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# From Book to Screen: The Literary Authors' Journey to Adaptation

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## **Abstract**

This article seeks to bring theories of authorship and the field of cultural production together with the experiences of Man Booker shortlisted authors in order to examine the inter-relationships of capital within literary authorship and adaptation. Issues addressed include; whether an author should let go of a work to allow others to interpret the text in their own way, if the active presence of an author confirms the integrity of adaptation, and if the idea of the author as a “creative genius and truth-telling sage to a debased and profit-hungry society” (Murray 2012, 26) is an outdated, romantic idealisation overstating the cultural and symbolic capital controlled by the author. Emma Donoghue’s (*Room* – novel adapted to film) and Yann Martel’s (*Life of Pi* – novel adapted to film) recollections of adaptation provide case studies of two quite different author perspectives and experiences.

## **Keywords**

Adaptation; Authorship; Capital; Bourdieu; Man Booker; Literary Prizes.

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## Introduction

The Man Booker prize is recognised worldwide for identifying and rewarding literary English-language authors with shortlists acting as a “consumers’ guide” to literary fiction (Todd 1996, 71), thus creating or raising the authors’ public profile and often increasing sales. Shortlists also attract the attention of other media outlets including Hollywood. The appeal to film studios, producers and directors is partly due to the ready-made market and partly the cultural and symbolic capital a Man Booker shortlisted author can bring to a film, which ultimately translates into economic capital. Authors can take on different roles within the transition from book to screen, from an active influencer to a passive observer. The impact of author involvement can alter not only how the film is made but also how it is received and accepted as a valid extension of the novel.

Murray (2012) reimagines Bourdieu’s field and capital theory in the processes of adaptation, examining negotiations between cultural fields and how the value placed on capital within these fields influences the experiences of the author and director. Similarly, Driessens (2013) reinterprets Bourdieu, however he has a stronger focus on symbolic capital and its relationship with celebrity, a key factor for Man Booker authors as celebrity capital may lead to improved power in adaptation discussions and publicity.

With a slightly different focus Pret, Shaw and Dodd (2016) concentrate on the convertibility of capital and the differing value perceptions of economic, cultural and symbolic capital in different fields. Though they use the example of small businesses their ideas are relevant to authorship as the capital authors collect, convert and value influences their positions and decisions within the adaptation process, and the extent to which they wish to be actively involved. Todd (1996), English (2005) and Murray (2012) bring capital theory into literary prize culture, providing insight into the apparent importance of the Man Booker to publishing, society and film through an examination of the social capital of literary prizes, their history and the resulting impacts on authors.

Theories of authorship, primarily from Barthes, Foucault and Gardiner, are also considerations in the discussion of author experience in adaptation since the position, or indeed the existence, of the author alters their rights to claim authority over a work and ability to do so. McQueen (2012) discusses Foucault in relation to adaptation as he extends the theory of “founders of discursivity” to encompass authors in adaptation. The author role in adaptation is debated, Ayodeji (2011), Corrigan (2012) and Stam (2005, 2012) claim authors must accept the novel as a participatory dialogue and multimedia experience, however this does not automatically reduce authors to bystanders, as Gardiner recognises the author name is key in the integrity, visibility and sales potential of the work and its derivatives.

### **Bourdieu, Adaptation and Literary Prizes**

Bourdieu heavily influences theories of adaptation through capital and field theory. He proposes that society is a plurality of “specialized and semi-autonomous” social fields that exist in a state of “continuous struggle” (Schwarz 1997, 121); a social logic governing interactions blankets understanding of all distinct fields, yet each one possesses its own combination of capital, sets its own terms, rules and boundaries, and cannot be reduced to any other field. Adaptation occurs due to conversation between different social fields, while negotiations are influenced by the positioning of individuals within each field, which in turn is determined by economic, symbolic and cultural capital, and the perceived value given to each (Driessens 2013; Murray 2012; English 2005).

