Millions of Eyes

In the realms of film adaptation to an original text, several factors come into play that inhibit the viewer’s ability to accurately define the director’s fidelity. The adaptation and expansion styles the director chooses, can easily be criticized by the observer based on their opinions. Readers can fine tune their judgements down to facts by putting on objective goggles. Through this process, it becomes easier to watch a film, such as 2081, derived from “Harrison Bergeron,” and clearly state it is an excellent adaptation.

The style in which Chandler Tuttle, director of 2081, adapted the original short story, easily influences the witness to measure the film’s faithfulness. There are a couple strategies filmmakers put in place; loose and close adaptations.

John Desmond, Associate Professor of English at Dutchess Community College and Peter Hawkes, Professor of English at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania explain the first method. The loose adaptation is relevant when “most story elements in the literary text are dropped from the film and most elements in the film are substituted or added” (Desmond, Hawkes 44). This case occurs during a pan of Hazel and George Bergeron’s living room with the TV playing a ballet. The blocking of the scene focuses on George rather than Hazel. This differs from the text where the plot is told through the wife’s eyes.

Although this adjustment was not incorporated in the original short story, it only enhances the plot. Since George’s character is described as more intelligent compared to Hazel, he has the
ability to offer more insight to the world around him. In this sense, Tuttle’s intentions of a so-called “bad” strategy, actually does wonders for Vonnegut’s input.

In contrast to the mood of a loose adaptation, the audience generally values a close adaptation because this style grasps onto the “important” content. Desmond and Hawkes define this as, “When most of the narrative elements in the literary text are kept in the film, few elements are dropped, and not many elements are added” (44).

For example, Tuttle depicts the film’s opening scene in dull colors of black and white with a mellow tone of music in the background. As the narrator begins to speak and explain what the world looks like in the year of 2081, the exact wording from the introduction in “Harrison Bergeron” is prevalent. This results in feelings of entitlement and connection because of prior understanding of the film. The setting therefore is brought to life on the screen “faithfully.”

In addition to the director’s choice to keep, add, or generate new material, the strategy in which the director expands the short story influences its adaptation value in the eye of the viewer. There are two different types of expansion methods which provide opposite reactions.

The point-of-departure strategy is depicted as a “bad” adaptation process. Filmmakers “drop most of the elements of narrative from the short story” (Desmond, Hawkes 128). It is clear that Tuttle strayed away from this method. Not only did he blatantly incorporate initial narration, but there’s authentic evidence dispersed throughout 2081.

The main plot line remains the same; Harrison, wanted from the government, works his way to prove the society’s wrongdoings of penalizing those with unique gifts. His audience is
intrigued, yet remains in fear of those in authority. All the while, his family is watching the protest. As in the short story, the film illustrates Harrison’s death as murder by Diana Glampers. Unfortunately, the community is forced to forget all events in order to keep governmental structure and sameness in society.

With this plot line in check, Tuttle’s expansion style is easily defined as the concentration strategy. This arrangement is generally perceived as “good” in the nature of the film. “The creator’s basis of the plot is derived from the initial text, is visible throughout the entire sequence of the film, and incorporates new ideas.” (Desmond, Hawkes 128).

As aforementioned, Tuttle plays off of Vonnegut’s primary intentions, and supplies his own flavors to enhance the display of the plot line. This is shown as the “bomb plot” is introduced. The audience member quickly makes notice of this alteration. Harrison not only is making his stance public on television as in the short story, but also interweaves the twist of an explosive threat. Although this detail was excluded from “Harrison Bergeron,” Tuttle complements Vonnegut’s notion by inserting the powerful tones of danger and apprehension.

Although the interworking of the creators have done an excellent job of fidelity, the audience members ultimately lead to the adaptation’s detriment. Interpretations are at the core of what individuals use to define a “good” or “bad” transformation. Every individual is predicted to express a plethora of differences in opinion to faithfulness. Each perspective of the original material inhibits the reader’s ability to picture other’s angles.
It’s difficult to determine if a film is well adapted based off of the individual’s following of the original story and the reader’s discourse. The story relates to the dry content of the plot and the discourse equals the expression of that content. So how can the observer accurately determine if 2081 is really a good adaptation or not?

The answer is found through Simone Murray, professor at Monash University, and her article, “Materializing Adaptation Theory: The Adaptation Industry.” Dr. Murray states, “Fidelity is an absolute value; once a source text has been “strayed” from, the critical measuring-stick of “fidelity” loses its evaluative rigor” (6).

It’s crucial to understand that the viewer subconsciously possesses a mental checklist of dropped or added materials to criticize the film’s fidelity. This habit enhances or destroys the plot depending on the conscious choice of the witness. Murray demonstrates the importance of watching film with an objective eye. The witness deciphers personal disappointment from creator’s intention by looking through a wiser lens.

A “good” adaptation does not have one strict definition. Every film will commit some fidelity, however, 2081 keeps the injustice to a minimum. Tuttle closely preserves initial elements from the text and only enhances the film experience through the relatively concentrated expansion method. As long as the individual remembers that the story is interpreted from a million eyes, they will be allowed to proclaim 2081 as an excellent adaptation of “Harrison Bergeron.”
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Works Cited


Desmond, John and Peter Hawkes. “Film Adaptation: The Case of Apples and Oranges.”
