

The Problematic of Meaning Construction between the Narrative Text and the Dramatic Series

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Abstract:

The sources of authorship in dramatic artistic works, whether cinematic or televised, are the cornerstone of their popular success. Such works rely primarily on two elements: the screenplay and direction. Authorship is a creative process distinguished by each writer or producer. Hence, literary texts—novels and stories—constitute a rich resource for artists and a fertile ground for their creativity. This gives rise to a relationship between the novel as a literary form and the film as a symbolically dense medium, leading to the concept of adaptation, which bridges the two arts. This raises an important issue: the director's fidelity and commitment when transforming a written narrative into a visual work. Adapting a novel into a visual production involves a complex transition between written and visual languages—that is, transferring a narrative from its textual structure to a different mode of storytelling: the visual narrative, or what is called the "cinematic language." This language seeks primarily to construct meaning and create significance. Linguistic signs move within semantic frameworks in the visual work, necessarily leading to the generation of meanings. The screenplay serves as the mediating and active channel, fragmenting the novel into sequential visual scenes. This paper will address the issue of meaning construction in adapted visual drama and examine how successfully it conveys the original text's intensity and poetics. It also explores the role of the intermediary text (the screenplay) in forming semantic systems.

Keywords: Narrative structure, Quotation, Construction of meaning, Drama series.

Introduction:

Since the text is one of the foundational pillars upon which any dramatic work is built, it is difficult to imagine a coherent film or series without an impactful script used effectively by its creators and producers. Drama has become increasingly aware of the importance of the written text, treating it as more than just a script to be read; rather, it is transformed into a dynamic visual narrative, detached from the purely imagined constructs left in the reader's or listener's mind.

The novel, as a literary and narrative art form, stands at the pinnacle of narrative genres—surpassing even theatre and epic poetry—in terms of popularity and distribution. This prominence qualifies it to be adapted into dramatic works, whether in cinema or television.

Adaptation in this context refers to the process of transforming a literary work using cinematic mechanisms, entailing a reconfiguration of the original text based on the vision of the screenwriter and director. The process aligns with the literary concept of adaptation, understood as the transposition of the semantic imagery embedded in the original text into a visual and formal representation. Adaptation involves the attempt to recreate meaning. In this process, the screenwriter seeks to construct the original meaning by finding a visual equivalent for each word in the novel. As a visual medium, film has the power of brevity and rapid transitions between events, times, places, and characters, often condensing large segments of a novel. This raises the issue of potential distortion of the source material and the degree to which the film remains faithful to the original narrative.

No matter how closely a dramatic text mirrors its source material, it can never surpass its original. Hence, the adaptation process must be executed skillfully to preserve the overall semantic structure of the creative work. The screenwriter and director must remain creatively loyal to the original source, making the screenplay a vital, influential phase in the transformation process—and a determinant of the work's success or failure.

In this regard, Jean-Claude Carrière, a prominent screenwriter who adapted numerous novels, asserted that it is impossible to translate or transform one artistic form into another with complete precision. Adaptation, at its core, is a creative act. It requires letting go of the written text in order to immerse fully in constructing the visual work within the cinematic writing framework. This is because the imaginative world of literature is fundamentally different from that of cinema, each relying on its own tools and techniques.

Thus, this article seeks to answer the following two questions:

1. What are the conceptual boundaries and distinctions between narrative language in literature and visual (cinematic) storytelling?
2. How are semantic systems formed to successfully dramatize a novel?

Through these questions, we aim to explore the nature of the relationship between the word in the novel and the image in the film. We will also examine how meaning (or semantic systems) is constructed and transferred from the literary text to the cinematic text, emphasizing the role of the intermediary text (the screenplay) as a central actor in this process. Given that a series is essentially a multi-episode film, it relies on the same elements, tools, and techniques used in film to produce meaning. This leads us to explore the dramatic construction of the television series in more depth.

I. Narrative Structure in the Novel and the Cinematic (Visual) Text

The relationship between the novel and film is not a recent development. It dates back to the early years of cinema, when many films were based on world literature. Classic novels such as *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky and *Les Misérables* found their way to the screen. In the Arab world, Naguib Mahfouz's *Trilogy* and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* are examples of works that were transformed into visual narratives. This convergence gave rise to two opposing schools of thought regarding the relationship between the novel and film.