Economic capital is the commercial aspect of each field, representing immediate monetary conversion. Cultural capital is the embodied “form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (Driessens 2013, 242), which can be objectified in cultural objects (books, films etc.) or institutionalised in educational qualifications. Symbolic capital however is harder to define as Bourdieu himself offered different definitions (Driessens 2013). Swartz (2013, 84) expresses symbolic capital as the legitimisation of cultural and economic capital through “publically recognized authority”, and can thus exist even when misrecognised. It depends

on the number of people within an individual's social network who recognise achievements as achievements, and who can be mobilised.

Bourdieu's theories are pertinent to the role of the author in terms of negotiating power in adaptation rights-dealing and in authorial control in casting, screenwriting and direction; Murray (2012) notes that the more literary the author the better their bargaining power. The Man Booker, as a cultural powerhouse, embodies and institutionalises authors as literary cultural beings. Indeed, Bourdieu's favoured expression for cultural awards was "consecrations" (English 2005, 31), whilst Pret et al. (2016) state awards objectify symbolic capital. Once shortlisted, authors often experience a higher public profile and increased sales (Todd 1996) which can significantly impact an author's symbolic capital - though the extent varies according to the public attention to, and recognition of the prize and the shortlisted authors as well as author visibility.

An author with higher symbolic capital is of higher economic and cultural value in adaptation as they have a greater following who see them as the definitive authority on their work and any derivatives of it. In comparison a middle-range mass-market author who may sell in equal numbers but does not possess the cultural cachet enabled by literary prize consecration has a lesser chance of influencing an adaptation (Murray 2012). The key factor distinguishing these two authors is the power of their name and the value in its attachment to the adaptation (see Authorship and Adaptation).

Bourdieu's capital theory has been debated and extended with subsidiaries being suggested as well as new distinct capitals. The most relevant is celebrity capital, which benefits from media visibility but is independent as it values image and commodity over attracting a large audience. It was categorised by Thompson (2000, 2005, and 2012) as a form of symbolic capital, though Driessens (2013) considered it totally separate. Although celebrity capital can be a valuable asset, as 'status on speed' (Kurzmann quoted in Driessens 2013) it may be experienced in a short, sharp hit but without the lasting positivity of symbolic capital, thus affecting the period available for celebrity authors to capitalise on success. There may also be connotations of superficiality, Driessens cites Rojeks' coining of "celetoids" (2013, 545)

referring to the disposable nature of celebrity. As commodities they are easily, and regularly, replaced by new “celetoids” in a constant cycle of disingenuous superstardom.

Pret et al. (2016) are critical of advocating absolute importance of one form of capital, portraying capital as multifaceted, convertible and transferable. Holding celebrity capital in one field does not automatically lead to recognition in others due to the different values fields place on forms of capital. The literary field for instance does not value celebrity as highly as cultural or symbolic capital. The film industry however can convert an authors' symbolic capital into celebrity, although this may only count in that field and not transfer to the authors' field of origin. Driessens (2013) also promotes accounting for the exchange rate and costs of conversion as it does not occur confidentially and may face resistance – a literary author may receive criticism for accepting commercialist rewards, such as large advances for adaptation. Therefore adaptations do not necessarily contribute to an authors' literary recognition (Murray 2012; Driessens 2013; Pret et al. 2016).

### **Authorship and Adaptation**

Debates over the role of authors in adaptation echoes to some degree the structuralist and postmodernist theories on authorship as it questions the position of authors as the creative genius, focus of all critical analysis, and single authority of a text. Barthes, who famously announced “The Death of the Author” (1967), envisioned the reader overtaking the all-encompassing author-centric view since the author's identity is lost upon writing, thus considerations of their intention limits interpretation and obscures linguistic quality.

