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Room by Emma Donoghue:
From the Reader's Perception to the Spectator's Eyes

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

An adaptation is defined as a film or play that has been adapted from a pre-existing work. The art of adaptation reached its highest point through the nineteenth and the twentieth century in Europe, and it has been pervasive ever since. However, it was not until Robert Stam studied the art of adaptation that it was conceptualized as a dialogic process.

Emma Donoghue's story *Room* was one of the few movies that were successfully adapted by the same writer who wrote the original story. The film adaptation of *Room* received critical acclaim. Nonetheless, there are many aspects of the adaptation that have not been covered yet. Thus, I aim to determine how the adaptation of *Room* reads the book, the way its characters are portrayed, the changes in setting and the shift in point of view. The film adaptation of *Room* reads the novel carefully and expresses it with the special magic and charm of the cinema.

In order to explore it, I intend to divulge the factors in which the film adaptation and the novel differ. I will focus on their two different ways of communicating as they have different objectives, according to the studies of Robert Stam and the Intertextual Dialogism Approach – which breaks with the previous studies of film adaptations and considers it a dialectical process.

Keywords: Room, Emma Donoghue, film adaptation, novel, screenplay, perspective, Characters, Lenny Abrahamson, Robert Stam.

0. Introduction

Adaptations have been ever-present in the film industry from the beginning of the seventh art in the nineteenth century. Georges Méliès, who was an illusionist and one of the first filmmakers, filmed and released two of the earliest film adaptations of literary works in 1899; *Cinderella* an adaptation of the story by the Brothers Grimm and *King John*, the first Shakespeare film adaptation. The term “adapt” means “to transpose from one medium to another.”

The art of film adaptation and adapted stories has been studied by many writers, screenwriters and theorists who will be discussed in this dissertation. Some crucial critics will be mentioned, such as Linda Hutcheon, Robert Stam, Brian McFarlane and Thomas Leitch, among others, and their works *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film* (2005), *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* (2000), *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (1996), *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of The Christ* (2007).

Adaptation is considered a skill and a challenge (Field, 2005: 259), it is an original work and “in film you have to keep the story moving forward, and the best way to do that is by intercutting the events between the main characters, then weaving the line of action through the story (...) the story line always has to keep moving” (264). Unlike a novel, films ought to be entertaining in a shorter amount of time, which is why “there may be times in your adaptation that you have to add new characters, drop others, create new incidents or events, perhaps alter the entire structure of a book” (263).

Hutcheon affirms that “an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary” (9). She describes adaptations as palimpsestic, stories that change throughout time; this definition was later supported by Thomas Leitch.

This aim of this project is to shed light on the previous research on adaptations and the process of translation of a story from a book to a film. This dissertation will focus on the novel *Room* and how its film adaptation reads the adapted work considering the strategies used in film to tell a story in a different light, such as the elimination of certain characters, the aspect of prison, the presence of a voice-over and the setting will be studied and compared to the narrative techniques of the author Emma Donoghue.

1. The Art of Adaptation

1.1 History of Adaptation

Adaptation is considered a film genre by most researchers of the field like Cartmell (2010). However, it has never been defined as such, as Leitch stated that “if adaptation is a genre, it has been a largely invisible genre that has flown beneath most observers’ radar” (106: 2008). The art of adaptation should be defined before analyzing the main topic of this research paper.

An example of adaptation would be Charlie Kaufman’s movie about a writer who is trying to adapt a novel, this movie’s title is also *Adaptation* (2002), and it follows the life of Charles who is adapting Susan Orlean’s book *The Orchid Thief*. It is believed that Kaufman was invited to write the adaptation of that book, but he was going through a writer’s block and decided to write a movie about the difficulties of adapting a film. *Adaptation* shows how hard it can be for a writer to create an adapted screenplay as we can see the main character struggling in front of the computer. Furthermore, it “calls up the question of how we speak about the filmic adaptation of novels” (Stam, 2005: 3).

There are different types of adaptations, some are really successful in the industry: there are adaptations based on real stories like *The Impossible* – which follows a family in the aftermath of a tsunami-, adaptations based on poetry like *Dickinson* – this series explores the life of the poet Emily Dickinson through her poems-, the *Marvel* industry which is completely adapted from the comic books with the same title – the Marvel Cinematic Universe shows the lives of different superheroes as they encounter different threats - or literary adaptations like *Room* by Emma Donoghue the example that will be studied throughout this project.

