

Adapting Comics to Film: Not a Cakewalk

S Manoj

Assistant Professor of English

Agurchand Manmull Jain College

Affiliated to the University of Madras

Meenambakkam, Chennai

Abstract

This Research paper defines and categorizes the process of adaptation and its forms. It classifies the different types of adaptations and looks at various new forms that have emerged in the field of adaptation. It also explains in depth the daunting task that adaptation may prove to be when a comic book is adapted into a feature film.

Keywords: Adaptation, Different types of Adaptation, Literature to Film, Comics to film

Adaptation

Adaptation is the method of transporting a genre to another, a process where one captures the source and makes it fit into other streams to attain a wider reach. It is not just a repetition of an old idea, but a medium in which new ideas and perspectives are infused. The result of this process is the birth of a new form of the old source. The process of adaptation can also be a simpler attempt to make the source (medium which is going to be adapted into other) easily comprehensible to new audiences and readership through the process of proximation and updating.

The universal appeal or the reception the source received is taken into account before being considered for the process of adaptation. Adaptation isn't a mere act of copying, but it

undergoes a process of transformation and adaptation functions as a commentary on the source from where it is originated. It is a form of retelling in a different style through a different medium. The process of adaptation is always in a state of flux where there is lots of scope for improvisation and experimentation. It is a process where one tries to fill the gaps, enhance, remove the inconsistencies and answer the unanswered to make it suitable for the new medium. It isn't a medium which is merely devoted to retell an idea in other genres, but a medium where a person gets the artistic freedom to see the source from other perspectives and project the source in different ways.

Different Types of Adaptations

There are different kinds of adaptations, prominent among them being the novel to silver screen adaptation. The other types of adaptation include literary works to TV shows, TV shows to movies, comic books to movies and adaptation of a historical event or a true incident. The field of adaptation has seen several changes where one reads literary works now transformed into comics, and classics adapted into graphic novels. Innovative ideas are brought in to reach various levels of audiences and expand the market beyond boundaries. The level of changes that the adaptation industry has gone through by coming up with new ideas and forms of adaptation, and the experimentation of the age-old methods of adaptation to give it in a new form has resulted in the industry growing by leaps and bounds.

The Conventional Way

The primordial way of adapting a novel into a feature film is still going strong even today. The source text which is well received for its contents is further exploited for its universal appeal and the monetary values it can bring in. Slight changes are made while adapting a novel into a film. It is nevertheless a daunting task to make a movie out of a novel with its plethora of details. The filmmaker's genius lies in trimming the unnecessary and trying to retain the things which are integral to the source genre, to which the audience can easily relate.

The person who makes the adaptation has to keep a check on the duration of the movie without leaving out the integral characteristics of the source, make it engaging and do some justice by keeping the flavor of the source, for which it was appreciated. But it doesn't mean that one cannot make changes to the source. Adaptation is a negotiation between the source and the output; it is the very point where it blossoms. Films like *The Godfather*, *Scarface*, and the James Bond series are based on books by Mario Puzo, Oliver Stone, and Ian Fleming respectively. The reason for the runaway success of these adaptations is that they followed its sources and posed to be commentaries on the source from which they were adapted. The charm of the adaptation lies in the hands of the person who oversees the process of adaptation. The amount of connectivity which the person has with the source and the vision to recreate it into another

medium plays a vital role in the success of the adaptation. If the person who works on the adaptation connects with the source text, he/she can transform it into other mediums with ease. But if there is no proper understanding of the plot by the person, the production goes haywire. One has to focus on minimal details to make the maximum out of it. He/she has to understand the source to carry out the process of adapting it to other mediums.

Making a work of adaptation is like walking on a tightrope where a good job will be applauded whereas a slight deviation can cause embarrassment. While some adaptations might have stuck to its sources, many have ventured far and experimented with the setting, plot, and enjoyed much success. For instance, a series of three movies have been made out of Mario Puzo's much talked about novel *The Godfather*. The plot has been expanded and extended to be made into three parts which were hugely successful. The success rests on the filmmaker's shoulder to weave a story with the elements and details provided by the writer in the book.

