

## Screen Adaptation: An Art in Search of Recognition

Sharaf Rehman<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*This paper has four goals. It offers a brief history and role of the process of screen adaptation in the film industries in the U.S. and the Indian Subcontinent; it explores some of the theories that draw parallels between literary and cinematic conventions attempting to bridge literature and cinema. Finally, this paper discusses some of the choices and strategies available to a writer when converting novels, short stories, and stage play into film scripts.*

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<sup>1</sup> Professor of Communication, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA

## **Introduction**

Tens of thousands of films (worldwide) have their roots in literature, e.g., short stories and novels. One often hears questions like: Can a film be considered literature? Is cinema an art form comparable to paintings of some of the masters, or some of the classics of literature? Is there a relationship or connection between literature and film? Why is there so much curiosity and concern about cinema? Arguably, no other storytelling medium has appealed to humanity as films. Silent films spoke to audiences beyond geographic, political, linguistic, and cultural borders. Consequently, the film became the first global mass medium (Hanson, 2017).

In the last one hundred years, audiences around the world have shown a boundless appetite for cinema. People go to the movies for different social reasons, and with different expectations. Some people find their role models in films, others find validation for their own beliefs and behaviors. In some cultures, the movies reinforce cultural values and in others, the movies encourage their viewers to question and challenge the existing mores and ideologies. Even without opening the debate on the cause-effect theory, one must admit that movies do have *some* impact and influence on their audiences.

## **Film Studies as an Academic Discipline**

Today, in most countries, one can find some form of formal study of cinema as an academic discipline. Film Studies as an area of study comes in many flavors and dimensions. Coursework in cinema can be found in business programs, social sciences, fine, arts, humanities, and institutions dedicated to the study of cinema as an art, a profession, and a craft. Cinema can be studied as a business activity in which the investors and entrepreneurs invest in making a product and hope to make a profit. From such a perspective, films are manufactured in film studios, are distributed into various markets, and are made available to consumers either in the movie theaters or through other marketing channels. Such an approach divides the business process into three main activities – production, distribution, and exhibition. Like any other business, investors use business models to predict audience size, seasonal trends, return on investment (ROI), and break-even ratios. Businesspeople organize, manage, and orchestrate the making and selling of films. Within the universities, business programs offer training in these aspects of film production.

Another approach treats film as an art form that combines the work of several types of artists such as actors, lyricists, composers, designers, and musicians. All these artists input their creative talent into the creation of the product – the film. These individuals acquire some of their artistry through formal training, but mostly through experience, and through studying the works of others. These artists are among the workforce of the film industry. Many believe that luck also has something to do with one's success as an artist. Sadly, to this date, there is no mathematical model to calculate or predict luck.

The social scientists (sociologists, social psychologists, and psychologists) study film as a social institution and try to evaluate its power, influence, functions, and responsibilities in society. This group studies the effects, and uses, of movies for their audiences. This group of academicians has filled libraries with empirical research and claims about the (mostly undesirable) effects of mass media in general, and films in particular. This group, however, is not engaged in the process of making films.

The literary approach to the study of cinema treats films as literature and attempts to *read* films as one would a novel or a poem. This approach dissects and analyzes films using the same tools and criteria that are used in literary analysis. This is the group that has developed theories about cinema and interpretations of the texts and visuals. According to these scholars, a common comparison between film and novel is done as the following:

Novel	Film
A novel is made up of several chapters.	A film is made up of several major scenes.
Chapters are divided into paragraphs.	A major scene is made up of several segments.
A paragraph has several sentences.	A film segment has several shots.
The sentences in a paragraph pertain to a common idea.	The shots in a sequence show various aspects of a single idea.
Sentences contain words.	Shots contain frames.
A sentence can be as short as one word.	A shot can be as brief as one frame.
The opening paragraph in a chapter describes the scene.	A scene begins with a Long Shot to establish the location.
A novel uses description to point to a detail.	The film uses a close-up to show detail.

However, these are forced comparisons.

The professional and training oriented institutions such as film schools and film academies treat filmmaking as a craft and assume the responsibility of training the technicians such as cinematographers, film editors, screenplay writers, and directors in the skills necessary in making films.