According to Linda Hutcheon an adaptation is defined as “acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works” (35). She states that in order to be adapted a novel ought to be a “creative and interpretive act of salvaging”. Hence, the adaptation could save a story from forgetfulness. Hutcheon suggests that the joy of the adaptation comes from the repetition of stories with modifications. As she mentions “recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change” (2006: 4).

Furthermore, Hutcheon asserts that an adaptation can be reviewed by asking *what, who, why, how, where and when*. The *what* refers to the type of adaptation, the *who* refers to the author whose work is being adapted, the *why* refers to the main message that the adaptation is going to give from the adapted work. The *how* is the reaction of the audience to the adaptation. The *where* and *when* refer to the context in which the original source was created and the context in which the adaptation will be released. A story can be significantly different from its original source when the context it will be released in is completely disparate. Therefore, many stories have been adapted more than once; for example, the eternal story *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare (1597) was adapted to a film for the first time in 1908 by Barry O’Neil. However, this tragedy has had several adaptations throughout history from the award-winning version directed by Zeffirelli (1968) to the most famous one directed by Luhrman (1996). *Romeo and Juliet*’s story has also been adapted to completely new narratives, such as *West Side Story* (1961) and the newest version *West Side Story* directed by Steven Spielberg (2021). Another famous novel that has been turned into a film many times is *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott (1868) which was adapted for the first time as a silent film in 1917 directed by A. Butler. According to critics, like Scott Mendelson of *Forbes* or *IMDb*, the best adaptations to *Little Women* were directed by G. Armstrong (1994) and G. Gerwig (2019).

Hutcheon mentions three modes of engagement to study the methodology of adaptations: “telling”, “showing” and “interactive”. These modes or forms relate to how a story is written, how a filmmaker decides to portray it, and how it is seen by the audience. The mode of “telling” takes place when the work is printed. The audience is persuaded by a written story. The “showing” mode corresponds to the delivery of a story, the audience is able to see it – movies or musicals. Finally, the “interactive” mode occurs when the audience takes part in the story, which can be the case in live performances, video games, reviews or blogs. Hutcheon’s thoughts are similar to the books of other researchers on the field such as Robert Stam, Thomas Leitch or Brian McFarlane, which I will comment on in the following section.

1.2 The Role of Fidelity

As Stam mentions, the question of fidelity ignores the bigger question of which aspect of a novel a filmmaker should be faithful to, if they are faithful to every single detail of a book a movie could last thirty hours. They could find an actor that is exactly like a character of a book regardless of them being a good actor or not. (2005: 15). Besides, a writer can create their story with just a pen, a piece of paper or a computer whereas a filmmaker needs to be aware of the budget among other factors, since “filmmaking, adaptation in particular, involves thousands of choices, concerning performers, budget, locale, format, props, and so forth. (...) there would be an infinity of subtle differences.” (17).

The audience is used to saying “it was not as good as the book” after watching a film adaptation. Therefore, a group of theorists on the field decided to analyze why a film adaptation does not need to be exactly like its original source, or as Hutcheon prefers to call it in order to break the hierarchical power, “adapted text”.

Robert Stam shares eight sources of hostility to adaptation; the first one is the thought that literature is more prestigious than cinema which derives from the concept of historical anteriority, which assumes that “older arts are better arts” (2005: 4). According to Stam “a second source of hostility to adaptation derives from the dichotomous thinking that presumes a bitter rivalry between film and literature. The writer and the filmmaker, according to an old anecdote, are traveling in the same boat but they both harbor a secret desire to throw the other overboard” (4). Stam adds a third source of hostility to adaptation which is “iconophobia, this deeply rooted cultural prejudice against the visual arts” (5). The fourth source is the opposite of iconophobia, it is logophilia, “the exaltation of the written word as the privileged medium of communication” (6).

