

NOVEL INTO FILM

At first glance, making a film from a novel does not seem a very difficult task. Surely it can only be a matter of transferring a story from the written page to the screen, with the added advantage that if a novel is particularly successful, the filmed adaptation will have a ready made audience just waiting for the box office to open.

Activity 1

Make a list of all the films you can think of that have their roots in a novel.

Activity 2

A book's appearance at the top of the best-sellers list is no guarantee that it will 'work' at the cinema. Concentrate on those films you have listed above where you have also read the book. Were those films a disappointment or a surprising success?

Activity 3

Although novels and films are media that entertain us, we approach them both in different ways. What **are** the differences between reading a story in a book and 'reading' a story from a film? For example, how do we get our information about character from a book and how do we get this information from a film? How long does it take us, on average, to read a book compared to how long it takes us to watch a film? List as many differences as you can think of.

	BOOK	FILM
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		

Activity 4

Below you will see a list of several different genres of film. Beside each genre fill in the title of a book that has been adapted for the screen. You might find that some books will fit into more than one genre!

	GENRE	BOOK
1	<i>Western</i>	
2	<i>Drama</i>	
3	<i>Comedy</i>	
4	<i>Romance</i>	
5	<i>Horror</i>	
6	<i>Musical</i>	
7	<i>War</i>	
8	<i>Animation</i>	

Reading a book is a solitary experience. Our imaginations must work with the author's narrative as the story unfolds. The image we form of the characters and events could well be different from that formed by a friend who has read the same book.

When we go to the cinema it is usually in the company of other people and everyone sees the same actors, the same settings and locations. There is more of a chance, then, that the audience's interpretations of what they see will be similar. If the film we are watching has been adapted from a novel, we are viewing the director's interpretation of the story.

However, there is always the possibility that some of the audience will read what they see in a different way from that intended by the director. This will be the difference between a **preferred reading** and a **differential reading**. Can you think of any examples where a person might not read what they see in the preferred way?

Machiavelli noted that the populace based its judgment more on appearance than reality;
"for sight alone belongs to everyone, but understanding to few"

Yet anyone could be forgiven for thinking it a fairly simple task to transfer one medium to another. In a film, there are no lengthy descriptions of people and places to contend with. The camera acts as a universal eye, showing us each character and location, be it a house, apartment, office, ocean liner or spaceship. We don't need to use our imagination.

Dialogue is another area that has to be changed. In a book we occasionally have to retrace our steps to check whether we are sure which character is speaking. In a film, we know instantly who is speaking at any given moment, and even if we can't see them, we recognise their voices. We can also gauge from their tone what mood they are in whether they are angry, sad, amused or good-natured.

Activity 5

How might a director use the following technical devices to influence our reading of what we 'see' ?

- 1 Camera angles (low, high etc.)
- 2 Camera movement
- 3 Colouring
- 4 Lighting
- 5 Soundtrack.

"In any adaptation in any screenplay really the make or break work is done before the writing actually begins. The writing is never what takes the most time. It's trying to figure what you're going to put down that fills the days."

William Goldman . "Adventures in the Screen Trade"

When a director begins collaborating with a screenwriter to adapt a novel, the first thing he or she must decide is how true to remain to the story. Is his or her film going to be a complete "lift" or might he or she add additional bridging scenes that do not appear in the novel, or cut other scenes that he or she feels are unnecessary?

Another important decision to consider is pacing. A book can be read, put down, left for a week and then picked up again, but a film must run from beginning to end. Let us suppose there is a chapter halfway through a gripping adventure story we are adapting which takes us back to the adult hero's childhood, in order to explain some negative aspects of his present behaviour. Think of a way the director might handle such a problem to avoid losing pace.

Most of you will be familiar with the film JAWS (1975), which tells of the hunt for a Great White shark that terrorises a formerly peaceful coastal town. The first half of the film mirrors the novel by introducing the characters in the resort of Amity and their reaction to the sudden and unusual appearance of this species of shark outside tropical waters. The rest of the story is set at sea, where the shark is hunted by experienced fisherman, Quint; the brash young oceanographer, Hooper and Police Chief Brady.