The present author holds that screenplay writing and adaptations are skills that one perfects through imitation, repetition, trial-and-error, and practice. Just as one does not become a competent tennis player or a concert pianist in a day, one needs discipline, commitment, guidance, coaching, and years of practice to become a writer overnight. For a film writer, it is also important to understand the requirements, possibilities, and limitations of the medium. Filmmaking is a collaborative process. It takes dozens, if not hundreds, of artists, craftspeople, and technicians to complete a film. A writer is an important part of the whole process, but so are many others. Historians of Hollywood can offer countless examples where the writers were replaced

mid-stream, or where more than one writer worked on the same film.<sup>2</sup> There are numerous examples of similar collaborations in the Indian film industry<sup>3</sup>.

The notion of taking an idea from the printed page and converting it into moving pictures dates to the very beginning of the invention of cinema. As early as 1895, the French filmmaker, Louis Lumière based his *Watering the Gardner* (1895) on a popular comic strip. Adaptation has been a part of the American movie business from the beginning of the movies in the US. One of the first American narrative films by Edwin S. Porter, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) was derived from a theatrical production. Adolf Zukor established Famous Players Film Company in the early 1910s to bring Broadway plays and literary classics to the American film audiences. In 1915, David W. Griffith adapted Thomas Dixon's novel, *The Clansman* as *Birth of a Nation*. From 1905 to 1915, the movies grew not only in popularity but also in their length. While most movies in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were between three and five minutes in length, by 1915 most were 20 minutes long creating a demand for longer stories.

### Adaptation of Literary Sources

As moving images progressed from a scientific novelty to a storytelling medium, the filmmaker tapped into literary sources for story ideas. Relying on the audiences' familiarity with plots and storylines of works by William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Emile Zola, Leo Tolstoy, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, Alexander Pushkin, Luigi Pirandello, and Selma Lagerlof, the filmmakers in Europe, the former Soviet Union, Japan, and the United States repeatedly turned to the works of the literary giants of their cultures and countries. As an illustration, there was a silent film version of *Frankenstein* in 1910, *Quo Vadis* was adapted for the screen in 1912, one of the children's all-time favorites, *Robinson Crusoe* was made into a film in 1913. The year, 1913, is significant as that was when the first Indian feature film *Raja Harishchandra*, also an adaptation, was released.

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<sup>2</sup> During the different stages of the development of *Gone with the Wind* (1939), several different writers including John Van Druten, Oliver Garrett, Ben Hecht, Sidney Howard, and Jo Swerling worked on the script; six writers (W. R. Burnett, Niven Busch, Oliver La Farge, Lillian Hellman, Stuart Lake, Dudley Nichols, and Jo Swerling) were credited for William Wyler's 1939 film *The Westerner*.

<sup>3</sup> Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar, as a screenwriting duo, have collaborated on more than 20 critically and commercially successful Indian films including *Zanjeer – Shackles* (1973), *Don* (1973), *Deewaar – The Wall* (1975), *Sholay – Embers* (1975), *Trishul – Trident* (1978), *Kaala Patthar – Black Stone* (1979), *Karanti – Revolution* (1981), and *Shakti – Power* (1982).

International classics *Don Quixote* and *Faust* were filmed in 1915. Several of Shakespeare's plays were also adapted as silent films.<sup>4</sup> Two of the most notable adaptations from the silent era are Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924) that was an adaptation of Frank Norris' novel, *McTeague*. Erich von Stroheim's original version of the film was nine hours long. He cut it down to five hours with a hope that the studio, MGM, and its head, Louis B. Mayer, would agree to release the movie in two parts. It was finally released as a 140-minute movie. David W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was a landmark adaptation based on Thomas Dixon's novel, *The Clansman*. The movie was 187 minutes in length.

The introduction of sound in 1927, compelled Hollywood to hire and import stage actors from Broadway, New York, and West End, the theater district in London, that could deliver lines, directors that could coach the actors in speaking their lines, and writers that could write scenes that contained not just action or title cards but also conversational dialogue. The result was a sudden overreliance on adapting stage plays and novels into movies. Some of the important adaptations from the sound era include *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Random Harvest* (1942).

In recent times, the collaboration between producer, Ismail Merchant, and writer, Ruth Praver Jhabvala has brought some remarkable literary works to the screen including *A Room with a View* (1985), *Maurice* (1987), and *Remains of the Day* (1993).

