

# From Page to Screen: Navigating the Influence of Culture on Adapted Fiction

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## Abstract

*Renowned German director and screenwriter, Robert Schwentke holds a significant position in the annals of cinema's history. His directorial work on *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2009) stands out as an exemplary American romantic science fiction drama film. The film adaptation draws its inspiration from Audrey Niffenegger's 2003 novel of the same name. This paper aims to undertake a comparative study, delving into the cultural disparities between the book and its cinematic counterpart, shedding light on the transformation of the fiction genre into the unique visual medium of film. The central focus of this investigation revolves around the extent to which the film's director adhered to the source material and the creative departures made. Furthermore, we seek to unravel the distinct qualities that render this movie exceptional, despite the cultural differences from the original novel. These pivotal inquiries will be thoroughly explored in the article.*

**Keywords:** Literary Adaptation, Translation, Fiction, Cultural Disparities, Adherence.

## Introduction

Cinema, as an expressive art form, has the inherent ability to captivate, enlighten, and scrutinize societal dilemmas, serving as a profound canvas for writers to articulate their thoughts. It acts as a vibrant tapestry, skilfully portraying the intricacies of diverse cultures and offering audiences a unique perspective on the world. In the exploration of artistic expression, literature, and cinema emerge as potent mediums with a unique synergy. Film exquisitely transmutes the realm of fiction into a different art form, diligently safeguarding the essence of the original creation. Within this arena,

the realm of adaptation assumes greater prominence, furnishing a stage for passionate discourse among writers and discerning critics. In their book, *Adaptations: Some Journeys from Words to Visuals* (2015), Shri Krishan Rai and Anugamini Rai explore the intricate and interdependent relationship between literature and cinema. They highlight how literature provides the foundation for cinematic adaptations, with filmmakers translating written narratives into visual storytelling. This dynamic process involves creative decisions to convey the essence of the original work while also influencing audience perceptions. They emphasize the symbiotic nature of storytelling across mediums, underscoring the importance of adaptation in bridging the gap between words and visuals (67).

Adapting a novel into a film is a complex and enthralling endeavour. When accomplished skilfully, it can produce a cinematic masterpiece that resonates with both fans of the book and new audiences. Recognizing its role as a narrative medium, cinema incorporated the novel as a repository of stories, a tradition that has withstood the test of time (McFarlane, 1996: 6). The intersection of literature and cinema forms a fascinating juncture where storytelling undergoes a profound metamorphosis. Adaptations create an interconnected framework where various domains intertwine. The cinematic narrative may integrate aspects from painting, poetry, or music, or metaphorically reference the methodologies of these arts. Consequently, adaptations leverage the diverse array of cinematic signifiers, broadening artistic allusions (Stam, 2005: 23-24). Though they share many characteristics, literature, and film take distinct approaches and portray their ideas in very different ways. Jeanne Veillette Bowerman in *Take Two: How to Adapt a Book into a Screenplay*, asserts,

“People often claim that authors have full control of their novels, but that’s not entirely true. They cannot control the audience’s imagination. Screenwriters bring that imagination to life. Even then, directors, actors, cinematographers, and costume designers also give input” (Bowerman).

Critics often emphasize the distinct spatial and perspectival dynamics inherent in theatre that may not necessarily translate well to the medium of film, thus dubbing theatre as a ‘false friend’ for

cinema. This suggests that what works effectively on stage might not always lend itself seamlessly to the cinematic format due to differences in visual and narrative presentation. Paradoxically, however, novels afford filmmakers a broader scope for creative adaptation within the cinematic realm. Unlike theatre, which often relies heavily on fixed sets and a limited range of perspectives dictated by the stage, novels provide filmmakers with a wealth of descriptive detail and narrative possibilities. This allows filmmakers greater freedom to reinterpret and reshape the story visually, utilizing techniques such as cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scène to craft a unique aesthetic experience for the audience. In essence, while theatre may present challenges in transitioning to film, novels offer a rich and versatile source material that can be more easily adapted to suit the visual and narrative demands of cinema. According to Mireia Aragay, “a significant portion of a play’s text can find direct use in a film script, whereas most of a novel’s text is typically suppressed, undergoing recoded through mise-en-scène and acting” (184).