Although the book was gripping, the film held much more tension, created by the young Steven Spielberg's taut direction. We knew the shark was big, but not how big; he showed us tantalising glimpses of a fin, a tail, a shadow thrashing in the water. Yet the most frightening thing about this particular shark is that its behaviour appears to be deliberately motivated.

HOOPER (Richard Dreyfuss) has insisted all along that it is much larger than average, having studied the bite marks on a victim, but nobody knows exactly how big it is until the three men are on Quint's boat in the open sea. In the novel, the shark merely appears beside the boat after several false alarms and the men make preparations to pursue it. In the film, BRODY (Roy Scheider) is lading fish guts over the stern to tempt the shark. He hates the sun, he hates the sea, he hates **being there**, and it shows in his face. Suddenly, the shark's head roars up out of the water, inches away from his hand. It's **enormous**. And then it swims past. It seems to go on forever. His eyes wide in disbelief and shock, Brady says *"We're gonna need a bigger boat."*

A novel can scare its reader, make him or her cry, laugh, or sympathise, but it can rarely make him or her jump out of his or her seat. A film through its director can do that and more.

JURASSIC PARK, much like JAWS, is a novel that contains all the elements of a fast-moving thriller pitting man against nature. The difference is that in this case, nature has been cheated by man. Dinosaurs said to have been extinct for the past 65 million years have been reincarnated in the twentieth century by the computerised duplication of fragments of DNA the protein contained in the nucleus of all living organisms, except viruses, which holds the instruction code or 'blueprint' for reproducing the organism. The man responsible is John Hammond, wealthy industrialist and dinosaur fan, who has built a theme park on an island off the coast of Central America. The 'Isla Nublar Resort' is aimed at jaded executives who can afford to experience something "different". Its attractions are a varied selection of prehistoric animals, some of which are plant-eaters and placid, some more deadly and rapacious than any creature alive today.

In "Adventures In The Screen Trade", William Goldman notes several points which are important in adapting a story into a screenplay.

The first is: What's the story about? and the second is: What's the story really about?

If we take his first point, we could say that JURASSIC PARK is about a man's short-sighted obsession with dinosaurs, oblivious to the dangers these prehistoric monsters represent to the rest of the world. Or we could say it is an adventure about a group of people isolated on an inaccessible island during a storm, who are menaced by dinosaurs.

Now let us take Goldman's second point; what's the story **really** about?

Activity 6

If you have read JURASSIC PARK, is there anything you could add to the general description above?

Do you think there is a more sinister aspect to Hammond's success in bringing living dinosaurs into the twentieth century?

Can you think of any other novels or films in which man meddles with nature and disaster occurs?

When palaeontologist Dr. Alan Grant arrives on Isla Nublar at Hammond's invitation, he steps down from the helicopter and notices the abundance of deciduous forest at the top of the island, the more tropical vegetation being below the peaks.

"To the south, rising above the palm trees, Grant saw a single trunk with no leaves at all, just a big curving stump. Then the stump moved and twisted around to face the new arrivals. Grant realised that he was not seeing a tree at all. He was looking at the graceful curving neck of an enormous creature, rising fifty feet into the air. He was looking at a dinosaur"

The makers of JAWS were able to use footage of genuine Great White sharks filmed in Australia, intercut with footage of a mechanical shark. But obviously there is no footage available of genuine dinosaurs! That brings us to the question of special effects, one of the most costly and time consuming aspect of any film in which they are necessary.

In the past, films made about dinosaurs have had to rely on the technician's ability and the equipment available at the time. From gila monsters photographically enlarged and back-projected behind major characters, to Ray Harryhausen's incredible stop-motion photography, film crews have been limited only by their budgets.

"Script writers have no limit on their imagination. What we do is make photo graphable anything they can come up with. All it takes is mechanical ability, a knowledge of hydraulics, pneumatics, electronics, engineering, construction, ballistics, explosives and no acquaintance with the word 'impossible'!"

(Danny Lee .veteran US Effects Supervisor. Source: American Cinematographer, 1965,

quoted in John Brosnan's "Movie Magic". Macdonald, London).