Removing the author's authority impacts the negotiations and organisations of adaptations. Without an author a text would be open to interpretation, enabling unlimited adaptations each with its own personality. Using Barthes (1967) it can further be suggested these adaptations would be open to interpretation, paving the way for additional adaptations of adaptations. Such freedom is a move away from moralistic criticisms of adaptation, identified as “infidelity, betrayal, deformation, violation, vulgarization, and desecration” (Stam 2012, 74). Accepting adaptations as one reading allows a work to be viewed as one

part of an ongoing dialogical process, with the initial author as originator but not the controller. This would reduce Man Booker authors to the state of all authors regardless of their economic, cultural, symbolic or celebrity capital. Indeed, the author was on the periphery, not only in adaptation, but as Barthes suggests in the text, they would not collect capital or convert it as it would belong to the work and not the originator.

Similarly, Corrigan (2012) examines the potential of unlimited readings with a focus on the impact of technology on film audiences as the digital revolution brought into question traditional authorship and textual authority. He suggests the development of viewing-media has enabled spectator control; just as readers take command of literature, audiences can experience films in a multitude of individual ways whilst other agents step back. A convergence culture emerges where viewers/readers become mobile players in and between fields, therefore breaking down barriers between media and introducing literature and adaptation as equally open to interpretation (Jenkins 2006; Corrigan 2012).

Reflecting the view of both authors and directors that authors do not travel beyond penning literature Ernest Hemmingway once advised:

The best way for a writer to deal with Hollywood [is] to arrange a rendezvous with the movie men at the California state line. You throw them your book, they throw you the money, then you jump into your car and drive like hell back to where you came from. (Cited in Murray 2012, 25-6)

Hollywood has been known to view authors as a necessary evil, an unwanted but indispensable source of content (Murray 2012). However, even when an author follows the advice of Hemmingway their name is a valuable source of capital, as Gardiner (2000) recognised, the author-role and endorsement as originator reaffirms the integrity of a work and guarantees meaning in the marketplace. The author name is also used for publicity through accreditation at the start or end of the film, invitations to the premier, acknowledgement as executive producer or by interviews with the media (Murray 2012).

Gardiner also noted how although literary and cultural theory has followed to some extent Barthes' predictions of a decline in author centrality, in practice publishing and adaptation thrives on the author-function in the circulation and reception of the cultural product. The author's voice of support is marketing logic, yet Barthes would have us believe the author does not have authority, or an identity, as the originator and thus their support would be meaningless to the film's collection of capital.

Foucault (1998) responded to Barthes, not by arguing for the rehabilitation of the author-god, but rather by asserting that the continued existence of authors illustrated they were more complex than previously assumed. Foucault sought to separate literary authors from "founders of discursivity" (217), which defined authors as writers who produce something beyond their own text and enable reuse by others.

Scholars of adaptation take a similar view on the importance of authors accepting the novel as a participatory form, in the way Foucault describes authors of discourse, they should enable deeper interaction with the work than conferred in the text. Authors of literary value will learn to write for the purpose of this interactive "multimedia experience" (Ayodeji 2011, 116-7). Whether those novels will be the next nominees for literary prizes remains to be seen but as it is already acknowledged Booker shortlists are a powerful catalyst for adaptation. Murray (2012) cites the overall average number of titles adapted for screen each year is a mere 0.1 percent, however for Man Booker shortlisted titles this figure rises to 21 percent.

Foucault states the initiator "of a discursive practice does not participate in its later transformations" (1998, 219), a theory McQueen (2012) extends to the authors' role in adaptation. Although Foucault's concern was primarily the founding fathers of grand-narratives such as Marx, McQueen claims transformations of literature are their own form of discursivity as adaptation prompts a return to the originator in concert with subsequent versions, but does not promote fidelity to the source. Through this theory of authorship room is made for the distinctive authorial intentions of the director who becomes equal to

the author, able to impose their own identity on an adaptation rather than merely copying and 'poaching its cultural capital and transposing it onto film' (McQueen 2012, 67).

Despite not advocating the disappearance of the author-function, Foucault and McQueen suggest authors do not warrant a role in subsequent transformations of the source text beyond their accreditation as founder. As supported by Barthes and Corrigan creative control is transferred from the initial author, however, McQueen assigns control to the director whilst Corrigan and Barthes would see it dispersed amongst readers/viewers. Either way the author role in adaptation is vastly reduced to that of a passive bystander, with no credit towards the capital collected by the author through literary prize consecration. Echoing Hemmingway's advice the author as a founder of discourse will throw over their work without a thought of interfering, a choice not accepted by all authors.