In the case of *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, director Robert Schwentke undertook the challenge of adapting Audrey Niffenegger’s novel, a narrative that intertwines elements of romance, science fiction, and drama. This paper aims to explore the aspect of adaptation, offering a deep analysis of how Schwentke brought the written word to life on the silver screen. It will investigate the departures made and the unique qualities that distinguish the film from its literary counterpart.

## **Literary Adaptation: The Interdisciplinary Connection**

Literary adaptation is a procedure that entails taking the original source material and modifying it to match the limitations and specifications of the new medium while maintaining the original work’s spirit and soul. The translation of literary works to the screen facilitates the dissemination of their themes and cultural relevance to a larger audience through cinema and television, as discussed by Gamze Nil Arkan in her article *Cinema Literary Adaptations as a Narrative Form* (2006). Literary adaptations may be difficult and

complex because the adaptation team must strike a balance between the requirements of the source material and those of the new medium. For instance, to make a logical and engaging tale for the screen, a novel adaptation for the big screen may need to condense or simplify the storyline, condense characters or events, or add new material.

This intricate process is exemplified in the adaptation of Audrey Niffenegger's novel *The Time Traveler's Wife* into the film directed by Robert Schwentke. The novel's non-linear narrative, rich in detailed cultural contexts and convoluted character developments, posed significant challenges for the filmmakers. While the novel precisely portrays the changing cultural landscape and the characters' deep emotional journeys, the film had to streamline these elements to fit a more linear and visually driven format. Despite these constraints, the adaptation sought to preserve the core themes of love, loss, and the complexities of time travel, albeit with some necessary alterations. This adaptation highlights how literature can be effectively translated into a visual medium, broadening its accessibility and allowing for a new, although different, exploration of its themes and cultural nuances. Ultimately, the success of *The Time Traveler's Wife* adaptation lies in its ability to capture the essence of the novel while navigating the inherent challenges of the cinematic form, contributing to a more enriched and immersive cultural tapestry. Julie Sanders in her *Adaptation and Appropriation* remarks about adaptation as such:

Adaptation is frequently involved in offering commentary on a source text. This is achieved most often by offering a revised point of view from the 'original', adding hypothetical motivation, or voicing the silenced and marginalized. Yet adaptation can also constitute a simpler attempt to make texts 'relevant' or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the processes of proximation and updating. This can be seen as an artistic drive in many adaptations of so-called 'classic' novels or drama for television and cinema. Shakespeare has been a particular focus, a beneficiary even, of these 'proximations' or updatings (19).

Interdisciplinary art involves incorporating diverse subjects into creative practices, with cultural and cinema studies playing pivotal roles in expanding perspectives and facilitating this integration across traditional artistic disciplines such as painting, sculpture, music, theatre, film, and dance. However, in recent years, there has been an increasing trend towards interdisciplinary art, which combines and blends these various disciplines. Kamilla Elliott in *Novels, Films, and the World/ Image Wars* observes:

The interdisciplinary study of novels and films has tended to run along two sides of a paradox. On one side, novels and films are opposed as “words” and “images,” agreed to be irreducible, untranslatable, a priori entities by most postmodern as well as prior scholars. On the other side, critics propound film’s integral formal, generic, stylistic, narrative, cultural, and historical connections to the novel (1).

The interdisciplinary character of art enables creators to draw from a broad spectrum of knowledge and abilities and to explore fresh creative possibilities outside the bounds of established artistic disciplines. Also, it promotes cooperation and communication between artists and subject matter specialists from many industries, creating a richer and more varied artistic scene. The interdisciplinary nature of art is exemplified in the adaptation of *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, where the novel’s complex narrative and emotional depth are translated into visual and auditory experiences unique to film. This fusion of literary and cinematic elements demonstrates how interdisciplinary approaches can enrich storytelling, bridging the gap between words and images to create a cohesive and impactful work.