The makers of JURASSIC PARK have more than a few fifty foot tall dinosaurs to re-create. There are several different species on Isla Nublar . the fierce predator **Tyrannosaurus Rex**,



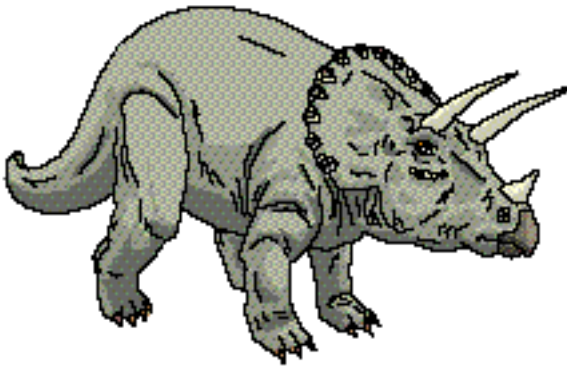
NOVEL INTO FILM



the flying **Pterodactyls** -left (not dinosaurs), the poison-spitting Dilophosaur (purely fictitious), the seven ton **Stegosaurus** (right), the **Triceratops** (below), and the vicious Velociraptors which are fast-moving, intelligent and deadly and hunt in packs.



John Hammond has invited several people to his island for a preview of its attractions, a year before the official opening date. These guests - a lawyer; Dr. Grant and his assistant; a computer expert and a



mathematician, are joined by Hammond's grandchildren; Tim, aged eleven, and his younger sister Lex. The children are amongst the party of seven who move slowly around the island in electrically operated Land Cruisers, inspecting each enclosure.

Later, when dusk falls, the computer expert has immobilised the security switches for nefarious reasons of his own. The electrified fences enclosing the dinosaurs are deactivated and a storm has negated all radio contact

between the Land Cruisers and the control room. The lights have all gone out, and the electrical cars - also deactivated - have come to a stop near the Tyrannosaur paddock. Tim and Lex are alone in the vehicle and Tim is trying not to panic. The Tyrannosaur - five metres tall, vicious, its jaws huge - tramples the fence and grabs at the car.

"...the dinosaur's jaws clamped onto the window frame and the whole Land Cruiser was lifted up into the air and shaken...Lex shouted 'Timmy!' and he (Tim) saw the door give way beneath her and she fell out of the car into the mud, but Tim couldn't answer, because in the next instant everything swung crazily - he saw the trunks of the palm trees sliding downward past him - moving sideways through the air - he glimpsed the ground very far below - the hot roar of the tyrannosaur - the blazing eye - the tops of the palm trees - And then, with a metallic scraping shriek, the car fell from the tyrannosaur's jaws, a sickening fall..."

Tim falls unconscious. Some time later -

"The whole car was moving. Tentatively, Tim rose to his feet. Standing on the passenger door, he peered over the dashboard, looking out through the shattered windshield. At first he saw only dense foliage moving in the wind. But here and there he could see gaps and beyond the foliage, the ground was.. twenty feet below him."

Activity 7

How would you go about filming that scene? Think of all the different elements that you will need and create a storyboard of each action as it occurs. Remember that you may want different types of shot . close-ups or long shots or a particular point of view.

What about special effects? Remember the Tyrannosaurus Rex is five metres tall. Imagine you have been given unlimited funds for the effects for this scene and describe how you would create a realistic model able to clamp a Land Cruiser between its jaws and toss it in the air before losing interest and dropping it into a tree.

A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Whilst it is important to think about how you will translate the action of the novel into filmic terms, one should also consider what is surrounding the action .the costumes, the scenery, the equipment used in the story.

For example, the story of Jurassic Park is set in a theme park which contains dinosaurs. What would this theme park look like in the film? How would people get about the park? Where would the dinosaurs be kept? What would the logo of the park be? All of these questions would need to be answered by the head of design of the film and all that that person would have to go on would be the novel itself.

So, how would you approach these questions? Try to come up with some designs for the items listed above. Can you design your own Jurassic Park? It is set on an island so how will you set out the park? What sort of uniforms will people who work there wear? What will the entrance look like?

When you have done this you could mount a wall display in your class which will give people an idea of your own Jurassic Park.

When the film appears you could see how your own ideas relate to the decisions made by the designers who worked on the film.