

NOVEL INTO FILM

War of the Worlds is a film that has been adapted from the novel of the same name written by H.G. Wells. Filmmakers from every country in the world have often used existing novels as sources for films. In taking H.G. Well's novel, Steven Spielberg, in his adaptation, has decided to alter the time setting of the original novel – nineteenth century England – to the twenty-first century. So instead of a period piece we have a film that deals with modern day themes and ideas.

When 'The War of the Worlds' was published in 1898, it seemed as if H. G. Wells was describing a vision of the future. Wells is regarded by some as having 'invented' futurist science fiction, laying the foundations on which many others built, including George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and Philip K. Dick. Like these writers, H. G. Wells used fantastical and apocalyptic visions of the future to expose the problems of human society, as they saw it.

In some ways his predictions would prove remarkably accurate. Although no invaders have come from Mars, some of his predictions, such as the lasers ('Heat Rays'), gas used as a weapon and bombing from the air, have all come about. These are now commonplace to us but in 1898 they existed only in the imagination.

So what did H. G. Wells intend 'The War of the Worlds' to be about?

COLONISATION

H. G. Wells admitted that colonialism was one of the themes of the book – at the time of writing, the British Empire covered much of the globe, usually to the detriment of the peoples who were colonised. For example, the indigenous inhabitants of Tasmania (near Australia) were wiped out in 1876 because of Britain's use of the island as a penal colony. In his novel, Wells turned this on its head, suggesting to the complacent inhabitants of Britain what it would be like to be on the receiving end of aggressive colonial expansion.

...before we judge them too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its own inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?

The War of the Worlds (Ch 1),
H. G. Wells (The Modern Library Classics, 2002)

THE FITTEST SPECIES?

Wells deflates humankind's pride in their technological achievements. Although they give men dominance amongst creatures on Earth, in 'The War of the Worlds' they are dwarfed by a rival civilisation from another planet. Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution, proposed in 1859, had become hugely influential in the popular imagination. Wells is clearly influenced by the theory in questioning our assumptions of being the dominant and most effective species on the planet: it is not humans who eventually defeat the Martians.

LIFE ON MARS

Wells must have been inspired by the vivid possibility of life on Mars. The widespread belief that there might indeed be a sophisticated civilisation inhabiting the planet may have arisen from a report about Mars written in 1877 by the Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli which described 'canali', the channels or grooves that he had observed on the surface of the planet. This word was mistakenly translated as 'canals', implying deliberately built structures created, presumably, by civilised life forms.

We now know that there is no life on Mars and so one of the key considerations that both director Steven Spielberg and scriptwriter David Koepp needed to make was to decide where the alien threat was to come from. Would a modern day audience accept mysterious spacecraft suddenly falling from the sky? How would aliens affect life on Earth in a digital, high tech world and how would humans react when their normal, high tech lives are suddenly disrupted?

CHANGES IN THE NARRATIVE

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. Some film adaptations of novels are very 'faithful' to the original book: they try to stick closely to the story that is told in the novel and keep the same sequence of events, and characters. This is often the case with very well known books, as people often don't like it when their favourite story is changed! In other cases, screenwriters may alter the novel considerably, putting events in a different order, or cutting scenes that they don't think contribute to the story as they are telling it. They also often have to add 'bridging' scenes to make the action clearer or because many novels simply do not contain enough plot for a feature film.

TASK

When a novel is adapted for film, events in the narrative and the order in which they occur are often changed. Some reasons for this may be:

- a) to make the film more visually exciting
- b) to speed up the action in the story
- c) to help the audience focus on certain characters and events rather than others
- d) to emphasise certain character traits or themes which are important to the plot
- e) because some scenes which work well in the novel, such as those that are mainly dialogue, may not transfer well to film, which is a mainly visual medium
- f) because time constraints dictate that scenes which are not vital to character or plot development are sometimes omitted.

Having completed this task can you now come to some conclusions about methods of storytelling in films and in books?

Consider these changes in the print and film version of 'War of the Worlds' and say why you think the adaptation was made. There may be several reasons for each of these.

THE FINAL FILM

All of these questions would need to be answered by the director, the head of design, the head of costume, the sound designer and many more people. So, how would you approach these questions? How might a director use the following technical devices to influence our reading of what we 'see'? Try to come up with some designs for the items listed below.

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

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, an apartment, an office, ocean liner or spaceship. We don't need to use our imaginations to create a scene.

Take this short scene from H.G. Wells' 'The War of the Worlds'.