Plays by William Shakespeare and novels by Charles Dickens have been popular sources for movies not just in the U.S., but around the world. Filmmakers in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Japan, and the former U.S.S.R. relied heavily on the literature of their respective countries.

A recent analysis of top-100 American movies revealed that 55 of these movies were adaptations. The numbers were identical (56%) for the top-100 British movies. From very early on, the American film industry recognized the contributions of screenwriters that specialized in this type of conversion. Since 1927, Academy Awards [Oscars] have been given in the category: Screenplay adapted from another medium. This is in addition to the annual awards for writing an original film script.<sup>5</sup>

The filmmakers of the subcontinent have also relied on literature, religious mythologies (*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*), and folktale for their films. Dadasaheb Phalke's first full-length feature film, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), was adapted from the mythological character Raja Harishchandra (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2013). Some recent examples of the adaptation of novels into films include Dev Anand's *Guide* (1965) which was based on a novel, *The Guide*, by Pearl S. Buck; Guru Dutt's *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam*

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the silent versions were *Twelfth Night* (1910), *King Lear* (1910), *Richard III* (1911), *Winter's Tale* (1913), *Hamlet* (1913), *The Merchant of Venice* (1916), *Othello* (1922), *Taming of the Shrew* (1923).

<sup>5</sup> The terms "film script" and "screenplay" are used interchangeably in this paper.

(1962) that originated as a novel by Bimal Mitra; a dozen versions of *Devdas*, a Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel, have been made in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Works by Agha Hashar Kashmiri, Rabindranath Tagore, Krishan Chander, and Saadat Hasan Manto have a long tradition of being adapted into films in Mumbai, Lahore, Kolkata, and Dacca.

There are several reasons why the filmmakers around the world favor adaptations more so than the original scripts. First, it is still a general belief among the film producers, directors, and the stars (the players that can successfully launch a film project) that novels and short stories are the best sources of ideas and stories. The second reason is marketability. A bestseller holds the potential of drawing large numbers of audiences to its film version, i.e., a safeguard against financial risk and failure. The third reason is the perceived prestige of being associated with a literary work. Whatever the filmmakers' motives, adaptation is generally an easier entry into film writing than original screenplay writing.

Novels when converted into successful movies also become successful books. Every generation in the last seventy years has rediscovered Shakespeare through movies. Works of writers such as E.M. Forster, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and Jane Austen have found new readers as a result of adaptations. An often-disregarded side-effect of films: Movies can and do turn film viewers into book buyers and readers.

*Novelization* – the reversal of adaptation

When a movie becomes a commercial success, the producers may commission a writer to turn the film script into a book. Several books have been based on movies. Graham Greene's *The Third Man* (1949) was written after he wrote the film script. Erich Segal turned his movie script into a novel to tie-in with the release of the movie – *The Love Story* (1970).

When the producers, Harry Saltzman and Albert Broccoli, ran out of Ian Fleming's stories of agent 007 - Captain James Bond, they hired other novelists, James Gardner and Kingsley Amis among them, to pen James Bond books that could be adapted into movies. In 1998, when Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* was turned into a successful movie, the young viewers wanted to read the novel, but not the original 500-page novel by Dickens; the new generation wanted a shorter version that was closer to the movie. Hence a shorter version was created to tie-in with the release of the film. It may be true that the new generation only wants to read shortened fiction – some would argue that reading something is better than not reading at all.

Film scripts, original or adaptations, are neither meant as general reading texts nor can these, in themselves, provide a cinematic experience to their reader. A film script is derived from an idea, a news item, a short story, a novel, or a stage play. As such, a screenplay is not the *source text* but is fashioned on something else. A film script, however, serves as a blueprint from which a film will be constructed. The film can be treated as the *target text*; the screenplay is not the *target text*. A film script is neither literature nor film. Instead, it is the *inter-text*. Film scripts are formatted and laid out according to certain industry standards with page numbers as well as scene

numbers. Film scripts are written in the present tense and first-person plural form.

Reading the screenplay for *Othello* does not produce the same emotional response as reading Shakespeare's play; the script for *Devdas* is not the same as reading Chatterjee's novel; a script based on a short story by Somerset Maugham is the same as reading the story.