Stam’s fifth source of hostility to adaptation and movies is anti-corporeality or “the distaste for the unseemly *embodiedness* of the filmic text”. To support his arguments, Stam affirms that Virginia Woolf thought that film spectators in the twentieth century were “savages whose eyes mindlessly lick up the screen” as she expressed in her essay *The Movies and Reality* (1926: 264, cited in Stam 2005: 3). Although movies and novels are mental experiences, novels allow the reader to imagine a scene whereas a film simply delivers it. Films have the aim of getting a physical response.

The sixth source of hostility is “the myth of facility”, the assumption that films are easier to make and easier to watch and understand than novels. However, like novels, films can also be “reread” to decipher new content every time, a good example could be *Cheaper by the Dozen*, a film that came out earlier this year, 2022, which is a remake of the movies from 1950 and 2003 with the same title. The seventh source of hostility to the cinema and adaptations is the “subliminal form of class prejudice” and how the cinema is perceived as “vulgar” spectacles like slideshows or carnivals (7).

Lastly, the eighth source of hostility to adaptation is the “charge of parasitism” because “adaptations are seen as parasitical on literature; they burrow into the body of the source text and steal its vitality”. In other words, a “faithful” adaptation is seen as uncreative, and an “unfaithful” film is seen as betrayal. (8)

Stam concludes that “for all these reasons, fidelity in adaptation is literally impossible. A filmic adaptation is automatically different and original due to the change of medium. (...) Even a *faithful* adaptation might take many forms.”

As McFarlane argues in his book *Novel to Film. An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (1996), the audience desires pictures, when they are reading a story, they usually create a picture in their minds of the events that take place in a novel. They are usually excited to see if the movie adaptation of their favorite book is what they pictured and most of the times they are disappointed with the results, since it is nearly impossible to please everyone in the audience.

Those theorists argue that an adaptation is an original work based on another source, which does not mean that it is inferior. Hence, it would not be beneficial to analyze a film adaptation considering how faithful it is to the source, but rather analyze a novel and its adaptation as equals.

As stated by Leitch “the theory of adaption has no reason to assume that any work is better than another regardless of which came first” (2007). As mentioned by Robert Stam “the trope of adaptation as a *reading* of the source novel suggests that just as any text can generate an infinity of readings, so any novel can generate any number of adaptational readings which are inevitably partial, personal, conjunctural, interested” (2005: 25).

Therefore, the audience can perceive a reading from the novel and another one from its film adaptation; it is the spectators who give their own meaning to a story. Leitch

supports this statement as he defines fidelity as “fruitless” (64: 2007). Stam also describes fidelity as an “inadequate trope” and concludes that a more adequate trope to describe adaptation would be “translation” (62). The term “translation” comes from the Latin, and it means “bearing across”. Salman Rushdie states that “it is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained.” (1991: 17)

In fact, Field asserts that the fine art of adaptation is “not being true to the original” as he compares the act of writing a book and an adapted screenplay “like apples like oranges” (2005: 274). Although novels and films, also known as “words” and “pictures” are very different, they both also share some qualities. The most important aspect of a movie is its story. Moreover, the most important features of a movie are also present in a novel, such as the characters, the plot, the events and the context. Thus, films and books are really different but quite similar.

According to the author Louis Giannetti in his book *Understanding Movies*, every single adaptation movie falls under the spectrum of three types: literal, faithful and loose. A literal adaptation refers to a work that is exactly like its adapted equivalent, Giannetti affirms that an example of literal adaption is restricted to plays as they can be longer than films, but an example of literal film adaptation could be *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) directed by Jonathan Demme. A faithful adaption refers to a work that “attempts to re-create the literary source in filmic terms, keeping close to the spirit of the original as possible” (2016), some examples of faithful adaptations could be the *Harry Potter* movies. Finally, a loose adaptation takes place when only a character or a specific situation from the adapted work is used for the adaptation, just thematic settings are integrated so an example of loose adaptation would be *The Shining* (1980) directed by Stanley Kubrick.

Room by Emma Donoghue and Lenny Abrahamson

2.1. From the Reader's perspective

Emma Donoghue's *Room* is a novel which was published in 2010. *Room* tells the story of a girl who was kidnapped and became a mother, after a stillborn daughter, while being held captive in a 11-by-11-foot room after being sexually abused for seven years before her escape. This story was inspired by a real crime case, The Fritzl Case, however, "to say *Room* is based on the Josef Fritzl case is too strong" as Donoghue stated in an interview for *The Guardian*. The novel is divided in two parts: the first part narrates the isolation and captivity of Ma and Jack, in which they are the only main characters, whereas the second part explains their escape and their adjustment to the world where new characters are added to their bubble. *Room* is described by Emma Donoghue as "a book about the smallest of worlds, and the biggest" in *Writing Room: Why and How*.