## **Review of Literature**

Adaptation, in the context of literature and film, is a multifaceted concept that involves transforming a source material into a new medium. This process has garnered both praise and critique within scholarly circles. Oxford English Dictionary defines adaptation as “the action of applying one thing to another or of bringing two things together so as to effect a change in the nature of the objects” (OED, 2011). The captivating journey of turning books into movies is a testament to human creativity, reflecting the ever-evolving art of

bringing literature to life on the silver screen. Imagine the early days of silent cinema when Shakespeare's timeless tales graced the movie theatres. These pioneering adaptations demonstrated the enduring love for reimagining interesting stories on the big screen. Shakespeare's plays pose challenges with nuanced portrayals of good and perplexing character dynamics. Adapters, troubled by these complexities, took a radical approach by rewriting and reshaping the plays to offer resolutions to the existing issues (Marsden 1995, 14). Filmmakers back then were like custodians, cherishing the essence of these well-established narratives. As time marched on, the magic of adaptation evolved. Classic books like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* made the transition from pages to the cinematic canvas, adding a visual dimension to stories previously confined to words. Bernard Franco's *Three Adaptations of Dracula: Friedrich Murnau, Tod Browning, Francis Ford Coppola, and the Liminal Vampire* (2021) discusses three major film adaptations of Bram Stoker's "Dracula": Murnau's "Nosferatu" (1922), Browning's "Dracula" (1931), and Coppola's "Dracula" (1992). It explores how these adaptations depict Dracula as a liminal figure, existing between life and death and navigating the spaces between referentiality and representation. These early adaptations paid homage to the source material, respecting the characters and moments that readers held close to their hearts. In his *book Adaptation: Studying Film and Literature* (2005), John M. Desmond asserts that film serves as an instructive medium, effectively introducing literary masterpieces to England, where numerous generations of film producers have adapted the Great Books.

Then, the mid-20th century ushered in a new wave of adaptation, with iconic films like *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). These adaptations dared to rewrite the rules, infusing fresh narratives and artistic perspectives, proving that movies could offer a unique lens through which to view interesting tales. These tales of yesteryear provide the backdrop for the challenges and opportunities faced by *The Time Traveler's Wife* adaptation. It was set in a cinematic world steeped in tradition, where faithful adaptations were cherished, yet where the spirit of creative rebirth was equally revered. In Lucy Mangan's review titled

*The Time Traveler's Wife* – far too much ick factor to be truly great (2022), she offers a critical perspective on the recent six-part adaptation series by Steven Moffat, based on Audrey Niffenegger's debut novel, *The Time Traveler's Wife*. Mangan suggests a sense of discomfort or dissatisfaction with certain elements in the series. Despite Moffat's efforts to tone down melodrama and infuse wit into the narrative, Mangan contends that an excessive "ick factor" diminishes the overall greatness of the adaptation, conveying a negative sentiment towards the content or themes explored in the story. John Smith, in his analysis titled *The Time Traveler's Wife: An Unadaptable Book?* examines the challenges of translating Audrey Niffenegger's novel into a film. Despite critical acclaim for its unique take on time travel, Smith argues that the novel has faced disappointment in its attempts at adaptation. This raises the question of whether the story inherently resists successful translation to visual media.

