

# How hollywood has commercialized books and how this techniques is used by movie m...

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



## **Is the world of cinema a ‘ consumerist mosh pit’ (Sean Penn, 2012), dedicated to the art of making money since its inception?**

Literature has always played an important part in influencing the world of cinema, from *Great Expectations* (David Lean, 1946) to more recent adaptations, such as *The Hobbit* (Warner Bros, 2014), some of Hollywood’s most iconic and high grossing films started as well recognised books. However, whether this is simply a technique used as a guaranteed way to make money, through conforming to what the target audience already knows, or whether it is another artistic method of telling well known stories is to be debated. This essay will explore this theory and how filmmakers use this technique and “ move between the poles of crass commercialism and high-minded respect for literary works.” (McFarlane, 1996, p. 384)

Historically, fiction – both written, and on screen – has always been an important contributor in the world of entertainment, attracting audiences of all ages as a form of escapism, or a way for artists to express themselves. With over ten billion American dollars taken through box office sales last year (Pro Box Office, 2015), it is obvious that this industry is still prominent in the world, socially and economically. It is unsurprising that the two art forms would merge, and “[attract] critical attention for more than sixty years in a way that few other film related issues have.” (McFarlane, 1996, p. 381)

With two hundred and forty five adaptations, *Sherlock Holmes* (Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle, 1887) has the most novel to screen adaptations up to date (Ledwith and Enoch, 2012), from Sidney Landfield’s 1939 film, to the more

recent adaptation by Guy Ritchie (2009), starring Robert Downey Jr as the infamous detective, who, himself alone brings a large audience to the film. This well-known protagonist has been adapted in many different films and television series, bringing mixed reactions from critics, however, as stated by Roger Ebert (2009), " Every Holmes story is different and each one is the same." This reinforces the argument that production companies can rely on the safety of a well-known story to invest in, and, therefore, the promise of an already existing following to bring in money.

One of the main arguments in the theory of book to film adaptation, is Hollywood's censorship. In 1932, Theodore Dreiser's problems with Paramount were announced, as the censorship through the producers of the film were to the point that the only link between the two was the title. Dreiser claimed that " they could have had their writers fashion a movie script with a plot bearing only the vaguest resemblance to the original." (As cited by Maltby, 2000, p. 79). This censorship and adaptation of literature could argue that production companies would alter the original art in order to create something likely to bring in an audience, and therefore, money. This in turn, as argued by Dreiser, " spells the end of art, does it not?" (As cited by Maltby, 2000, p. 79).

One of the main culprits of censorship in adaption is Walt Disney and his infamous revisions of Children's and Household Tales (Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, 1812). However, many of the original stories these films are based on are rarely acknowledged, and the famous stories are adapted and censored in order to give a more positive message to children, and are

therefore thought of as works by Disney himself. This introduction of well-known stories aimed at children through the art of film, “ abdicated it’s rein over the children’s market,” (Biskind, 1988, p. 318) and gained a large audience of consumers who – still to this day – give their money to the company in return for a new artistic form of showing them the stories they know they love.

Disney’s work is still influencing consumers today, bringing in money through the infamous theme park Disney World, as well as merchandise aimed at children in stores worldwide. In cinema, Disney is gaining consumers through the most recent movie Cinderella (Disney, 2014), starring Lily James and Richard Madden, and taking a gross of over one hundred million American dollars, it is obvious that his legacy lives on through these films. This adaptation of the classic Cinderella (Disney, 1950) is an example of the argument that Disney is simply bringing back an idea which is already known and appreciated by many, even including the music from the 1950 original film, and adapting it to a modern audience, gaining a willing audience. The company was “ rolling out the quintessential version of the classic story,” (McClintock, 2015). This form of adaptation, encouraging an existing audience to view the film attracted a large consumeristic audience, was in turn a sure way of making money.

However, this theory of Hollywood commercialising literature through censorship within adaptation was challenged in 1957, by George Bluestone, who argued that not all movies “ debase their literary sources; instead, they “ metamorphose” novels into another medium that has its own formal

narratological possibilities.” (Naremore, 2000, p. 6). Bluestone argues his theory that although both are art, film and literature are “ as different from each other as ballet is from architecture.” (Bluestone, 1957, p. 5). He argues that to link the two art forms as one is an impossibility and that the two forms simply cannot merge, meaning in turn that any adaptations of literature into film are art on their own, and should be seen as this.

McFarlane (1996, p. 389) queries “ Who, indeed, ever thinks of Hitchcock as primarily an adaptor of other people’s fictions?” (McFarlane, 1996, p. 389) In modern filmmaking, the director of the piece is often seen as the artist, separate to the author of the original literature, having created visual art exploring the written narrative. This theory supports the argument that film adaptation is art, rather than a consumeristic technique.

This theory is countered in 1979 by Keith Cohen, who states that “ narrativity is the most solid median link between novel and cinema, the most pervasive tendency of both verbal and visual languages.” Cohen argues that the two art forms of literature and film can be the same if both carry the same narrative. Again, this counteracts Hollywood’s censorship, as, according to Cohen’s theory, this alteration of adaptations causes the link between the two art forms to be broken, and therefore, causes them to be separate.

Akira Kurosawa changed the opinions of many by expressing his artistic vision through classics such as Ed McBain’s *King’s Ransom*, which was praised as “ a model of its genre.” (Thompson, 1963, p. 30). However, many critics ignored the idea that the movie was originally literature, and felt that “ the McBain connection was incidental to the film’ aesthetic success, and

worth mentioning only in passing.” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 172), which in turn meant that the film was no longer seen as an adaptation, and instead was classed as a lone standing work of art, supporting Bluestone’s theory.

