To Interpret the Meaning of Films , *Or*, Levels of Interpretation

- Prof Saurav Chakrabarti, Dept of English, SVC

    When viewed from the angle of the layman, the main purpose of films is entertainment. They are essentially documents of their place and time. They are expressions of their maker's creativity. They tell stories about protagonists going through their experiences. But what are films essentially about? How do we analyse the content of a film?

    The commonest way to try to discuss is film is to talk about its plot or storyline: that is, discuss what happens in the film as a common viewer may see it. This is in form of a synopsis that any viewer who has seen or will see the film will agree with. This level of content evaluation may be called **referential**, as it simply refers to those things that directly happen in the plot, as well as some that may be indirectly referred to. This is the first level of understanding, and films generally allow deeper levels of interpretation.

- The second level of interpretation may be called **explicit,** as it involves the clear-cut communication of the film's ideas to the audience through dialogue, and other obvious elements in development of character. **Explicit** content evaluation therefore allows us to understand the "moral" of the story.

-

    The third level of meaning may be called **implicit**, as it is presented in a subtle and less obvious manner, but still may be inferred through close watching and deduction. Issues and ideas dealing with general human predicaments (rather than issues and situations of particular characters) are generally easy to deduce but may not be explicitly stated. Another important idea about this level of interpretation is that it is upto the viewer do decide the meaning, depending upon the viewer's own experiences and expectations.

    These three levels of meaning (referential, explicit and implicit) are based entirely on the film as a self contained independent work; that is, upon "internal " evidence. The fourth level consists of evaluating and finding a film's meaning by investigating the background of the film, of its makers as well as the place and time of its creation. This is treating the film as a "symptom" of its society, history and ideology, and may be termed as **symptomatic.** This interpretation tries to recognise the symbolic content, identifying characters and situations as *metaphors* for something else, or even seeing the whole story as an allegory.

*****

Adaptation and Appropriation

-   Prof Saurav Chakrabarti, Dept of English, SVC

What is Film Adaptation?

The simplest meaning of the term "adaptation" with reference to films is the" transfer of a work or story, in whole or in part, to a feature film." Although often viewed as a type of derivative work, recent developments by film critics such as Robert Stam consider adaptation as more of a dialogic process. The most common form of adaptation is the use of a novel as the foundation of a feature film. Other works adapted into films may include nonfiction(such as biographies), historical sources, scriptures, comic books as well as other films. Since the earliest days of film making, in nineteenth century Europe, adaptation from such diverse sources has been a common practice.

While adapting a "source" into a film, two very important and generally used techniques include Elision and Interpolation. Elision involves the process of removal of unnecessary or irrelevant data or details (from the point of view of the film and filmmaker) that the source may contain. The importance of elision may be understood through just one example: in 1924 Erich von Stroheim attempted a literal adaptation of a novel by Frank Noriss that resulted in his film Greed attaining and absurd length of over nine hours. Similarly Interpolation (addition of new character or incident not present in source) sometimes becomes necessary in order in order to provide desired message or in anticipation of target audience demand.

Some theorists have argued that a filmmaker should not be overtly conscious about his source, as a novel is a novel and a film is a film, and the two works of art must be viewed as separate entities. Direct transcription of a novel into a film is impossible and therefore focussing too much on "source accuracy" is absurd. Others argue that what a film does is to "change to fit" (literally, adapt), and so must be true to that aesthetic effect. Utility of adaptation is also found in meeting the demands of time and audience, amidst changing times and views, feel theorists. Another aspect of adaptation is inclusion of sound and music, as filmmakers are required to determine specific sound characteristics that subliminally affect narrative interpretation.

Common sources of Adaptation:

I)   Theatrical Adaptation

Perhaps the commonest source of adaptation to films is stage plays. Several Shakespearean plays have been adapted into films, including Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello etc. The first sound adaptation of any Shakespeare play was The Taming of the Shrew in 1929. It was later adapted as a musical Kiss Me, Kate in 1948 , and as a Hollywood production by the same name in 1953. It was again retold as a high school comedy in 1999 with the title 10 Things I Hate About You, and as an urban romantic comedy titled Deliver Us from Eva in 2003. Adaptation of Shakespearean works in language other than English may be seen in Akira Kurusawa's Throne of Blood (from Macbeth), The Bad Sleep Well (from Hamlet) etc. Vishal Bhardwaj created a Shakespearean trilogy with the names Haider (2014), Omkara(2006) and Maqbool (2003), from Hamlet, Othello and Macbeth respectively.

Similarly hit Broadway plays have been often adapted to Hollywood films.

Theatrical adaptation does not involve as many elisions and interpolations as does novel adaptation, but demands of scenery and possibilities of motion allow frequent scope for change.

II)   Television Adaptation

Television serials are also sometimes recreated into full length films. The X-Files may provide well known example of such adaptation. The American television shows such as Saturday Night Live have been the origin of a number of films such as The Blues Brothers etc.

III) Comic Book Adaptation

Comic book characters, especially superheroes, have long being adapted into films since the 1940's. Superman (1978) and Batman (1989) are two very successful movie adaptations of famous comic book characters. Blockbusters such as X-Men (2000) and Spiderman (2002) have led to dozens of superhero films.

The process of adaptation of a comic book into a film is somewhat different as these comic series often last several years (maybe, decades) and the emphasis of the filmmaker is to capture the essential spirit of the character rather than specific story requirement. Occasionally the original characters may be modernised or simplified.

IV) Radio Adaptation

Radio narratives sometimes provide the basis of film adaptation. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, that began as a BBC radio series, subsequently became a novel that was then adapted into a film.

V) Adaptation from Films

When the screenplay of a film is original it can be the source of novels and stage plays. Sometimes movie studios commission novelisations of their popular titles or sell the rights of their titles to publishing houses. There have been instances of novelists who have worked from their own screenplays to build fully developed novels. Both Arthur C Clarke (with 2001: A Space Odyssey) and Graham Greene (The Third Man) may be cited as examples.

VI) Other sources of adaptation may include Video Games, Newspaper and Journal reports etc