

# Intermediality and Film Adaptation

Emma Tornborg, Linnaeus University

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## Intermediality and Adaptation

### Slide 1

What is intermediality?

Intermediality is a research field that deals with relations between and inside media and media products. Originally the field was called Inter Arts Studies and the research was focused on relations between literature and, mainly, visual art or music.

# What is intermedialty?

Relations between media

Relations inside each medium

“All media are mixed media”

– W. J. T. Mitchell



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## Slide 2

Today, as the word intermediality suggests, the interest is focused on all kinds of relations between all kinds of media, and inside media as well. The inside part is important, because, as media scholar W. J. T. Mitchell notes, “all media are mixed media”, and there is no such thing as a “pure” medium. There are always traces from other media in a media product.

## Examples of mixed media

A medium product such as a film incorporates many media and media elements:  
Images, text, sound, etc.

A medium product such as an ekphrastic poem can imitate the formal structure of a painting, use “painterly” language, be very descriptive etc., thereby incorporating the media form it describes or represents.

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## Slide 3

Take a media product such as a film. It consists of, at least, sound, images and written text. The sound can be sorted into dialogue, screams, song, instrumental music, sounds

of traffic, footsteps, doors closing, toilets flushing, water pouring etc. The images can be moving and still, photographic, animated, computer generated (cgi), painted, in color, black and white and so on. The written text can appear in the form of letters, book pages and subtitles, as well as in the list of the cast, crew, credits etc. Thus, a lot of media and elements of media coexist in a movie. But movies are obvious examples. Let us take a subtler example. A poem (or a prose text) that describes or represents a painting, an *ekphrasis*, can borrow traits from that painting in various ways. It can imitate the painting's formal structure, by describing the most prominent of its features first, and finish with the smaller details, or try to capture the painting's atmosphere and the emotions it conveys, or describe it in a painterly matter which makes it visible to the inner eyes of the reader. In those cases the poem incorporates traits connected with the painting, which renders it medially mixed.

### Adaptation from novel to film

Involves a transmediation of content from one media product to another.  
What is lost and what is gained in the process?  
The fidelity issue: is the film faithful to the books? Is fidelity a sign of good quality?  
What has changed in the adaptation, why and how?  
The issue of media specificity: is every medium unique?  
Can a film show everything a book tells?



Image from Wikicommons

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The examples above are from single media products incorporating multiple media, but there is another relation as well: when content is transmediated from one medium to another, for example in the case of *adaptation* from novel to film, or from book to ballet, as in the case with *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, which was transmediated into a ballet with music by Tchaikovsky (its first performance was in St. Petersburg in 1892), via a retelling by Alexandre Dumas.

For intermedial students and scholars there are many very interesting issues to pursue regarding this process. What is lost and what is gained in this transmedial process?

Usually a novel is much longer than a film script and the filmmakers have to focus on some aspects of the novel, and let go of others. Depending on their choices, the film can be perceived as either very close to the source medium (the book) or very different from it. This often brings up the so-called *fidelity* issue: is it the primary goal for a film to be as faithful towards the novel as possible, or should the film be regarded as a work of art in its own right, as a new original, so to speak? The often-heard comment that “the book was better than the movie” probably has its roots in the fact that we often read the book first, and thus see it as the original, originality being a property with a high cultural status in our time. When we read, we visualize the surroundings and the characters in our mind, and when we see the film, a new set of images are placed on top of the ones we formed. The resistance we feel when our own inner images become challenged can result in the critique against the film. Especially when a book or a series of books become intensely loved by its audience, for example the Harry Potter books, any change from the original story can be perceived as problematic. The cast of the Harry Potter films is very similar to the description of the characters in the books. This is, of course, not a coincidence, but rather a necessity in order to keep the audience pleased.

Modern film scholars treat the film adaptation as a work of art in its own right, and its value doesn't lie in whether it is “faithful” to the book or not. What interests film scholars is rather *why* and *how* the content has changed in the process: is it because of the different properties of the two media forms, is it a result of the film maker's own vision, an effort to make it his or her own work? Does the film take place in another time, place and cultural and social situation than the novel? In that case, why and how has it affected the narrative? Has the perspective changed? Have the relations and balance between characters been affected? Numerous questions can be asked when studying an adaptation.