In her article, *Why do we keep pretending that The Time Traveler's Wife is a love story?* (2021), Vanessa Willoughby critiques the problematic dynamics in both the novel and its adaptation. She questions the portrayal of Henry as a romantic hero, particularly focusing on discomfort in his initial encounter with Clare as a child. Willoughby challenges the romanticization of troubled relationships in the narrative, highlighting the author's evolving perspective over time. This analysis adds to the rich tapestry of successes and challenges in the realm of adapting books into movies. Baz Luhrmann's 2013 adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* showcased the transformative magic of storytelling, bringing the Roaring Twenties to life on screen and vividly portraying iconic characters. Through a visual and auditory symphony, the adaptation breathed new life into the classic tale, demonstrating the power of human imagination. The 2012 adaptation of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, directed by Walter Salles, faced criticism for translating its complex narrative from written expression, particularly its free-flowing, stream-of-consciousness prose. This underscores the challenge of adapting literature to film while defying conventional storytelling norms. Yet, despite these challenges, the enduring relationship between books and cinema showcases the boundless creativity of the human spirit.

## **Preserving the Essence: An In-Depth Analysis of Source Material Adherence**

The heart of both the novel and film lies in the profound love affair between Henry De Tamble and Clare Anne Abshire. Henry, a librarian, grapples with a hereditary condition propelling him unpredictably through time—past, present, and future. This evocative narrative delves into how these individuals navigate their relationships amidst life’s unforeseen events, notably Henry’s peculiar time travels and similar upheavals. The movie adaptation closely mirrors the book, with some distinctions. The fidelity of a film adaptation to its source material remains a fervently debated topic among readers and movie enthusiasts alike. In her review titled *The Time Traveler’s Wife — A Review* (2020), Melanie M. emphasizes the persistent theme of waiting in Clare and Henry’s love story, whether they first meet in youth or adulthood. Beyond the typical elements of romance and conflict, their relationship uniquely addresses the challenges posed by Henry’s condition, showcasing innovative ways to sustain their connection despite the uncertainties.

In the novel, Niffenegger brilliantly weaves the narrative through alternating perspectives between Clare and Henry, allowing readers to intimately experience the unfolding events from both protagonists’ viewpoints. The author employs a dual perspective approach, skilfully transitioning between Clare and Henry’s points of view, mirroring the novel’s storytelling. An illustrative instance is the “first meeting” scene. In both the book and the film, we witness the moment when Clare first encounters Henry as a child. This scene serves as a poignant introduction to their unique love story, and Schwentke’s adherence to Niffenegger’s original structure allows for the preservation of this pivotal moment’s emotional impact. In her work *Literature into Film*, Linda Cahir emphasizes that “the film cannot be so self-governing as to be completely independent of or antithetical to the source material” (Cahir 99). Consequently, maintaining adherence to the original text becomes paramount in the process of literary adaptation.

The fidelity to character development is another essential aspect of a successful adaptation. The intricate characterization of Clare and Henry is crucial to the story's emotional resonance. Schwentke's adaptation remains remarkably loyal to the novel's character portrayals, ensuring that the essence of Clare and Henry is preserved. For instance, Henry's profound struggle with his uncontrollable time-traveling is a central theme in both the book and the film. The thematic elements of Niffenegger's novel are integral to its emotional impact and resonance. These themes, including love, loss, and the inevitability of time, are elegantly interwoven throughout the story. Schwentke's adaptation successfully upholds these thematic underpinnings. One notable instance is the exploration of love's enduring nature in the face of time's relentless march. Both the novel and the film highlight Clare and Henry's unwavering commitment to each other, even in the face of the temporal challenges posed by Henry's condition. Schwentke's film ensures that this theme remains central to the narrative, emphasizing the enduring power of their love.