The first school asserts that the relationship between the two is necessary and inherently strong due to the many shared characteristics—foremost among them being their narrative nature. For this group, "a film adapted from a literary work is essentially a visual translation

that respects the original text." In this sense, the relationship is one of reproduction and transfer from a written to a visual format, preserving the theme, details, narrative style, and characters. Accordingly, this school opposes the idea of abbreviation or omission from the original text, considering it a violation of its intentⁱ.

To delve further into the views of this school, it is important to examine the shared elements between the novel and the film and their roles in meaning construction:

- The use of the term "text" was initially exclusive to literary works before being extended to include film and other artistic productions. According to Étienne Physile, "the essential structure of the narrative text can serve as material for a dramatic or cinematic productionⁱⁱ."

- Screenwriter Jean Lodabay similarly claimed that "there is no real difference between literary writing and screenplay writing." Both require structured steps: a beginning, a plot, and an endingⁱⁱⁱ.

- The novel and film share a fundamental element—narrative. Furthermore, their core components (time, space, characters) align, making it naturally feasible to adapt a novel into a film. A cinematic script functions as a discourse that addresses an issue or phenomenon, with the ability to affect audiences through visual and auditory signs crafted by the filmmaker.

Structurally, a film is a sequence of visuals organized through a style unique to each production. It represents a coherent and meaningful structure, integrating both visual elements (characters, lighting, décor) and auditory ones (music, sound effects, silence, dialogue) within a context that forms a story. These elements operate within a system designed to construct semantic meaning. The film text, as a visual medium, is a logical system loaded with codes and signs that can add depth and value to the intended message^{iv}.

While the novel conveys meaning through words, the film communicates using cinematic images. The arrangement of words produces meanings that evoke mental images, while the composition of images generates meaning—referred to as signification, which, in semiotics, is defined as "a material entity that evokes an abstract idea^v."

Therefore, the ultimate purpose of both the word and the image is to convey meaning.

In film, image composition relies on montage techniques, just as a writer uses literary devices such as coherence and cohesion. Film segments are akin to literary paragraphs, shots to sentences, cuts to commas, fades to full stops, and so on. The camera becomes the pen^{vi}. This cinematic scene construction has birthed a new language in the arts, as Podovkin affirmed: "Montage is the language through which the director communicates with the audience. A shot represents a word, a sequence of shots forms a sentence, and a scene is made up of images just like a sentence is composed of words." Thus, the image replaces spoken language in communicating with the viewer, becoming an expressive and suggestive medium^{vii}

According to Christian Metz, "language is any means through which communication with others is achieved. ^{viii}" The goal of any language is to tell a story—this is true for both the novel and the film^{ix}.

On the other hand, the second school of thought argues that *the film should be treated as an independent creative work, where the filmmaker draws inspiration from the literary source*, but is not bound by it. According to this view, the film's connection to the literary text is limited to its central idea or theme, which the filmmaker reinterprets with cinematic touches, recognizing that each medium—literary and cinematic—is a distinct genre with its own language and conventions.

Proponents of this school defend the director's right to personal interpretation, viewing film not as a reproduction of another's perspective, but as a reimagining rooted in the director's emotional and aesthetic experience. They emphasize the uniqueness of cinematic language, which relies on iconic signs, thus making it inherently different from the verbal signs used in novels.

Here are key distinctions between the two mediums:

- A word or verbal expression cannot be equated with a cinematic shot. A single film shot can convey far more than a single word due to its visual richness and multi-layered signification. In language, meaning arises from the sequential flow of words. In contrast, meaning in film emerges not only from temporal succession of shots, but also within each individual shot, which contains multiple signs operating simultaneously (e.g., actor, lighting, setting, dialogue)^x.
- A film communicates ideas through perceptible signs, easily grasped by audiences. Visual signs are typically clearer and more quickly processed than linguistic signs, which require mental visualization. Thus, film achieves a more immediate emotional and cognitive impact^{xi}.
- Sound elements—dialogue, music, ambient noise, and effects—play a crucial role in reinforcing meaning and evoking emotion, creating atmospheres that a silent, written novel cannot replicate. This does not diminish the power of the written word; on the contrary, silent language allows each reader to build a unique mental world^{xii}, rich with imagination.
- The narrative styles differ: film presents its story through visual simulation, without a narrator, while novels rely on telling the story, often through elaborate narration and dialogue. The reader must employ voice, imagination, and interpretation, giving literature a greater potential for personal meaning-making—a dynamic less available in film due to its fixed visual progression^{xiii}.
- Interpretation, in literature, involves decoding and diving into the text's layered meanings. A literary text is a dynamic system, rich in intertextual and symbolic connections. Reading thus becomes an interpretive process.
- Time functions differently in both forms. Novels use linguistic tenses (past, present, future), and narrative time is primarily mental and imaginative. Time in film is visual and immediate, limited to what is shown on screen in the present. Shifts in time are conveyed cinematically, primarily through montage (editing). Film lacks grammatical tools like verbs to explicitly mark time, and instead uses visual cues and editing rhythms.

