

The Aesthetic Characteristics and Limitations of Film Adaptations of Classic Literature: A Case Study of The Great Gatsby

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Abstract: Under the commercial development of today's film industry and the purpose of recreating excellent texts, there are many film adaptations based on excellent classic literary works. These adaptations attract both literary and film and television audiences. Through the analysis of the audition language and literary original work of *The Great Gatsby* (2013), this paper summarizes the aesthetic characteristics and limitations of adaptations from classic literature. According to the research, it can be concluded that film adaptations of classic literature bring the literature of some original works, insightful narration, and more aesthetic images to the screen. In the meantime, the characteristics of the film itself add limitations to the subjective world where the text could be extended endlessly. The key to overcoming the limitations is to go beyond the adaptation of "respecting the original work" and take an outright advantage of the characteristics that only films have and are difficult to ignore.

Keywords: Film, Literariness, Literary Film, Aesthetic Empathy

1. Introduction

Narrative films have been accompanied by the imitation and evolution of literary narratives since their birth. However, with the rise of films as an emerging independent art category and mainstream media, their demand for literary imitation has declined sharply. Therefore, literature and film are studied as two completely different art forms. Whether a film adaptation based on literature is "literary" in the traditional sense has always been a controversial topic, and the definition of "literary" is also biased from the perspective of film and that of literature. Since the birth and development of the film, there have been a great number of good and bad adaptations of classic literature, many of which even have won high box office and good reputation. Although there are a large number of studies on the adapted works, there are few thoughts on what the limitations of the adapted works are and how to improve them. Taking *The Great Gatsby* as a case study, this paper analyzes the aesthetic characteristics and limitations of film adaptations based on classic works. Moreover, it proposes an improvement plan for the limitations, so as to further explore the boundary between the two different cultural carriers, literature and film, and provide film narration and adaptations with a conclusion of guiding significance.

2. Aesthetic Characteristics of Film Adaptations Based on Classic Literature

2.1. Closer to Real Society

Compared with film scripts completely created for films, literary adaptations have a better text foundation. Film and television scripts mainly focus on the deductive nature of the story, and they tend to show "social reality" either from the acceptability of the audience's perspective or the rationality of the objective picture. Taking Chinese director Yimou Zhang's early literary adaptation *Alive* as an example, the plots such as "drawing blood to death" and "boiling steel in water" were "optimized" to be more realistic, reflecting the difference between the aesthetic characteristics of literary adaptations and that of original works. Meanwhile, this feature may also become a drawback in the adaptation process. In order to make the audience better feel the shock of the people, as described in the original novel, when they see the voluptuous life of the upper class in the early days of American capitalism, the director integrated more modern cultural characteristics such as rap and techno music in the film *The Great Gatsby* (2013 version, hereinafter referred to as *The Great Gatsby*). Besides, in the film, Gatsby's houses and vehicles are changed from the classical ones described in the original novel to a style more in line with modern people's aesthetic impression of "exaggeration". However, this move obviously caused a split in the style of the era, which was criticized by a large number of the audience. Admittedly, it is necessary to respect and keep the essence of the original work, but, sometimes, it is inevitable that film adaptations simplify and popularize the insightful part of the original work.

2.2. The Imagery in the Picture

In the discussion of literary works, the "image" they contain is often mentioned. Taking traditional Chinese poetics as an example, the image is essentially an occurrence of "aesthetic empathy". Obviously, poets' understanding of mountains and rivers does not exist in the shape of the landscape only but also from the perspective of the aesthetic subject and there is no distinction of "I" from "things". Poets see themselves when they see the mountains, rivers, and birds swimming in the clouds. As if they themselves were the mountain, standing there for thousands of years and overlooking the other mountains and all life beings on the other side. The existence of this "image" in the audio-visual language of film and television works is intuitively manifested as a deeper and hierarchical object existence compared with traditional film metaphors and symbols. In *The Great Gatsby*, the "green light" on the dock across the Gatsby's house is one of the most widely noticed images. It does not appear purely as an object of metaphor and symbolism. In terms of objective characteristics, the color green itself means "hope" and "freedom". This is not like the "fanciful stone" that can float after being flooded in the Korean film *Parasite*, which is artificially endowed with the satire of social culture and the metaphor of "fake" for this family, but the "unthinking" and instantaneous nature of human aesthetic senses to the image of "green". The existence of the green light also achieves the aesthetic empathy between the world in the film and the reality outside the film. In the film world, Gatsby stands on all the well-designed sites and docks with a strong purpose every night, reaching out to touch the clear green light on the other side. At this time, he seems to touch his real and accessible hope in the air. The green light is no longer just a signal light on the dock, but also the goal of all his life: Daisy, who Gatsby misses day and night but has never met. Similar to its form in literary works, the green light on the screen is still an abstract existence that does not have social significance and promotes narrative functions. It carries a unique, broad, and far-reaching space for imagination. So, in the real world, the audience seems to see everything behind the green light. They can see the unconcealed happiness of Gatsby going smoothly with Daisy, as well as the life after the two come together. The green light has become an image and the

target of people's aesthetic empathy. Regarding this subjective aesthetic projection, the film gives a narration as soon as Gatsby's initial success. After many years, Gatsby finally holds Daisy in his arms again. At that time, both for Gatsby in the film and the audience outside the film, the distant and unreachable green light no longer carries Gatsby's extremely heavy thoughts or the image of a straw that could only be held with his hands, because the woman that Gatsby misses all the time is already in his arms. As a result, Gatsby is able to talk breezily to Daisy about the green light in the fog, and a narration that is extremely close to both the film and literature can be given: "Possibly it had occurred to Gatsby that the colossal significance of that light had vanished forever. Now it was once again...just a green light on a dock." This is the dissociation of Gatsby's aesthetic gaze on the image of the green light.

