In terms of thematic expansion, Villeneuve and Heisserer have enlarged the canvas of the original short story to include more themes that are relevant in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The film beautifully weaves the ongoing discussions of the clash of cultures and the arrival of others, clearly alluding to the coming of refugees on the shores of western countries. It also points to the importance of communication done in the right manner and the dangers of miscommunication. In one such instance, when the Heptapods tell humans that they are here to give them a 'weapon,' humans mistake it as a threat. In reality, the Heptapods meant it as a 'tool.' This shows the importance of correct interpretation, resonating with one of the topics of the present study. This thematic undertone makes us perceive *Arrival* (2016) with a Bakhtinian point of view since it also depicts the language as the bearer of conflict. But then it goes on to overturn it, and in the end, the language or rather the knowledge of a new language becomes the resolver of conflicts. It is reflected in the film when Ian Donnelly, Louise's colleague, and a physicist, reads loudly the preface of the book written by Louise:

Language is the foundation of civilization. It is the glue that holds a people together. It is the first weapon drawn in a conflict. (*Arrival* 16:19-16:26)

Another principle of screenwriting, according to Michael Tucker, is "the need for immediate conflict and tension." (Tucker) Chiang has kept the conflict to a bare minimum and at the inner and personal level in his short story: it is in Louise's thoughts. There is no imminent danger of warfare between humanity and its unwanted, though intriguing, guests. Humans never come face to face with the Heptapods and their ships never enter the earth's atmosphere. Instead, the aliens send an enormous piece of glass to communicate with humanity. This just wouldn't do for on the screen. McKee says in *Story* that "the inner life can be expressed impressively in the film, but it cannot reach the density or complexity of a novel." (McKee 367) This is reflected in the words of the film's screenwriter, Eric Heisserer:

I can't have them spend a year in a room skyping with some aliens - this is not a film. And the first major change that I pitched to (Ted Chiang) and we brought to it was: they show up at our door. (Tucker)

In the film, nine alien ships enter the earth's atmosphere and loom over different parts of the world. And humans are invited inside those ships for the introduction and the exchange of information. This change increases the tension. It is trespassing; an immediate threat. It is something unknown at our door. It entails fear, conspiracy theories, and anarchy among humans. To increase the tension further, the director and the screenwriter also introduce a group of renegade soldiers detonating a bomb into one of the alien ships. It sends the aliens into the attacking stance. There is a lack of readiness to communicate with each other among humans, and that makes them miscommunicate with the aliens. The introduction of a quasi-fascist, war-loving, Chinese military general also makes the danger of war and destruction more imminent in the film. These choices expand the conflict, which is merely at the inner or, at best, the personal level in the short story, and make it extra-personal in the film. They take the short story and convert it into something which will find its place among a larger audience that is perhaps unversed in the nuances and subtle ways of literature. Coupled with the above-mentioned choices are the narrative changes in terms of structuring the plot. In the short story, Louise's visions are episodic and sprinkled across the length of the story. Therefore, the revelation of the real intention of the aliens, the power of their language, and what it could mean for humanity is gradual. The layers are peeled off one by one. While this method has its own beauty and use, and it will evoke a kind of pleasure particular to it, it won't please the audience of the screen much. That's why Villeneuve and Joe Walker, the editor, have put a montage of the birth, the growth, and the death of Louise's daughter at the very beginning of the film. It brilliantly deceives the audience into believing that those are the memories of the past and not the visions from the future. It results in a giant explosion of surprise and staggering information when the truth is revealed. The protagonist and the audience both come to learn about the truth and power of the alien language at the same time. The film takes on a very different form in the spectator's mind after that. In terms of structural choices, the film also contains a three-minute montage halfway through the film, which is focused on telling the audience information on the aliens. In the short story, that information is expressed through Louise's monologue with the audience. The film applies voice-over narration to accomplish this task. Coupled with screenwriting and editing choices, the somber cinematography and the haunting background score make *Arrival* (2016) more engaging, and they intensify the conflict and the tension.

III. Conclusion

When seen through the lens of Robert McKee's notions of adaptation, expressed in his book *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, the adaptation of the short story *Story of Your Life* (1998) into a full-length feature film is quite successful. Denis Villeneuve, the director, aided by Eric Heisserer, the screenwriter, and Joe Walker, the editor, has successfully converted the written text into a cinematic text. He has enriched the end result with thematic expansion and an added intensity of conflict through a number of narrative choices and structural tweaks. In doing so, the film doesn't wander away from the original themes and concerns expressed by Ted Chiang in his short story. On the contrary, it adds extra weight to them. The gloomy atmosphere, the haunting background score, the ambiguity, the brilliant acting by the actors such as Amy Adams and Jeremy Renner, and the core idea of the content of the tale combine to turn *Arrival* (2016) from merely a film or work of art into a cinematic text - ready for different interpretations. It also successfully tackles the challenge of expressing something, a short story, which excels in expressing the inner conflict of the character through a medium, a film, that is ill-suited for it. In McKee's words,

The challenge that great filmmakers have always accepted is to start with images of social/environmental conflict and lead us into the complexities of personal relationships, to begin on the surface of what's said and done and guide us to a perception of the inner life, the unspoken, the unconscious. (McKee 369)

This research concludes that *Arrival* (2016) and its makers have been successful in telling the story of its protagonist's dilemma by starting the film and making it about the entire humanity. Of course, in doing so they have taken their own creative liberties while remaining true to the spirit of the original text. It shows their conformity to McKee's idea of reinventing and reinterpreting the story for the screen. All this renders it an appropriate case study to examine the amalgamation of literature and visual arts.

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