- Both media rely on spatial structure, but space in film is visualized and dynamic, revealing meaning through movement, camera angles, and setting, while space in novels is conceptual and constructed in the reader's mind. Place becomes a meaning-bearing unit, a component of the broader narrative world—called textual space—which emerges through interactions between characters, time, and events.

- Unlike novels, which may spend pages delving into a character's internal thoughts while sitting alone in a café, films struggle to convey extended internal monologues visually. A scene showing a man sitting silently cannot hold a viewer's attention for long. Therefore, cinematic expression relies more on visual cues—camera angles, facial expressions, body language—than on introspection.

II. Construction and Formation of Meaning (Semiotic Systems) in the Filmic Text

Narration is the essential foundation upon which a filmic text is built. It is the cornerstone in shaping its structure and determining its meaning. In this context, narration refers to the sequence of events and actions expressed through cinematic images. According to Yuri Lotman, the film image serves as a fundamental unit in the cinematic language, often used to define spatial and temporal boundaries, as well as character positioning within the frame^{xiv}.

Cinematic narration is the structure through which the central theme or plot is constructed, alongside a series of signals and indicators that translate imagined movement into visual scenes, articulated in screenplay format. The filmic text depends on three expressive dimensions: the visual, the auditory, and the kinetic. That is, meaning must be constructed through visible elements (images), audible components (dialogue, sound effects), and movement (interaction between visuals and content)^{xv}.

Thus, the discourse in a visual work (such as a film) is composed of a system of interlinked codes or semiotic systems. These include:

- Visual system
- Auditory system
- Color system
- Motion system
- Editing system
- Costume system
- Set design system
- Symbolic and coded signs

These systems appear as interrelated networks, functioning both on a surface level (explicit visuals and sounds) and on a deep structural level (mental and interpretive associations). Together, they form the cinematic or television film.

A TV series, in this sense, is nothing more than a succession of images filled with signs, which interact through the relationships among them to produce filmic meaning. These relationships are not limited to a few elements; they span every component of the cinematic image. While some signs—like motion—may be more essential, they cannot independently organize meaning in the way that verbal language does.

Even though motion is a distinctive feature of the cinematic image and contributes specific meanings to a shot, it alone cannot fully convey meaning. Each filmic shot operates on two levels simultaneously: it encapsulates space and time (through lighting, décor, acting, sound), and all these elements function in unison, forming a network of signs. These signs work together to generate meaning. That is to say, meaning in cinema arises from the synchronization and sequencing of all these codes^{xvi}.

In addition, the role of montage (editing) is central. Montage is a narrative technique and one of the most essential cinematic tools in constructing a film's semantic structure. It signals the passage of time, whether by maintaining continuity, compressing time, or skipping over events altogether. Through the sequencing of individual shots (micro-signs), a scene (macro-sign) is constructed, endowed with its own meaning and value.^{xvii}

Once arranged and unified, these shots are placed into a representational context that ultimately forms the artistic work. Thus, montage is not merely a technical process—it is a creative mechanism that organizes and aligns all structural elements of the film^{xviii}.

The foundation of modern editing techniques is credited to filmmaker David Wark Griffith, a pioneer of American cinematic artistry. His film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), adapted from the novel *The Clansman*, laid down the groundwork for cinematic editing as we know it. Griffith skillfully manipulated narrative elements such as time and space and established cinematic norms like cutting and cross-cutting. He identified three main types of montage:

1. Continuity Editing – Ensures narrative fluidity without detailing every event; often relies on time compression.
2. Classical Cutting – Adds dramatic depth and emotional emphasis, allowing the viewer to experience subtle expressions and nuances in an actor's face^{xix}.
3. Thematic Montage – Uses editing to convey abstract ideas or themes, moving beyond narrative to philosophical or ideological messaging.