## **Departures from the Literary Blueprint: A Comprehensive Analysis**

In *The Time Traveler's Wife*, Robert Schwentke made several notable departures from Audrey Niffenegger's novel, which played a crucial role in shaping the film's unique identity. In the novel, the intricacies of Henry's time-traveling are explored in great detail, making the concept of time-travel a complex and integral part of the narrative. The novel delves into the scientific and philosophical aspects of this phenomenon, providing readers with a profound understanding of its implications. Schwentke, on the other hand, simplifies the mechanics of time travel in the film. While the basics of Henry's condition remain, the film does not delve as deeply into the scientific aspects, opting for a more streamlined approach. For instance, the film reduces the frequency of technical explanations about time travel, focusing instead on the emotional and relational aspects of the characters' experiences. In her article titled *Comparing The Time Traveler's Wife Book, TV Show, & Movie* (2022), Emily Burack highlights distinctions among the TV show,

movie, and original book. She notes that the movie primarily adopts Henry's perspective, unfolding in a more chronological order before flashing back to Clare's childhood. On the other hand, the TV show starts with a documentary-style narration, resembling the narrative style of the book more closely, with direct-to-camera talking heads providing insights into the story.

Another departure from the novel involves the depiction of the characters' ages and the timeline of their relationship. In the book, Clare meets Henry for the first time when she is six years old, which significantly affects her character development and their connection. The novel unfolds their love story over several decades. Schwentke's film, in contrast, compresses the timeline and ages of the characters. Clare first encounters Henry as a child, but the film accelerates their relationship by depicting them as young adults shortly afterward. This alteration affects the depth and complexity of their connection, as the prolonged period of waiting and yearning portrayed in the novel is significantly condensed in the film.

Film adaptations often necessitate the omission of subplots and secondary characters to streamline the narrative and maintain a reasonable runtime. *The Time Traveler's Wife* is no exception. Schwentke omits certain subplots and secondary characters that enrich Niffenegger's novel. For example, the film omits Henry's interactions with other time travellers and the complexities of his relationships with secondary characters who play substantial roles in the novel. While these subplots provide depth to the book's world, their exclusion in the film allows for a more focused exploration of Clare and Henry's central relationship. In his evaluation titled *THE TIME TRAVELER'S WIFE Review, Better Than the Movie* (2022), Bryan Dawson contends that;

*The Time Traveler's Wife* is not a perfect adaptation of the novel, but it's a significant improvement over the 2009 film. It leaves some moderately important characters out and skips the ending entirely, but what's there is very good, and the missing characters aren't integral to the story (2).

One of the most significant departures from the novel is the film's reliance on visual storytelling. While Niffenegger's novel allows

readers to imagine the events and characters, Schwentke utilizes the visual medium to bring a new dimension to the story. This is evident in the use of cinematography, music, and performances to evoke emotions and convey the passage of time. For instance, the film uses striking visuals to depict the time-traveling sequences, emphasizing the disorientation and surreal experiences of the characters. These departures from the novel create a cinematic experience that is distinct from the literary one.

## **Deciphering Cultural Disparities: An In-Depth Comparative Exploration**

To comprehensively grasp the transformation of *The Time Traveler's Wife* from novel to film, it is essential to delve deep into the cultural variances that define this adaptation. These variances encompass shifts from written to visual storytelling, cultural differences, and cinematic conventions. By scrutinizing these aspects, we can gain a profound understanding of how cultural dynamics have moulded the portrayal of characters and the depiction of time travel in the film, thereby contributing to its distinct cinematic experience. One prominent cultural variance lies in the medium's inherent differences. While a novel allows readers to engage their imagination, a film serves as a sensory and visual experience. Monaco, in 1981, posited that novels can employ either a first-person narrator or an omniscient narrator (172).

As noted by Bluestone, "The novel possesses three tenses; the film, on the other hand, operates with only one" (Giddings, et al., 1990, 15). This shift in narrative impacts the audience's perception of the story. For example, Niffenegger's novel provides rich, detailed descriptions of the Chicago setting, offering readers a vivid sense of the city's cultural and historical backdrop. Also, the novel explores Henry's love for the Newberry Library, where he works, and its significance in Chicago's cultural landscape. Additionally, it delves into the cultural ambiance of the different neighbourhoods, such as the art scene in Clare's loft and the historical elements of Henry's childhood. The movie condenses many of these details, focusing more on the visual and emotional aspects of the story. While the film captures some essence of Chicago through visual

cues like the city skyline and landmarks, it does not delve as deeply into the cultural specifics. Scenes in the library are more about advancing the plot rather than exploring the cultural significance of Henry's workplace.