Underline any words or phrases which we, as a reader, have to visualise ourselves, using our imagination.

The undulating common seemed now dark almost to blackness except where its roadways lay gray and pale under the deep blue sky of the early night. It was dark and suddenly void of men. Overhead the stars were mustering, and in the west the sky was still a pale, bright, almost greenish blue. The tops of the pine trees and the roofs of Horsell came out sharp and black against the western afterglow. The Martians and their appliances were altogether invisible, save for that thin mast upon which their restless mirror wobbled. Patches of bush and isolated trees here and there smoked and glowed still, and the houses toward Woking station were sending up spires of flame into the stillness of the evening air. Nothing was changed save for that, and a terrible astonishment. The little group of black specks with the flag of white had been swept out of existence, and the stillness of the evening, so it seemed to me, had scarcely been broken. It came to me that I was upon this dark common, helpless, unprotected and alone. Suddenly, like a thing falling upon me from without, came - fear.

The War of the Worlds (p25),
H. G. Wells (The Modern Library Classics, 2002)

Is there anything in this paragraph which would be difficult to film? How might the filmmaker get around this?

INDUSTRY - FILM - AUDIENCE

Every film that is made can be looked at from three different perspectives. Yet it is important to remember that these three perspectives are all inter-related.



Firstly we need to consider the producers of the film.

- what ideas did they have in making the film?
- How did they give us an idea of what the film would be about?
- How did they expect us to understand what is happening in the film?
- How did they get the film made?

Then there is the film itself.

- How is it constructed?
- What is its relationship to other films that we may have seen?
- How does it embody both the producers' ideas and also the audiences' possible ideas about what it is trying to say?
- What is the film's relationship to different worlds beyond film? How do the messages that it gives relate to other media and other experiences of both the producers and also the audience?

Finally there is the audience for the film

- How will they understand what is happening in the film?
- Will they relate it to other films in general?
- Will they relate it to other films which might fit into the genre of the film?
- What will be their expectations of the film?

Because everything relates to the film itself, let us start by considering what you expect from a film? Write down a list of all of the things that you expect from a film. It might be that you write down such things as 'it will tell a story', or 'the camera will move and let us see different views of the action'. Think of as many things as you can.

You might want to look back at the work that you have already completed to give you some ideas.

THE STORY: NARRATIVE

When you have seen War of the Worlds answer the following questions as soon as you can.

THE OPENING

- 1) Who are the central characters and how did you recognise them?
- 2) How did the film pose a number of questions that you wanted answering? What were the questions?
- 3) What sort of characters are they? What information are we given about them in the opening section which helps us to understand their character?
- 4) What settings are we shown? Do the settings help us to sort out what will happen or do they give us information about the characters?
- 5) Is there anything in the first part of the film that you did not understand? Was anything that you did not initially understand explained later in the film?
Was there anything that, even at the end of the film, you did not understand?
- 6) From the opening section of the film, what type of film did you expect to see? How did this fit in with the expectations that you had noted in your earlier work?

The opening of any film sets an enigma - a series of questions that we want answered. The story then goes on to answer these questions.

CHARACTERS

One of the key elements of storytelling is the characters in the story. A novelist or filmmaker has to create believable and interesting characters in order to involve the reader/viewer in the story.

The major techniques used by writers and filmmakers to establish a character and to help us understand what type of person they are include:

- Physical description (including dress, looks, voice etc.)
- Personality (friendly, happy etc.)
- Actions of the character
- Interaction with other characters
- Comments on other characters

Characters are essential to the movement of a story. As a story is a construction and everything within it should be relevant to its development, then we can see that the actions, thoughts and words of any character are a vital element of the dynamic of a story.

The three central characters in War of the Worlds are:

- 1.Ray
- 2.Robbie
- 3.Rachel

Firstly we want you to think about each character individually. For each of the three characters answer the following questions:

1. Describe the physical characteristics of the character.
2. Try to describe their personality
3. What do we know about the background of the character

Your answers will lead you to some general conclusions about each character. The next thing to look at is how you have come to understand this. For your answers to questions 2 and 3 try to think of moments within the film which illustrate the points you have made.

ACTIONS AND MOTIVATION

Having looked at the physical and personality aspects of the three characters we should now look at their motivation and also their actions in order to see how each character helps to move the story along, both through their actions and their decisions.

TASK

In the chart below you will be required to choose three key actions for each of the main characters. For each of these actions you should then try to say what each of them tells us about the character and then why this important to the overall plot of the story, how it helps to move the story along.