III. The Role of the Intermediate Text (The Screenplay) in the Cinematic (Dramatic) Presentation

Within the ongoing debate regarding the interplay between visual presentation—which includes elements like camera angles, movements, and composition—and verbal storytelling—built on rising action, characters, suspense, and event sequencing—the screenplay emerges as the intermediary form. It is a creative channel through which meaning and significance are shaped within a specific artistic format, linking the narrative form of literature to the visual format of film.

The screenplay holds a central position in the filmmaking process. Some consider it the most important stage, as it serves as the master blueprint or guiding map of the film. It not only outlines the structure but also plays a determining role in whether a film succeeds or fails. The significance of a film lies not merely in its story but in how that story is told—the treatment, the dramatic structure, and the form in which events are conveyed.

According to Pier Paolo Pasolini, the screenplay represents the meeting point between literature and cinema. In literary language, the word serves as a sign, substituting something else. In this case, the signifier is separate from the signified (word/object). However, in visual language, the signifier and signified merge—the sign and the object it represents are one and the same^{xx}.

This fundamental distinction in how signs function creates the first major challenge in adapting a literary work into a visual medium. It requires retelling the story using a completely different semiotic system. A written word in a screenplay takes on a new property: it transforms from a conceptual sign into a sensory sign—an iconic sign that generates its own meaning. The written word is a dictionary-based sign that precedes the literary text, while the visual sign is created anew during the artistic process.

Consequently, the entire dramatic presentation (film) is fundamentally iconic. Every moment in a dramatic sequence functions as a visual and auditory sign of a fictional or recreated reality. Other types of signs used in film operate within the bounds of this iconic simulation. In essence, the dramatic presentation is a visual-auditory offering based on the intensive use of signs to construct a cinematic reality grounded in lived experience.

Reproducing this lived reality and translating it into artistic form depends on the vision and perception of the filmmaker (director) and the screenwriter, both of whom bring their unique interpretations to the source material. The screenwriter is often responsible for identifying a central idea or story, which then becomes the foundation of the film. This idea typically draws from the author's original narrative but is reconstructed as a sequence of shots, enriched with scenes, dialogue, music, and visual dynamics, all while striving to preserve the core of the novel's narrative and spirit.

Screenwriting, then, is not merely a type of writing, but a specialized craft that searches for the appropriate visual form to express the linguistic content. It distances itself from traditional literary writing to achieve what is known as visual equivalence. It is a language designed to create images, where each sentence must have a visual counterpart. It is writing through silence, movement, glances—a writing that seeks words that can be transformed into images when filtered through the lens of a camera. This form of writing must resist the temptation of literary prose, instead operating within a system that builds complex relationships between a single-layered language (words) and a multi-layered semiotic system (film).

IV. Features of Dramatic Construction in Film or Television Series

The production of television drama series relies on foundational principles that every writer, director, and television actor must understand in order to carry out their creative and artistic tasks effectively. Chief among these principles are the formal and historical foundations of drama. This involves the distinctive nature of the television script, which combines visual and auditory elements and is tailored to an audience that differs from viewers of other media.

A comprehensive awareness of all aspects of the dramatic work is essential, grounded in a concrete structure that aligns with the available capabilities. This awareness must be built on

a rigorous scientific framework governed by specific principles that enrich the construction of the work. The television drama director, in particular, must have a deep understanding of dramatic structure and composition in order to effectively realize the artistic vision of the series, in accordance with the fundamental components of any dramatic work, which include^{xxi}:

1. The Idea and Subject Matter:

The theme of a film serves as the central link between the visual image and the viewer. In order to successfully convey the artistic message to both viewer and listener, the idea must be embedded within the dramatic structure of the work—whether in an audio drama or a television scene in all its components.

Through this thematic integration, the viewer becomes familiar with the essence of scenes and episodes that often embody wisdom, moral lessons, or sources of reflection. These may originate from personal experiences of the writer or from observed or narrated events. While it may be easy to identify a subject, treating it effectively is much more challenging. Treatment refers to the ability to translate the subject into the visual logic of a television series—shaping it in a way that conveys both information and emotion.

Moreover, treatment relies on various aesthetic components, such as set design, props, costumes, cinematography, and other technical elements. These significantly influence the visual structure of the series and require substantial resources and large production teams, which in turn affect the way the image is built and perceived^{xxii}.