### **The Man Booker Shortlist and Author Role in Adaptation**

Murray (2012) claims scholars of adaptation need to consider theories from other disciplines to create a hybrid analysis of adaptation within its contemporary material and cultural economy. She questions the separation of the cultural and the commercial, stating adaptations cannot be isolated from their original source, as they are not a mere afterthought but an anticipated and deliberate commercial and cultural strategic decision. In a global conglomerate multimedia landscape adaptation is as much the concern of the publishing industry as it is the film industry, with the potential of selling film rights "stage-managed and pursued at every stage of a book's pre- and post- publication life" (Murray 2012, 26). As such it is important to consider the originator's role in pursuing, influencing and advocating adaptation throughout negotiations, writing, shooting and screening.

Emma Donoghue and *Room*:

Donoghue was an experienced author when *Room* was published 2010 by Little, Brown and Co. (the same year it appeared on the Booker shortlist), with several other titles to her name and the support of literary agent Caroline Davidson. *Room* was shortlisted for a number of literary prizes and the film adaptation (2015) similarly attracted nominations for prestigious honours including four Academy Awards.

Donoghue, with considerable foresight, began working on *Room*'s screenplay immediately after submitting the novel's final manuscript. In later interviews she admitted fearing directors would wish to avoid author interference and she would lose creative control over the adaptation. Donoghue acted before any interest in adaptation was even hinted at, believing if she "[wrote] it first...it'll be harder for them to say no" to her desired role as screenwriter (Marcus 2016); an aggressive and optimistic stance which eventually paid off. Donoghue is arguably the type of literary author Ayodeji (2011) would commend for seeing beyond the novel as a print artefact and encouraging the multimedia experience.

With a clear vision of her role in adapting *Room*, and the cultural and symbolic capital gained from a Man Booker nomination behind her, Donoghue was in a stronger position than most when negotiating adaptation rights and held off offers until the right one came along (Murray 2012; English 2005). Ultimately it was a letter written to her personally which clinched the deal, described in Kerridge (2016) as half "a kind of brilliant book review", Lenny Abrahamson impressed Donoghue with his understanding of *Room*'s subtle literary references, and his restraint in offering hollow platitudes. Though Abrahamson gutted the dialogue and insisted on allowing the actors to improvise scenes irrespective of Donoghue's initial horror, she later acknowledged the benefits of this approach. As Stam (2005, 2012) states maintaining the essence of expression is favourable to absolute fidelity, this then leaves room for multiple readings and supports the director's right to equal authorship in the adaptation (McQueen 2012).

Donoghue remains the definitive authority on her work, maintaining her right to author the screenplay and retain creative license over casting and direction. Also, as is evident from the number of interviews available online – conducted on the publication of the novel, Booker

shortlist announcement, film release and film award nominations – author involvement is vital to the recognisability and legitimisation of novels and adaptations as cultural products. As Gardiner (2000) recognises, the author is a key publicity tool used to distinguish integrity in an over-populated marketplace. The resulting adaptation can be viewed by fans and critics as possessing literary endorsement, without which the film could not successfully appropriate the novel's and author's cultural and symbolic capital. Boozer further suggests adaptations refresh the original, creating a symbiosis of capital transference in a "full circularity of influences" (2012, 211).

### **Yann Martel and *Life of Pi***

Before the success of *Life of Pi* as a Booker winner in 2002 (published 2001 by Canongate) Martel was virtually unknown and living off only £4000 a year. In an article for *The Guardian* Martel describes his life as an author as "a quiet thing" until the announcement that he had won the Man Booker prize: "the silence [was] broken by a great deal of noise". Martel goes on to define the act of prize-giving, rewards and media recognition as not a reason for writing, but as "tokens of a faith that art matters"; a view mirroring assertions that awards go beyond allocating economic capital but also seek to legitimise and objectify cultural and symbolic capital, as Bourdieu claims they are consecrations (English 2005; Pret et al 2016).