The classic plays of Shakespeare like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Measure for Measure* were made into movies with the same plot but with an entirely new setting, even though the level of success or appreciation it received is debatable. It reveals that adaptation gives vent to experimentation. It is not just a way of re-enacting but an idea with which one can toy with.

The recent on-screen adaptation of William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* has defied all the odds and set new standards in the method and process of adaptation by portraying the protagonist Prospero as a woman. So, it shows that the process of adaptation too goes through changes and one cannot rule out adaptation as a mere act of copying. By exposing themselves to a work of adaptation the people who criticize adaptation as a mere act of copying would come to know about the strenuous process that adaptation is. One just doesn't need to do justice to the source, but also has the artistic freedom to enhance and take it to the next level.

Breaking from the Mould

If the adaptation of a novel into a feature film has been something which has been there from the early days of adaptation, there were other types of adaptations which emerged and laid the foundation for different genres to be transported into any medium. Some of those types of adaptations are drama into musical, the dramatization of prose narrative and prose fiction, or the inverse movement of making drama into prose narrative, movies into novel, people's life and true incidents into movies and many more. These types of innovative ideas to adapt different mediums have revolutionized and enriched the field of adaptation, and played a huge role in expanding the market for adaptation beyond boundaries.

Literary Works into Comics

The adaptation of literary works into comics has been quite a revelation these days by expanding the market for adaptation to a great extent. And with the advent of the hugely now popular Manga comics (Manga are comics created in Japan, or by Japanese creators in the Japanese language, conforming to a style developed in Japan in the late 19th century) the

adaptation business has scaled new heights. New varieties in adaptation has widened the market for adaptation and opened the doors for experimentation in this field. Literary works made into comics have increased by adding children to their audience. Reading a literary work as comics is fast-paced. Thus, classics can also reach the children in a far simpler way. Keeping the 400-plus pages of a literary work to a 40-page comic with colorful pictures will help grab the attention of the young readers and is more likely to make the reading process more engaging.

It's not just literary works which are made into comics, but history and autobiographies of world leaders are up for grabs in the form of comics and graphic novels. Graphic novel pose as serious competition to the comics as it looks flashy and colorful. Many of William Shakespeare's plays are now in the form of Manga comics and they are a huge rage among the comic book lovers. Life histories of world leaders like Subash Chandra Bose, Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar are available in the form of comics which are far more pleasing to read with pictorial descriptions.

Comics into films

If literary works are something which comes with a general perception that they are read by mature and intellectually driven people, the people who read comics were considered to be spending their time reading an insignificant form of art. Adaptation of comics into feature films broke this type of view and helped in pointing out the value that comics too have the potential to be transported into other mediums. The imaginary world of comics when translated onto the silver screen seemed larger-than-life and a sense of awe was the response from audience of all ages. We don't have many reboots of classic movies like we have for comics. The number of reboots of comic characters to silver screen shows the amount of recall and market value which comics have.

Comics enjoy enormous amount of fan following that when made as a movie it doesn't need publicity, and the much needed all important pre-hype is created by the audience themselves. Comic characters have become part of the lives of its followers that when translated into other mediums, they garner tremendous response from all quarters. Comic characters like Batman, Superman, and Spiderman stand testimony to the huge fan following it has. These characters have been rebooted many number of times and tasted unanimous success because of their popularity.

So, if a source has a universal appeal it can be adapted into other genres, irrespective of it being a work of literature or comics. A medium can be transformed into any given medium if the message is universal in nature.