2.3. More Associative Lines and Monologue Texts

Literary adaptations generally keep some lines that are not much different from or even identical with the original literary works, therefore, compared to original films, literary adaptations often have more broad associative space with text descriptions. In the novel *The Great Gatsby*, there is a description of Nick's first entry into the world of the rich, and this is Nick's second and last time drinking till he drops. It briefly and profoundly shaped Nick's self-disciplined and introspective character, as well as his unique and influential experience during this afternoon. In this second and last drunkenness, Nick stands by the small window of the apartment and looks out at the traffic. Here, the film uses repeated scenes, distant visions, close-ups, as well as expressions assisted by inner monologue lines to show the "With in and with out" described in the original texts.

The film starts with Nick's verbal talk and story-writing to his psychologist. In a conversation with the doctor, Nick mentions: "Yes, Gatsby was always watching me." The doctor's answer is meaningful: "And how did you know that?" At this point, a single sentence of the male protagonist and the doctor's brief rhetorical question bring more information than the large number of close-ups given in the film. More specifically, through the single sentence and the brief question, the amount of information unfolded in the reader's association is obviously richer than in the film's scenes, where Gatsby opens the curtains behind the small window of the attic and looks at Nick downstairs, and Nick also squints and looks up at Gatsby, showing that "Nick is also curious about Gatsby." At this point, Nick can see that he is "With in and with out" but perhaps what he can not observe is the personal idol-like worship he has for Gatsby.

3. Limitations of Literary Adaptions

The description of the text carries a broader and more profound space for imagination, so the text brings readers a subjective spiritual world that can be freely chosen and created. Objective description unfolds into different aesthetic worlds in the spirit of different readers. Even if the literary adaptation has the literary foundation of the original work, what finally displays in front of the audience is still the fixed objective image presented on the screen. This image often represents the director's subjective interpretation and aesthetic projection of the description of the original work [1]. For example, there is such a text description: "On the right side of the vegetable garden is a small red poplar forest, which is dark in color and whispering. Occasionally, a gust of wind blows, and it trembles. On the left is a vast field. Over there, a light is flashing brightly in the darkness where the eyes cannot distinguish between the field and the sky." This may be a sweet vegetable garden on a fertile black land. The red poplar trees in the forest are crowded one by one, surrounded by darkness. The wind blows through the folded leaves, making a whistle-like sound and shaking at the same time, like it is trembling. The vast fields are filled with fertile black soil, which makes it difficult to distinguish the boundary between night and the land. This bright flashing light is a lamp

lit by a struggling family that is still busy. But if this text description is adapted into a film or television adaptation, neither of the two audiences will have exactly the same association, so the world the director envisions will definitely be different from what the audience imagined, who may see the following picture: the poplar forest is not dense, and there must always be a reasonable distance between the trees so that the branches and leaves can be stretched freely. The wind not only brings the trembling of the leaves but also the tilting of the whole forest to the wind. The whisper symbolizes the footsteps of the gregarious animals that are shocked by the wind storm. At the junction of night and the land, there is no bright flashing light lit by a busy family. When everyone thought that there would be no more lights on the screen, a group of caravans appeared from the distance, and the leading carriages and horses hung oil lamps. Consequently, the limitation of environmental description alone not only lies in this but also in the main idea of the whole story and in the differences between objective pictures and words [2].

Going back to the "green light" image mentioned above, the first description of the green light in the original work comes from Nick, the narrator of the past: "Involuntarily I glanced seaward--and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of the dock." In the film, all the shots in front of the audience are shown on this side of the lake. Nick sees Gatsby standing on the dock and looking at the other side in the dark, and then a distant vision containing everything on the other side as well as the green light of the dock is given. Compared with the original work, this picture is indeed slightly better due to the passive acceptance of the visual picture, which improves the lower limit that some audiences can associate with this scene in an instant. But focusing on the original work, the last sentence of this paragraph is described as: "The end of the dock." In the picture, everyone can easily see the position of the green light and its depth to the dock. But after all, the picture is only a picture. It lacks the pun meaning of "the end" showing at the text level in the original description. This green light is not only the end of the dock but also the end of the story and the end of Gatsby's life. Gatsby did everything for the rest of his life to save the love he missed when he was young. When Gatsby really came close to the green light symbolizing this love, he died. Both his life and the story end with the end of this green light at the dock. So far, the double tragedy of the era and the character of Gatsby has come to an end [3].