The novel won the 2011 *Commonwealth Writers' Prize*, and it was shortlisted for different awards such as the 2010 *Booker Prize* and the 2010 *Governor General's Awards*. *Room* was described by *Irish Times* as "the most vivid, radiant and beautiful expression of maternal love", the novelist Michael Cunningham says "*Room* is that rarest of entities an entirely original work of art. I mean it as the highest possible praise when I tell you that I can't compare it to any other book. Suffice to say that it is potent darkly beautiful, and revelatory." (2009). The novel *Room* was adapted to film in 2015 directed by Lenny Abrahamson. In 2017, the play with music *Room* was premiered at *Theatre Royal Stratford East* which was also adapted by the same author.

The story is narrated in first-person by Jack, a little boy who turns five the same day he starts narrating his story, as he says "Today I'm five. I was four last night going

to sleep in Wardrobe, but when I wake up in Bed in the dark, I'm changed to five, abracadabra" (2009: 3), since he is a little kid we can find many ungrammatical constructions and simple vocabulary, Donoghue used Jack as the narrator as a way of explaining horrible things in a new light, as they are told through the eyes of an innocent child, as she told *The Economist* "I hoped having a small child narrator would make such a horrifying premise original, involving, but also more bearable: his innocence would at least partly shield the reader on their descent into the abyss." (2010). For instance, Jack describes the constant sexual abuse perpetuated by the kidnapper – or as they call him Old Nick – by saying that "Old Nick creaks the bed" (46). The reader reads the story from a different perspective, specifically, from the point of view of someone who has been locked in a shed his whole life. If Jack had not been the narrator, *Room* would have been described as "another crime story".

He begins explaining his birth and how he "zoomed down from Heaven through Skylight" (4). This is the first religious reference found in the novel, however, there are many religious references as the story progresses, including God, different Saints and Baby Jesus. When the author was asked in an interview for *The Economist* about these religion references, she replied "I have always been religiously inclined, but it does not come up in most of my books. I always knew it would be central to *Room* because prisoners cling to whatever tatters of faith they have got" (2011). Christianity is also shown whenever they thank baby Jesus for their food before eating. Furthermore, Jack describes the sun as "God's yellow face" (9), and the moon as "God's silver face" (32). Religion gives them, but mostly Ma, hope and faith to survive in Room.

Routines are very important to Jack in Room; Ma created a daily schedule that they both follow every day to give Jack some degree of normality. They have breakfast and brush their teeth, they stretch, and Ma teaches Jack a Physical Education class, they read books, they play games and watch television but not for long because Ma believes it rots their brains (13), they try to guess the number to open the door, they scream and plan what they are going to ask for on “Sundaytreat”. Jack sleeps in Wardrobe when Old Nick visits in the evening.

Donoghue uses teeth as a symbol to represent the inner health of Jack and Ma, Jack describes Ma’s teeth as “pretty rotted” since “she forgotte^d (sic)¹ to brush them” (9) but his are “so clean they are dazzling” (9). After being in pain for a long time Ma loses a tooth – as Jack calls it “Bad Tooth”. Bad Tooth is a nightmare for Ma, but it is a lifesaver for Jack as it makes him feel connected to his mother when he is away throughout the novel. It is a connection between their bodies.

Another moving symbol used by Donoghue to show their bodily bond is breastfeeding. Ma breastfeeds Jack who is five years old as a way of strengthening their bond, since there is no closer bond possible than breastfeeding. Jack refers to this tradition as “having some”, as he narrates “I have some now, the right because the left hasn’t much in it. When I was three, I still had lots anytime, but since I was four, I’m so busy doing stuff I only have some a few times in the day and the night” (23), “having some” is not only a bonding experience between Jack and Ma but also a moment of peace and comfort for him, “I want some very much, I didn’t have any all day. The right even, but I’d rather the left” (79). Breastfeeding is also used to make Jack’s transition to the overwhelming world easier, however, it is not understood by anyone else – not the doctors nor Ma’s family – when she is asked about it, Ma answers “there was no reason to stop” (268). However, by the end Ma stops breastfeeding, but they do not lose their bond. Their relationship has matured, and they adjust to the World.