This is not to undermine the importance of screenplays and cinematic writing. Some of the most profound recognition of the importance of film scripts has come from film directors. Alfred Hitchcock remarked: "To make a great film you need three things – the script, the script, and the script." It has also been said that just as a stream of water cannot rise above its source, a film cannot rise above its script. The Japanese film director and screenwriter, Akira Kurosawa who directed 30 films in a career spanning 57 years, had the following on the significance of a film script (Lee, 2020):

*It costs a great deal of money to make a film these days. And it's hard to become a director. You must learn and experience various things to become a director, and it's not so easily accomplished. But if you genuinely want to make films, then write screenplays... it's only through writing scripts that you learn specifics about film structure and what cinema is.*

Elsewhere, Kurosawa, emphasizing the importance of a film script said (Cardullo, 2011):

*With a good script, a good director can produce a masterpiece. With the same script, a mediocre director can produce a passable film. But with a bad script, even a good director can't possibly make a good film (pp:123).*

### **Importance of Film Adaptation**

There is no definitive theory of film adaptation. Nor do the adapters have any standard tools to convert a source text into a screenplay. Past successes or failures are of no help. Each film project is unique and gets no help from one-hundred year-long tradition of turning novels, stories, and plays into films. There are no set procedures, models, rules, or guidelines – only opinions, and anecdotal tales of what has worked and what hasn't. To complicate the issue further, the audiences, the scholars, and the reviewers seldom agree on whether a film adaptation was a success or a failure. Each cluster has its favorite criterion.

Hungarian film theorist, Béla Balázs, held that any material provided by a novel was merely raw material for the screenplay writer, and the film script was an entirely new literary form (2011). The notion of "raw material" implied that the source text was a springboard and any numbers of variations were possible. This also meant that the novelist relinquished all creative control to the screenwriters who would retain what they thought useful and toss what they considered unsuited to cinematic storytelling. The adaptation,

according to Balázs, occurred in developing the screenplay and not during production.

Siegfried Kracauer (1997), argued that film was a 'visual' medium and whenever a filmmaker leaned on techniques such as voice over, or superimposition, it was a sign of failure of the visual imagination or the unsuitability of the material. Kracauer suggested that novels rooted in objective reality were better suited to the visual medium than the ones that dealt with mental and spiritual issues. Thus, John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is cinematic while Albert Camus' *L'Étranger* (1942) isn't. Kracauer went as far as to say: "*The redemption of the physical reality was the only true purpose of cinema* (1997).

Both, the novel and cinema have their limitation, yet, the two media share a common goal: it is to convey images (Morrisette, 1973). Literature relies on words to help the reader creates mental images, cinema, through providing images encourages the viewer to add more mental images to fill the missing details in a narrative. A reader uses the words to create images leading to emotions; a film provides the images to arouse emotions. Visual writers arouse the emotions through their words: the true genius of Dickens and Shakespeare. However, for a filmmaker, visual fidelity to the written text is neither necessary nor possible (Jean Mitry, 1971). A reproduction is an imitation; it may resemble the original art form; it can't replace it.

The aim of the screenwriter is not to reproduce the emotions aroused by the words of the novelist but to create visual cues that may provide a set of sensations for the film viewer. George Bluestone (1957) summed up the process by saying that an effective adaptation *paraphrases* the themes of the source text. Thus, faithfulness is not a required virtue in adaptation <sup>6</sup> Bluestone, agreeing with Kracauer, held that some novels were more visual and therefore better suited to the medium of film.

By juxtaposing different opinions, suggestions, and warnings issued by various theorists, one may be able to create a recipe for one's adaptation venture. The same recipe would most likely not work for all genres or, for different adapters. It is this very aspect of non-reliability in literature and cinema that makes every novel and every film unique. One could argue that it's a good thing we don't have a definitive theory of adaptation. Such a thing would have restricted the creativity of the screenwriters and adapters.

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<sup>6</sup> Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924) was a 9-hour long adaptation of a novel, *Mc Teague* (1899) by Frank Norris. The studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and the executive producer, Louis B. Mayer, took the film away from von Stroheim and released it as a 140-minute feature. Outraged, von Stroheim disowned the film and never saw it. The incident also inspired the director to engage in a fistfight with Mayer. Like the statue, *Venus de Milo*, with several of its parts missing, is still considered a classic, so is the film, *Greed* – often voted as one of the greatest films of all time.