Unlike Donoghue, Martel was not as prepared for a film adaptation admitting that whilst he believed it would make an excellent visual experience he did not believe that the technology existed at the time to justify an attempt. Indeed, it took a decade and several directors for *Life of Pi* to make the leap from page to screen (the film was finally released in 2012 and won four Academy Awards in 2013). Also in contrast to Donoghue, Martel did not view adaptation as a priority, preferring to take Hemmingway's advice of throwing the manuscript over and staying out of the way; "I know my limits...it's my business to write words...not to make movies" (quoted in Lee 2012).

Moreover Martel echoes Foucault and McQueen's assertions of the nonessential author in subsequent translations of a source text, declaring it was not his right to assert creative

control as the adaptation belonged to the director. In interviews he stated, "I told them to take liberties" (Medley 2012), and that "all the praise and all the condemnation" belonged to the director (Morrison 2012). Martel saw his role as the author as having finished with the novel, however he was instrumental in the promotion of both the book and adaptation. After the initial Booker winner announcement he embarked on a two year publicity tour and later, around the time of the film's release, agreed to interviews thereby implying his support.

Martel was offered early drafts of the screenplay, however he claims he did not ask to be involved and only commented on the idiosyncrasies of the Indian language used and not on the plot development or structure (Quill 2012). Although Martel's involvement in the adaptation was minimal he did appear in a cameo role, a tactic identified as a common and conscious strategy of adaptations seeking to depict author approval, convert and transfer capital and appeal to niche fan communities (Murray 2012).

## Conclusion

By identifying novels as literary products, the Man Booker shortlist grants author's economic, cultural, symbolic, and potentially celebrity capital. Upon adaptation this is transferable and convertible across social fields, improving the author's ability to negotiate rights deals and become involved in the adaptation process. However, author interference is not always welcomed, as recognised by both Donoghue and Martel, but author response to this presumption varies. Some (Martel) take Hemmingway's advice to disappear and not associate with the commercial field of Hollywood whilst others (Donoghue) confront this barrier and breakthrough in order to retain creative control. However, the use of the author name in promoting adaptation is sought after regardless of author involvement, or lack thereof. Arguably by placing a recognisable, consecrated author name on an adaptation, capital can be appropriated and even converted into the desired form of capital. This refutes Barthes' claims of "The Death of the Author" (1967) as author name and brand is key to

validation of adaptations, particularly for supposed culturally significant literature as those consecrated by the Man Booker shortlist.

McQueen's (2012) recycling of Foucault's authors as founders of discursivity provides a fascinating interpretation of authorship in contemporary adaptation and their position as bystanders to, not participants of, adaptation. Conversely, Ayodeji (2011) advises authors to accept and prepare for the impacts of technological developments which cause the thinning of boundaries between cultural fields. Authors must accept novels as a part of a multimedia experience and not as an artefact of higher cultural value; the value is in content not in its form. Donoghue represents the latter style of authorship, actively engaging in the 'convergence culture' (Jenkins 2006) whilst Martel exhibits the role described by McQueen as he handed over artistic licence to the director, only appearing at the end of the process to promote and transfer capital to the adaptation.

The issue with attempts to reduce authorship in adaptation to one experience or impose a particular idea of the author-function is that it forgets the multifaceted personalities and opinions of authors and the practicalities of promoting a singular approach. Corrigan states the relationship between film and literature should not be divided by texts and screens, or indeed author and director, but rather adaptation is a process of equal "creative and interactive players" (2012, 51). When examined as individuals rather than theoretical concepts authors, directors, agents, publishers, readers and viewers are collaborative, interactive participants contributing equally to the adaptation process. Consequently individual roles should not be seen as reducible to singular types, human nature and preference must be considered alongside traditional theory.

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