	What the action tells us about the character	Importance to the plot
RAY		
1		
2		
3		
ROBBIE		
1		
2		
3		
RACHEL		
1		
2		
3		

INTERACTION

Look back to your answers to the previous task. How many of the key actions of each character involved one of the other main characters?

TASK
You will need now to consider how the characters interact with each other and also how their relationships change.

When you have done this try to think about the relationships between Ray and Robbie and Robbie and Rachel. How do these change during the course of the story?
Finally, when you have tracked all three relationships, look to see how they are linked together.

OTHER CHARACTERS

So far we have looked only at the three main characters in the film. However we are also introduced to other characters. Can you remember any other characters from the film?

TASK
You now need to think what these characters add to the overall narrative of the story. Why have they been included? How do they help move the story along? For each character that you have listed try to answer those questions.

THEMES

Films do not merely tell a story. They deal with particular themes. If we take the key example of the detective story, then we can say that most detective stories deal with themes of terror, guilt, violence, betrayal and mystery. These themes run through most detective stories.

TASK

Look at the other three genres listed below. What themes are common to films within each of these genres? You might repeat certain of the themes that occur in detective stories. For example, you might say that betrayal is a theme of love stories and that violence occurs in war stories. Try to come up with as many themes as possible for each genre.

- Romantic comedy
- Western
- Horror

When you have completed the task you should now start to think about how these themes are dealt with in the story of War of the Worlds.

In the chart below write down four of what you think are the themes of the film. Next to each theme try to write down at least two incidents from the film which illustrate that theme.

THEME	INCIDENTS IN WAR OF THE WORLDS

If we say that we enjoy one particular type of film then where does the pleasure that we get come from? We have already seen the ways in which genre films repeat similar plots, contain similar characters. What is it that makes you want to go on seeing the same type of film over and over again when you know what might happen and appear on the screen?

In a sense the concept of genre supplies the audience and the filmmaker with a framework. In making a gangster film, a director and scriptwriter have certain ideas that they can 'play' with. It is unlikely that any one-genre film will use all of the conventions that you noted earlier. Twists and turns take place within the sense of the familiar. Each director will put into a genre film something different - it might be the motives of a character, the settings could be slightly different. What we are talking about is the skeleton of a text - the structure - which always has similarities with others of the same genre.

Within that structure, with which we, the audience, are familiar, lays the opportunity for change, into an area of originality. The important question here is why an audience likes this sense of the familiar. Can you think of any reasons why we go back and see the same types of films again and again?

REPRESENTATIONS

In all media we are presented with views of the world - ways in which to behave, ways in which we could live, the types of clothes that we could wear. Values are suggested by the producers of all media products. Even though we might not be as aware of it as we are in adverts, all of the time we are being told how to live our lives in certain ways by identifying with what we see in a film and in other media.

TASK

In War of the Worlds, what are the values which seem to be admired and which values are we being asked to reject?

We should also remember is that the view of the world that we are given is not simply a 'window'. This view is deliberately constructed through the whole production process of any film.

Influence is brought to bear on all films so that they look 'right'. But who decides what is 'right' - the producer or the audience? If you look back at your ideas about the values of War of the Worlds, then who has decided that the 'good' values shown are in fact 'good' and worthwhile?

TASK

Below are six statements. Read them carefully and think about what each one says. Then write down whether you agree or disagree with each statement and give reasons for your answers.

1. When we watch a film we know that it is only a film. We don't believe that we can do what is shown on the screen.
2. Film is responsible for the violence in our society.
3. Films cannot change anything. It can only reflect what is happening in the world.
4. There is nothing wrong with the ways in which films show the world.
5. There is nothing sexist or racist about films.
6. Films can teach us how to live our lives properly.
7. We only watch films for entertainment.

Now see if you agree or disagree with these comments on War of the Worlds.

1. Working life in the dockyards is only the background to the story and so it does not matter how it is represented.
2. It is important that one of the central characters is a child.
3. Human beings are complacent about their superiority.
4. Human beings should prepare themselves in case they are invaded by aliens.
5. If people stay true to themselves and their family, they will be rewarded.
6. When it comes to it, humans will do anything to save themselves.
7. We rely too much on technology.
8. The film is more about human values than about alien invasions.
9. There is more to being a hero in a film than being heroic.

When you have done this, compare your answers with a partner and see if you agree. Discuss any disagreements that might be found in your answers.