4. Improvements in Literary Adaptions

4.1. Improving the Approach Used in the Film Adaption

The limitations of the film adaptations mentioned above can mainly be classified into two types: the differences shown in the transmission process; and the specific limits they have on the broad and far-reaching association space of the text. Therefore, in order to improve the existing limitations, the approach used in the film adaptation can be improved. In the film *The Great Gatsby*, a relatively complete clip is Nick's "With in and with out". This film scene is presented in a quite specific and intuitive way. It considerably lowers the threshold for appreciating the same part in the original work so that people who have not read or deeply understand the original work can intuitively see the description with the director's understanding. This provides a relatively simple and concise film adaptation method for other similar literary adaptations. This can be interpreted as the "respect for the original work", which is most emphasized and expected by the original readers for the film adaptation. However, from the perspective of film criticism and in view of making film adaptations more in-depth, this film scene is too clear and specific so the film lacks the insight and depth of the original literary works. In terms of the aesthetics of acceptance of the film, there is nothing to see except what the director wants the audience to see. Additionally, the improvement can be specifically refined to the design of the film shot. Nick looks out of the window and the people he

sees on the street do not have to be his own image. Nick represents countless simple young people who crowd into this material world during the prosperity of Wall Street, and he is the epitome and group portrait of the times. Therefore, another young man who has just arrived on Wall Street can be set here in the film. The young man has a similar restrained look and the same sincere and curious eyes as Nick, and they look at each other. This can further optimize the adaptation of the original work in the presentation of the film.

4.2. Taking an Outright Advantage of the Film Characteristics

Whether it is a "literary film" or a literary adaption, it still belongs to the film category in terms of its essential attributes. Therefore, the concreteness, refinement, and other characteristics of the film are difficult to remove and should not be removed. The film is displayed to the public on the screen while traditional literature is read by the public on paper where everything exists in words. This text is not only a language but also a carrier of meaning and a symbol that conveys everything. Words are known by their abstract way of transmission, but it is worth noting that "to a thousand readers, there are a thousand Hamlets" is not a negative metaphor for this abstraction. It is a praise for the broad and far-reaching associative space of words [4]. Therefore, if a film intends to surpass its own limitations, it should not only focus on its own shortcomings but also create and derive more characteristics that only films have and cannot be ignored, which is what people call cinematicism [5]. In 1911, Giotto Candu, a pioneer filmmaker from Italy, issued the Seventh Declaration of Art. The reason why a film can be called the "seventh art" not only depends on its gradual transformation into a broad category of media but also has a unique comprehensiveness in addition to its own artistic characteristics [6]. This also makes another breakthrough in the limitations of literary adaptations [7]. In *The Great Gatsby*, the moment when Gatsby and Daisy meet in a room full of flowers and sunshine is not only the core of the original story but also the peak of the film. At this critical moment, the film can further light up its highlights with the help of other art forms because of its comprehensive advantages [8]. As a result, the music "Young and Beautiful" made this moment. Many colors added to the film have been criticized, such as too many CG special effects and historical fashion culture, but "Young and Beautiful", which has excellent quality and emotional power, has perfectly completed this mission. This moment in the film world is no longer silent and distant. It helps the viewer complete the immersion experience of the film world under the emotional rendering of music, making the touching moment more tearful. Since then, although the film has not been able to fully reproduce the broad associative space of words, it has broken through the limitations of pure picture and narrative sound with the characteristics of its own comprehensive art. This is only a very small part of other forms of art adding color to the film.

In addition to its comprehensive form of art, a film is also characterized by the actor's interpretation of the role. Like films, words also have their limitations that are difficult to break through. No matter how deep and insightful the characters in the literature are, they cannot get out of the abstraction of words. But the role in the film world is interpreted by people who really exist in real life. The level of actors' performances is uneven, but throughout the history of the film, there are still a large number of performances that leave an indelible impression on the audience. Among them, the most representative is Marlon Brando's performance in a film adapted from classic literature. The successful performance of this role once placed the film *The Godfather* at almost the same height and reputation as the original work. The success of this interpretation is not blindly reflected in the stereotyped reproduction of the description of the original work but in the director's ability to guide the performance through his own understanding of the original work. For instance, in the film *The Great Gatsby*, the image of a "female athlete" is not the same as that of the original work. The original description of this character is "dark and strong", but the actress in the film is a taller and more neat female. The two images are not exactly the same in appearance but both

successfully demonstrate the original author's expectations for a shrewd and neat woman for this role.

5. Conclusion

By taking the commercial film *The Great Gatsby* as an example, the paper analyzes the aesthetic improvement and limitations of literary adaptations in combination with the broad characteristics and specific details of literary adaptations. The aesthetic characteristics of literary adaptations mainly lie in the closeness of the film world to real society, the excellent imagery expression compared to non-literary film adaptations, and various forms of more in-depth text in the film. Its limitation mainly lies in the limit of the broad and far-reaching associative space of words. The key to breaking through the limitations is to go beyond the adaptation of "respecting the original work" and take advantage of the uniqueness of the film. The author's understanding and research of literature still lack certain in-depth accumulation, so there is an imbalance in the comparison and analysis of the two genres of literature and film.

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