While Hollywood’s censorship of book to film adaptations is less of a highly publicized issue, the use of adaptation as a technique dedicated to the art of making money is still prominent in modern cinema. Sam Taylor-Johnson’s adaptation of E. L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2014) created controversy as it was unleashed onto cinema screens. This could create the argument that the reaction caused by the already known novel is what caused Taylor-Johnson to take on the film rights. However, as the book was based on the Stephanie Meyer’s well known *Twilight* series, and had already sold over one hundred million copies worldwide (Lane, 2015), this is an example of a collaboration started by “ the lure of a pre-sold title, the expectation that respectability or popularity achieved in one medium might infect the work created in another.” (McFarlane, 1996, p. 385),

As stated by DeWitt Bodeen (as cited by McFarlane, 1996, p. 381), “ Adapting literary works into film is, without a doubt, a creative undertaking, but the task requires a kind of selective interpretation, along with the ability to recreate and sustain an established mood.” This theory suggests that filmmakers must be loyal to the original literature, arguing against the censorship in Hollywood adaptations. This loyalty and alliance between filmmaker and author has become more prominent in modern filmmaking. In Alexander Payne’s adaptation of *The Descendants* (Kaui Hart Hemmings, 2007), Hemmings (2012) stated, “ Almost every line of dialogue was right

out of the book, ever sequence, the music I'd mentioned, the clothes they wore, the places they went to." This link between author and director supports Bodeen's theory, and links the two art forms as one.

Although this technique of adaptation has been around for centuries, it could be argued that that it is the more recent use of comic books and young adult fiction with cult followings as adaptations into high grossing movies is a sure way of gaining avid consumers, and therefore boosting box office sales, and bringing the love of cinema to a younger audience, in the last five years. For example (Smith, 2015), in 2012, six of the highest grossing films released into the cinema, including Avengers Assemble (Joss Whedon) and The Hunger Games (Gary Ross) were well known adaptations of books and comics aimed towards young adults.

One of the most famous book to film adaptations in the previous decade is the Harry Potter series (JK Rowling). These movies took in a total worldwide box office of over seven billion American dollars (The Numbers, 2015), proving the following this franchise attracted. With the seven book series having sold four hundred million copies by 2008 (Dammann, 2008), it is obvious that this franchise already had a cult following, ready to give their money to Warner Bros as each high grossing movie followed. It could be argued that by taking on this series, Warner Bros made the franchise more accessible to a wider audience, attracting those who were not appealed by the books, and giving them the stories. Although the last movie was released four years ago, in 2011, the franchise is still bringing money to Warner Bros even years later through theme parks and merchandise, still purchased by

consumers of all ages, as well as the promise of more films involved in the same franchise to be released in 2016.

In bringing the Harry Potter franchise to the cinema, Warner Bros' also explored a new technique to gain more interest and increase box office sales. This technique was splitting the final film in the series into two parts, and therefore gathering two billion American dollars in ticket sales, causing it to become the highest grossing film of all time (Lambie, 2012). Opinions on this technique vary amongst critics, as some believe that it increases the artistic value, giving the director more space to create the film loyal to the author, however it could also be argued that it is unnecessary, and is only another form of making money.

This technique was expanded to other franchises, such as Peter Jackson's The Hobbit (2012), a three movie franchise based on a single book. This idea itself caused more controversy with critics than the Harry Potter franchise, as it was commented that it was "strange that JRR Tolkien's slim volume, The Hobbit, is being given the two-movie treatment." (Lambie, 2012). This shock in audiences was due to the original three Lord of the Rings films (Jackson, 2001 - 2003), in which none were split into more than one movie, and yet all three movies brought in a total worldwide box office of over two billion American dollars. (The Numbers, 2015)

Another form of adaptation seen in modern day cinema is that of biographical narratives into film. In late 2014, The Theory of Everything (James Marsh) was released as a screen adaptation of Travelling to Infinity



(Jane Hawking, 2008) showing the life of Stephen Hawking. The film showed its success through three British Film and Television awards, and one Academy Award, as well as gaining over two million in box office sales in only its sixth week. (Bacle, 2015). This is another example of a film with a large audience before its release, as the infamous story of Stephen Hawking's theories and disease brought many interested consumers to theatre screens. However, Marsh states that his reasoning for creating the highly successful film was to show the intimacy of the relationship between the Hawkings. (Marsh, 2014). This could insinuate that, although the success of this film was inevitable, it was made for art rather than simply to make money.

E. H. Gombrich theorises that "one cannot dismiss adaptation since it is a face of human nature," (Andrew, 1983, p. 376). This argument relies on the theory of "matching." (Gombrich, 1960), in that psychologically, it is human nature to adapt one art form into another, "a tuba sound is more like a rock than like a piece of string; it is more like a bear than like a bird." (Andrew, 1983, p. 376), this argument counteracts that of adaptation being solely dedicated to the art of making money, and instead, is it simply another technique used by humans to compare art forms.

In conclusion, by studying and exploring existing theories behind the use of book to film adaptation in cinema and its consumers, there is no doubt that it plays an important role in the art of making money. However, it could still be debated that film and literature, although combined through the use of one to create the other, are two separate art forms, and that "between the

percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image lies the root difference between the two media," (Bluestone, 1957, p. 1) causing them to become lone standing art forms, and therefore they are not reliant on each other to gain audiences, and therefore to make money.