Comics: A Difficult Genre to Adapt

For a mere reader comics supply only the barest amount of details, but for an avid reader of comics the world of comics is full of details where every symbol offers a meaning. The person who adapts the comics into other mediums needs to be an avid reader who doesn't miss out even

the minutest of details which the comics present. A story is woven around the comic character with the details and description which are provided in the comic book. The person who tries to adapt a comic book superhero to the silver screen should study the nature, color, style, mannerism, costume and history of the superhero (comic character). Part of the adaptation process is over if the person who adapts the comic character studies the aforesaid. Keeping all the characteristics of the comic character in mind the person who adapts it onscreen should weave the story. The task of adaptation should be handled carefully as one cannot toy with the characteristics of a comic character which are integral to it.

The person who oversees the process of adaptation should focus on how the character has evolved right from its first appearance to the recent past, to create the character with the recent changes made in its characteristics to keep up and give a feel of the latest avatar of the comic character. An appropriate example would be that of the comic character *Batman* (*Batman* is a fictional character, a comic book superhero created by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger) which enjoys a tremendous fan following and has gone through several changes from its first appearance. These changes that were brought in were to suit the changing times and the societal scenario which were persistent of that age. The comic character in a way portrayed the culture, mood and the mindset of the people. One can say that the comic character *Batman* has gone through three stages to become of what it is today. *Batman's* history has undergone various revisions, both minor and major. A few elements of the character's history have remained constant.

When the character was introduced in 1939 the comic book reflected the social condition of the times with much crimes taking place and the wealthy exploiting the poor. The character who plays *Batman* witnesses his parents being murdered for money and he transforms himself into a masked superhero to bring about a change in Gotham city where he resides. When he starts the process of refining his city, he is merciless in punishing the conspirators and takes any means to finish off his rivals. By 1942, the writers and artists behind the *Batman* comics had established most of the basic elements of the *Batman* mythos. In the years following World War II, DC Comics (DC Comics, Inc. (founded in 1934 as National Allied Publications) is one of the largest and most successful companies operating in the market for American comic books and related media) adopted a post-war editorial direction that increasingly de-emphasized social commentary in favor of lighthearted juvenile fantasy. The impact of this editorial approach was evident in *Batman* comics of the post-war period as *Batman* was instead portrayed as a respectable citizen and paternal figure that inhabited a "bright and colorful" environment. During the 1950s there was a public outcry when psychologist Fredric Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* got published in 1954. Wertham criticized *Batman* comics for their supposed homosexual overtones and argued that *Batman* and *Robin* were portrayed as lovers. Wertham openly criticized that children imitated crimes that were committed in comics and it corrupt the morals of the youth in a big way. It led to the establishment of Comics Code Authority and the tendency towards a cleaner looking *Batman* in the post-war years intensified after the introduction of the Comics Code.

In the late 1950s, *Batman* stories gradually became more science fiction-oriented, an attempt at mimicking the success of other DC comic characters that had dabbled in the genre.

Another of *Batman's* characterizations is a vigilante; in order to stop evil that started with the death of his parents, he must sometimes break the laws himself. Although manifested differently by being re-told by different artists, it is nevertheless that the details and the prime components of *Batman's* origin have never varied at all in the comic books. Now, the recent portrayal of the comic character of *Batman* as someone who stands by an ideology and philosophical in his approach has led the critics and the viewers to see the character as a person who has been idolized and considered more than a hero.

Even though the films feature original storylines, they borrow scenes and themes from multiple *Batman* comic book miniseries such as Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*, Jeph Loeb's *The Long Halloween* and *Dark Victory*, and Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, as well as maxi-series like *Knightfall* and *No Man's Land*. Further, the films borrow heavily from *Batman: The Animated Series* in terms of style and character. Despite all the liberties taken by the trilogy to combine these disparate elements into a unified vision, *Batman* fans widely consider these film adaptations as some of the best adaptations done by the franchise.

It is far easy to adapt a literary piece because of the details being presented in the form of words, whereas in comics one has to collect the various details which are in the form of pictures, color and dialogue. It is a taxing process and the person who carries out the process of adaptation should focus on various elements which were said above to do the work of adaptation in an effective way. So, one has to read the history of the comic character and its transition to carry out the process of adapting a comic book to silver screen effectively. It is nevertheless a daunting task.

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