The core of the filmic screenplay lies in its central idea, which revolves around the actions and conflicts of the characters—especially the protagonists—and key situations and events that feed into the screenplay’s overall theme. As Syd Field puts it in his book *Screenplay*:

"A screenplay is, by its very name, a person in a place doing something. The person is the main character, and when we talk about the theme, we are talking about action and character. Action is what happens; the character is who it happens to. You must know what your film is about and what is happening to your character. This is a fundamental principle of screenwriting^{xxiii}"

2. Dramatic Plot (Structure):

To properly understand the plot, one must first define it as a network of obstacles and events encountered by a set of characters across various settings, generating interconnected incidents that drive those characters toward specific goals. The writer constructs the plot through logically sequenced events, linking each to those before and after it. The plot thus serves as a logical and cohesive framework^{xxiv}.

The dramatic plot is the backbone of all dramatic writing—whether for theatre or cinema—because it carries the key element that enables audience engagement: suspense and emotional investment. Through a sequence of developments and complications, the story progresses toward its climax and resolution.

Television drama, in particular, often involves multiple characters and intertwining plots—both main and subplots. This layered approach is echoed by the great writer William

Shakespeare, who utilized repetition and variation through secondary plots branching from a primary narrative^{xxv}.

In television drama, the evolution of events takes place through successive images that enrich the dramatic tension—whether through motion, dialogue, color dynamics, or the interaction of characters within a compressed timeline. This contrasts with radio drama, which tends to be more concise and focused on dialogue and narration.

3. Conflict:

A dramatic work inevitably involves multiple characters^{xxvi}, each playing a role within the story. The screenwriter focuses on highlighting relationships to reveal conflict, which arises when two opposing desires clash, pushing events toward a climactic point. Conflict is defined as^{xxvii}:

"The struggle between two equally intelligent and powerful forces with opposing goals—typically represented by the protagonist and antagonist—from which the dramatic action unfolds."

Conflict often polarizes into a battle between good and evil, with one character pursuing a noble objective and another driven by contrary motives. Through these opposing forces, the drama moves forward. As articulated by Leticia Egeri, conflict can take various forms:

- **Static Conflict:** Characterized by inertia and a lack of escalation, leaving the viewer on the edge of tension that never fully materializes.
- **Leaping Conflict:** Marked by sudden, unpredictable bursts throughout the narrative.
- **Foreshadowed Conflict:** The most refined type, it develops gradually and logically, following a natural escalation of events.

Thus, conflict is the engine of dramatic progression. It begins the moment tensions arise, intensifies through complications, and resolves at the narrative's conclusion. It is the actions—especially of the hero and antagonist—that bring the conflict to life, underscoring its centrality in shaping the screenplay's plot and the overall story arc.

4. Character:

Characters are human figures crafted by the dramatist, either through imagination or observation. They include main and pivotal characters (the protagonists), supporting roles, and secondary or peripheral figures. These characters carry out their roles during the performance according to the script, but also under the director's vision, who may adapt movement and performance to serve the visual narrative.

As Syd Field puts it:

"A screenplay is about a person doing something in a particular place—this person is the central character^{xxviii}."

The character is the axis of dramatic action, defined through differences in goals, awareness, and external appearance. These differences help establish each character's role and narrative function.

Conclusion:

It can be said that cinema and literature, particularly the novel, belong to the same artistic domain. Both rely on fundamental elements such as time, imagery, and storytelling.

Thus, the relationship between literature and cinema remains a dialectical one—not a relationship of dominance or competition, but rather one of complementarity and mutual enrichment.

Literature draws inspiration from cinema in various artistic dimensions, while cinema remains loyal to literature as one of its richest creative sources and a primary reservoir for narrative content.

Despite this creative synergy, adapting novels into films presents significant challenges—especially with lengthy novels or multi-volume works. Audiences tend to engage with adapted films critically, often making comparisons with the original source.

Foremost among these challenges is the question:

How can a director translate a written text into visual scenes and shots using a camera?

Then comes the role of the screenwriter, who must transform the narrative into dialogue, actions, and movements. These necessary modifications affect audience reception and may, in some cases, alter or diminish the essence of the novel.

Ultimately, the success of a novel's adaptation depends on:

- The available production budget
- The director's artistic vision and talent
- The audience's taste and cultural context
- And above all, a deep understanding of the original literary text

These factors are generally absent from the process of writing a novel, which is a solitary creative act. A film, by contrast, demands collective effort, coordination, and substantial technical and financial resources.

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