To debate whether a screenplay is or isn't literature is of little value to the screenplay writers. Screenwriters and writers tackling adaptations are not theorists. They are working writers looking for practical solutions and workable models to deviate from or put a new spin on the ending of a novel. Screenplays and stage plays (except for plays by Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekov, and George Bernard Shaw) are not meant to be read as written texts. Screenplays are read by filmmakers and actors; stage plays are read by theater professionals and actors, and students of literature who are required to read and analyze these works.

Screenplays are not intended as literature any more than a blueprint for a house is intended as a work of art. Screenplays are the roadmaps for the directors to follow and construct their films. How much does an adapted screenplay owe to its source text, or how true it is to the original are irrelevant. No viewer has ever asked how faithful a film was to its script! Film theorists have shackled themselves by equating film with novel through labeling film directors as their 'authors', and confusing film technique as 'grammar' of cinema. The Russian filmmaker, Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein, in his *Film Form* (1969), linked film aesthetics to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel. He equated the visual descriptions in Dickens' works such as *Oliver Twist* (1837), *Dombey and Son* (1846), and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) to cinematic devices such as close-ups, dissolves, and montages in the American and Russian films of the 1910s.

The similarity between a novel and a film is that both are trying to make us see. The former uses words to arouse emotions; the later used images to the same end. For all practical purposes, the *grammar* of film consists of rules of visual composition, the placement of the camera, and assembly of various shots to show the narrative without disorientating the viewers. For instance, in a movie, a scene concludes with a fade-out; it is comparable to turning the page at the end of a chapter in a book. Claims such as "*a filmmaker is writing a film*", or one is using "*a camera lens as a pen*" are merely quixotic allusion.

Films are acted and shot in bits and pieces, and out of continuity. The process bears no resemblance to writing a novel or a short story. Creation of film images is the result of the collaboration between a cinematographer and his or her lighting crew, and folks that build and decorate the sets, the teams of hair-stylists, makeup artists, and costume makers that add to the visual 'look' of a scene in a film. To achieve the full emotional impact, the individual pieces of film are edited together according to established rules of visual communication. A film only takes on its shape once it is edited, scored, and music and sound effects are added to various segments. To say that a film is authored by one person is to deny the work of hundreds of technicians, crew members, actors, and musicians that contribute to the finished product.

While the debates over authorship of films, and the literary status of screenplays and adaptation remains unresolved, the motion picture industries' reliance on adaptations is unwavering. In any given year, more films are based on adaptations than original screenplays. The status of the adapters as writers

of literature may be under scrutiny, the demand for their craft prevails. For beginning screenwriters, it's important to learn the craft of weaving a narrative with interesting characters, linked subplots, supporting characters, and realistic sounding dialogue to propel their stories. It is equally important to be able to extract the essence of an existing source, select the visually potent scenes and characters to retell the story of 300-plus pages of a novel in a 100-page screenplay<sup>7</sup>. Commonly, three types of written texts are converted into movies – novels, short stories, and stage plays. Each type offers its advantages and challenges for a screenwriter.

## Novels

The biggest advantage of novels is that these are “pre-sold”. The viewing public is familiar with the success of a novel and its author. If a book has been a bestseller, the people that have read the book are likely to want to see the movie. The disadvantage is that the readers already know how the plot unfolds and how the story ends. Does one keep the same ending or does one change it? There are also challenges regarding the length. A novel may have as many as 100,000 words or may run over 500 pages. A film script formatted according to the industry standards contains wide margins and white space. An average film script is about 120 pages; around 25,000 words. The challenge is to fit a 500-page story into a two-hour film. A novel may have several main characters with many subplots. It may cover fifty years in the life of a family. The movie is going to focus on one individual and focus on a small segment of his or her life. It will include the key turning points and two or three subplots. Many scenes, locations, characters, and subplots will be dropped. In this selection and elimination process, one should forget about the author of the novel; instead, the adapter should think about the viewer. What would intrigue, interest, and keep the viewer from walking out?<sup>8</sup> Trotter (1998), condensed the exercise into three steps.

1. Read the novel to understand the story, the conflict, and the subtext.
2. Pick no more than 10 scenes from the book.
3. Develop an original screenplay from the story and the key scenes.

Another approach is to develop a new ending and write the final scene. The notion of *chasing the end* has some practical advantages. Once one knows how the story is to end, getting there is relatively easier. One may take the viewers on d-tours and tangents, but if one knows the destination, the journey has a direction and a goal. All subplots and supporting characters either try to hinder or assist the protagonist with achieving his or her goal. American writer, Joyce Carol Oates who is often described as “America’s

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<sup>7</sup> Generally, one page of a film script results in one minute of film.