When adapting a story from one culture to another, it's essential to consider how these variations might change the characters' behaviour and the dynamics of their relationships. For instance, the novel is set in the United States, and it reflects American cultural elements, such as holiday traditions, familial dynamics, and social norms. When the story is translated to a different cultural context in the film, such as through the choice of actors with their own cultural backgrounds and sensibilities, it introduces new layers to the characters' identities. The portrayal of time travel in films differs fundamentally from literature, employing distinct cinematic conventions that reshape how the concept is experienced. Unlike novels relying on language and imagination, films utilize special effects, sound design, and editing to craft a sensory representation of time travel. This cultural shift transcends the intellectual realm, turning time travel into an emotionally impactful encounter for the audience. Recognizing these variations underscores adaptation as a transformative process, not just a translation between mediums but a reinterpretation within a unique cultural and cinematic framework.

Themes such as love, loss, and the passage of time are interwoven with cultural nuances in the novel, where we can see frequent references to literature, art, and music, such as the poetry of Rilke, which Clare and Henry read together, or the music of punk bands that Henry enjoys. These references provide a rich, textured experience, linking their personal story to broader cultural elements. The film emphasizes visual storytelling and emotional impact, which can sometimes simplify or alter the thematic depth present in the novel. For example, while the film includes scenes of Clare and Henry listening to music, it does not explore the significance of their shared cultural tastes in as much depth as the novel does. The novel's cultural references often provide context and depth that the film's visual focus might overlook.

The novel's non-linear narrative allows for a nuanced exploration of how different time periods influence the characters culturally,

with Niffenegger meticulously detailing changes in fashion, technology, and societal norms from the 1970s to the 2000s. Henry's time travels include rich descriptions of each era's cultural atmosphere. In contrast, the film's linear approach necessitates a more straightforward depiction of temporal shifts, visually representing different eras through costumes and settings but lacking the novel's depth in portraying Henry's disorientation and cultural adjustments. *The Time Traveler's Wife* serves as an illustration of how these differences enhance the cinematic experience, providing viewers with a fresh perspective while preserving the narrative's essential emotional elements.

## Conclusion

Adapting literature to film is a multifaceted and intriguing endeavour, exemplified by Robert Schwentke's adaptation of Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*. This transformation involves more than merely translating text to visuals; it encompasses a careful balance between fidelity to the source material and the creative liberties necessary for the new medium. Schwentke's film captures the core themes of the novel—love, loss, and the intricacies of time travel while navigating the challenges inherent in such a complex narrative. One of the critical aspects of successful adaptation is maintaining the essence of character development and thematic depth. Schwentke's adherence to the emotional and relational dynamics of Clare and Henry ensures that the film resonates with the same poignancy as the novel. However, certain deviations, such as simplifying the mechanics of time travel and condensing character timelines, were necessary to fit the cinematic format. These choices highlight the inherent differences between literary and visual storytelling, showcasing how adaptations must sometimes sacrifice depth for coherence and impact. The cultural nuances present in the novel, such as the rich depiction of Chicago's settings and the era-specific details, are streamlined in the film to focus on visual and emotional storytelling. This shift underscores the transformative process of adaptation, where the sensory experience of cinema offers a different yet compelling perspective on the narrative. The film's visual representation of time

travel, utilizing special effects and sound design, creates an immediate emotional engagement that literature achieves through detailed descriptions and imaginative engagement.

The adaptation of *The Time Traveler's Wife* illustrates the intricate interplay between literature and film, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities inherent in this process. Schwentke's film remains a testament to the power of adaptation, demonstrating how the core of a literary work can be preserved and transformed, creating a new yet familiar experience for audiences. This dynamic relationship between the two mediums enriches the cultural tapestry, offering a profound exploration of storytelling across different forms.

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