Even though the concept of *media specificity*, the notion that media have essential and static properties that separate them from each other, has been criticized among, for example, film scholars and intermedial scholars, film has a greater potential to show, compared to literature, because of the sign systems it uses. Verbal text mainly consists of conventional signs, or *symbols*, according to semiotician C. S. Peirce. Symbols in this understanding are signs that have no resemblance with what they refer to. The word *tree* has no resemblance to a tree, and tree is called something else in another language. On the other hand, a photograph of a tree is similar to a real tree; the relation between

this sign and what it refers to is one of resemblance. These types of signs are called *iconic*. Film consists of both iconic signs (images) and symbolic signs (written and spoken verbal text), while literature mainly consist of symbolic signs (I say mainly, because all signs contain traces of other signs in them: just as no medium is pure, no sign is pure either). Generally, one can say that iconic signs show, while symbolic signs tell.

So how does one show an inner monologue in film? In most cases, you cannot do that without words, symbolic signs. In a film, a voice over can be used, or the character can speak the monologue out loud. The voice over technique, however, is often accused of being too literary; too close to the way the novel works, which means that it is not regarded as a true filmic feature. It is regarded as “a simple way out”.

If you can read in a book that a character feels scared, the adaptation must show that fear in some way. On the other hand, as film professor Anne Gjelsvik (2013) has pointed out, there are cases where the film cannot show what the novel tells, for example extreme violence. Even though many film scholars are critical of the notion that film is an easier medium to understand and to get oneself involved in compared to literature, Gjelsvik still argues that cinema has a way of affecting us emotionally that other media have not, and it has partly to do with the exactness of iconic signs. While a text can say: “he hit her a couple of times”, a film shows all the hits in detail. Violence is harder to watch than to read about, even though we know it’s fictive. We see it with our own eyes, which makes it seem real, and that is what we react to, according to Gjelsvik. This is an example of things that must be taken under consideration in an adaptation process.

## Adaptation of *Where The Wild Things Are* From Maurice Sendak (1963) to Spike Jonze (2009)

The book is much shorter than the film script – usually it's the other way around.

Much of the underlying meaning and emotions of the book is explicit in the film

The implied audience has changed from children to teenagers and adults



### Slide 5

Another question that arises is how close a film must be to its source to be called an adaptation. How much can be left out? How much can be added? This is of course almost impossible to answer, but it can be interesting to do a case study with those questions in mind. Let's take as an example the picture book *Where The Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak (1963) and the film with the same name (Spike Jonze 2009). It is an adaptation, but the film is dramatically different from the book. The usual problem when adapting a novel into film is that you cannot include everything that the novel includes in the film. In this case, the problem is the opposite. Sendak's picture book is very short, almost Hemingway-ish in its structure. The symbolic, underlying meaning of the text is found between the lines rather than on them. It is thus up to the filmmaker to stage his or her interpretation of the meaning of Sendak's work. Such an adaptation must necessarily be more independent towards the source media compared to adaptations of novels. The film *Where The Wild Things Are* is an interpretation of Sendak's text and images. In the film, the main character, Max, is much older than the picture-book Max. He lives with his mother and his sister, and the mother has a new boyfriend. Max is acting out because he feels lonely and pushed away by his family so he runs away and finally gets to where the Wild Things are. The emotions that we can only sense when reading the picture book are put into words in the film, which adds both relations (the sister and her friends, the mother's boyfriend) and explanations to why only the mother appears in the book and why Max is acting out. That makes this adaptation different from how they usually work: the film fills the gaps of the texts, speaks where the text is silent.

The film has kept the basic plot, and the Wild Things in the film are very similar to Sendak's pictures. However, the implied audience has changed. While the book is meant for young children, the film is more violent and, in some ways, more complicated. A child can read the book and understand the literal meaning of it. As the child grows older it will probably start to reflect more on why Max is so angry, where the father is, what the Wild Things are, etc. In the movie, on the other hand, that other level is already present, the conflict is outspoken, and the emotions are staged: an interpretation is made for us, so to speak, and that interpretation can be difficult for a young child to comprehend and process.

**Thank you for listening!**