<sup>8</sup> If an unhappy novelist is going to sue, she will sue the studio or the producer, not the scriptwriter.

foremost woman of letters” offered profound advice about story construction: *The first sentence can't be written until the final sentence is written.*

### **Stage Plays**

Most stage plays offer two advantages. First, these are written to last about two hours. This is close to the length of an average film. Second, stage plays provide several key elements that are needed in effective visual storytelling. Elements such as the three-act structure, a manageable number of characters, the bare essential subplots, and most importantly, the dialogue. When a stage play is converted into a film, most of the play's characters survive the transition; most of the dialogue remains intact. In Mike Nichols' 1966 film of *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* nearly all the original dialogue is used. In Richard Brook's, version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), all the characters are retained in the movie and most of the dialogue is used. The changes were to make the film's female protagonist more acceptable to the viewing audiences and the moral standards of the time.

The biggest challenge in adapting a stage play is to make it more visual. A stage play is confined to limited stage settings. In some of the contemporary plays, all three scenes take place on the same set, e.g., *Twelve Angry Men*, *The Deathtrap*, and most of Neil Simons' plays (*The Odd Couple*, *Goodbye Girl*, *Plaza Suite*, *Last of the Red-Hot Lovers*) take place on one set. A screenwriter must free the story from the confines of one set and move the action of the play to different locations. While new locations are added, the dialogue is rewritten or shortened to make it fit the visual medium. In many instances, the dialogue is replaced by action. Due to the distance between the audiences in the last rows and the stage, dialogue that is needed on stage may become unnecessary in close-ups. Reaction shots in a film can often replace dialogue that is essential on stage.

### **Short Stories**

These offer the greatest flexibility and creative opportunity to the adapter. While novels must be cut to fit the 120-minute requirement, a short story may only consist of 10 pages – hardly enough to fill the two hours. At least two options are available to an adapter.

1. Develop the backstory so the viewer learns how the character/s in the short story landed in their predicament. The short story becomes the destination.
2. Build the story onward from where the short story ends. The material and characters of the story serve as the building blocks for the development of a longer film. Here, the short story becomes the basis for the film.

The adapter would address questions such as where did the characters begin their journeys, whom they interacted with, what they did, and where they may have gone wrong? The answers to these provide opportunities to add new scenes, characters, and subplots. With the added

backstory, the adapter brings the viewer into the short story; the film may have the same ending as the short story, or it may have a different ending.

One may also combine the two strategies. In any event, additional material is going to be needed. In adapting a short story, the adapters, in many instances, develop an (almost) original screenplay. Ernest Hemingway's short story, "The Killers", has been made into movies in 1946 and again in 1964. In the 1946 version that ran 103 minutes, the first 11 minutes show the two hitmen arrive at a diner and tie up the two kitchen workers. The hitmen say they are there to wait for a regular customer of the diner, "The Swede", and when he arrives, they intend to kill him. The Swede doesn't show. The killers leave. One of the workers rushes to The Swede and informs him that two killers were expecting him at the diner. The Swede makes no effort to flee. He knows what's coming to him, he knows why, and he knows that running away will do no good as the killers will eventually track him down and kill him. This is the short story by Hemingway. This much in the film is a close adaptation of the original text. For the remaining 90 minutes of the film, new material was written by Richard Brooks and John Houston, which shows how an investigator trying to find and the beneficiary of the Swede's insurance policy discovers the Swede's past. Through flashbacks, it is revealed that the Swede was a professional boxer whose career was cut short by an injury. He got mixed up in a bank robbery and doublecrossed his fellow robbers. Those that were wronged sought revenge through hired killers. Through developing the backstory, the writers provided explanations and details to flesh out the characters and their motivations delivering a satisfying story.

In adapting Munshi Premchand's "A Game of Chess – *Shatranj ki Bazi*" Indian film directors, Satyajit Ray infused the political history of British East India Company's plotting for the takeover on India in his satiric parable, *The Chess Players* (1977). While the short story blames the fall of Oudh's king, Wajid Ali Shah, on his hedonistic excesses and a disregard for the common folks, the film squarely exposes the British desire to fatten their coffers by reneging on their treaty through ruthless maneuvering through their local operative, General Outram. Premchand's descriptions are converted into documentary-style narration delivered by Amitabh Bachchan. Ray added material to enhance King Wajid Ali Shah's character from a harem-happy sensualist to a more three-dimensional person by adding sympathetic qualities such as being religious, and a devout patron of poetry, dance, and music. He even dabbles into composing couplets. On one occasion, Shah asks his prime minister, "Why are you crying? Did General Outram recite some poetry or sing a song to you? Because only music and poetry can bring a real man to tears!"

The short story mainly offered exchanges of dialogue between the two chess players – Mirza Sajid Ali, played by Sanjeev Kumar, and Mir Roshan Ali played by Saeed Jaffrey. The subplots about their wives were added to enhance the characters of the two chess players. Ray, a native of Bengal, retained the flavor of the Mogul Urdu spoken in Lucknow by bringing

Urdu-speaking writers, Shama Zaidi<sup>9</sup> and Javed Siddiqi<sup>10</sup> to write the additional dialogue to fill the 115 minutes of the film. The magic of *The Chess Players* is not in its adherence to Lucknow's poetic Urdu or the details of the Mogul culture of the time but in its storytelling. It's not about two irresponsible noblemen or the intrigues and infidelities of their wives. It's a sad tale about the moral deterioration of a nation that lost its dignity and self-respect. The short story ends tragically as the two players engage in a swordfight over an argument about the game and suffer fatal injuries. For Ray's film, this would have been a lukewarm conclusion. He layered the film by hinting that the Shah's rule came to end without a single shot being fired; the only shot fired in the film is by Mir Roshan Ali who hits nothing.

Someone who has read the short story is still going to remain engaged in the film as it tells the "rest of the story" behind the fall of Oudh. A viewer knows of the coming of doom for the likes of Mirza and Mir. Whether they live or die in the film is irrelevant. The visual punchline in the film is the slow-paced march of the procession of the fallen king being escorted to prison as the two players nonchalantly settle down to play another game of chess – a war of pretend. This is visually a much stronger message than showing two fools bleeding to death.

While Premchand's short story offers a slice, Ray's film hands us the entire cake. *The Chess Player* serves as a textbook example of the creative potential in adapting short stories to film. It would not be unreasonable to state that more than 80 percent of the script for the Chess Players is original writing that retained the favor of its source text.

A word of caution for beginning writers. The temptation to turn a new Broadway play by David Mamet or Neil Simon or a best-seller novel by John Gresham or Stephen King may be strong, the chances are that such materials are often acquired by production houses or independent producers long before the opening of a play and before the hardback editions arrive at the bookstores. Often, while the original material is being developed, someone may be assigned to do a screen adaptation. Additionally, no

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<sup>9</sup> Shama Zaidi is a seasoned screenplay writer and dialogue writer with an impressive list of credits (*Umrao Jaan*, 1981; *Mandi*, 1983; *Zubeidaa*, 2001) and has worked with Bengali and Kannada directors including Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, and M. S. Sathyu.

<sup>10</sup> Javed Siddiqi is an Urdu screenwriter and dialogue writer with over 50 credits for storylines, screenplays, and dialogues. Siddiqi has collaborated with some of India's most prominent independent directors of the Parallel Cinema like Satyajit Ray and Shyam Benegal, as well as mainstream directors like Yash Chopra and Subhash Ghai. Some of his credits include *Baazigar* (1993), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1996), *Taal* (1999), *Pyaar Deewana Hota hai* (2002), *Humko Tumse Pyar Hai* (2006), and *Sadiyaan* (2010).

production house or producer takes the risk of reading an unsolicited screen adaptation. No agent would advise her client to develop a treatment for a novel on speculation.

If one has the urge, one should write an *original* screenplay to demonstrate the *skills* for writing within the three-act convention, building intriguing narratives and subplots, and interesting characters. Self-proclaimed artists are plentiful in London, Los Angeles, Rome, and Mumbai. Skillful screenwriters, now, that's a rare commodity. To return to the initial issue of whether there is a relationship between literature and film, and whether a film should be true to the novel – the answer could vary with every project. If there is a marriage between the literature and film, at best, it's an open marriage.

**About the Author (s)**

\* Sharaf Rehman, MFA, Ph.D., Professor of Communication, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

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