One of the most recurrent themes in *Room* is the notion of reality as opposed to television. Everything that he cannot see in Room is not real, as he explains:

¹ *Sic* will be used to quote Jack’s words exactly as they appear in the novel.

Ships are just TV and so is the sea except when our poos and letters arrive. Or maybe they actually stop being real the minute they get there? (...) Forests are TV and also jungles and deserts and skyscrapers and cars. Animals are TV except ants and Spider and Mouse, but he's gone back now. Germs are real and blood. Boys are TV but they kind of look like me, the me in Mirror that isn't real either, just a picture. (66)

Only the palpable objects are real to Jack, as he asserts:

Dora is just a drawing in TV but she's my real friend that's confusing. Jeep is actually real; I can feel him with my fingers. Superman is just TV. Trees are TV but Plant is real (...) Grass is TV and so is fire, but it could come in Room for real if I hot the beans (...) Air's real and water only in Bath and Sink, rivers and lakes are TV. (...) but God is real looking in Skylight. (78-79)

Jack believes his whole world is just Room and outside of it there is the Outer Space.

He believes that TV – as he calls it- shows what is happening in other planets. Jack thinks that only everything that is tangible is real, if he cannot touch it, it is just television as he says “Dogs are only TV (...) Spider's real. I've seen her two times” (10). Jack struggles to comprehend and make a distinction between real and “just TV” throughout the story. When Jack sees a mouse in Room, he believes it is real since he can see it and touch it, he describes it as “an alive thing, an animal for really real not TV”.

In Room there are no windows to the Outside, the element that serves as a link between Room and Outside is Skylight. The experience of Jack in Room is very similar to Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, which focuses on how our ideas are different from the actual world. In the *Allegory of the Cave* a group of prisoners in a “cave” accept everything they can see as true even if it is not since they have always been chained inside of the cave. Jack represents these prisoners, as he has also grown up in Room and has never seen the Outside. In fact, at a specific moment of the novel when Jack is Outside, he turns on the television and finds a program in which they are talking about him. One of the hosts says “Culture as a shadow on the wall of Plato's cave” when he is told that Jack had a television in Room. In the *Allegory of the Cave* the prisoners believed misleading and altered versions of reality, in the form of shadows on the walls, as they were unaware of the world. Jack's only input of the real world were deceitful images on

TV. In the *Allegory of the Cave* the sun is believed to show the truth and knowledge, it is shown when one of the prisoners is blinded by sunlight when he abandons the cave as he is shown reality. Jack is also blinded by sunlight when he escapes Room, and must wear sunglasses, alluding to the idea that he does not want to comprehend that Room is not “all there is”, he avoids the truth as he refuses sunlight by not going outside.

The peculiar relationship that Jack forges with the objects in Room can be seen from the beginning of the story. All the objects in room are capitalized, they are considered characters of the story, even Room is a character. He personifies inanimate objects which strengthens the nonhuman connections he has made over the past five years of his life. An example of how he personifies objects could be how he wishes good night to all the objects in Room before sleeping and encourages his Ma to do the same, he says “Good night, Room, good night, Lamp and Balloon (...) good night, Wordy Ball. Good night, Fort. Good night, Rug.” (53). Jack also fills the empty spots of relationships in his life with cartoons he watches on television, for example *SpongeBob SquarePants* to whom he even writes a letter, but especially *Dora the Explorer* because she listens to him and “every TV person else does not listen” (13), as he says, “Dora always says she’s going to need *my* help” (12). Dora also introduces him to Spanish, a language he had never heard before inside his tiny world, as he explains, “Dora says bits that aren’t in real language, they’re Spanish, like *lo hicimos*” (12). Therefore, every time Jack hears a foreign language when he is out of Room, he is certain it is Spanish, which shows the importance of *Dora* in Room, for example when he hears his doctor say “probably young enough to forget (...) which will be a *mercy*” as he thinks “That’s *thanks* in Spanish I think” (261).

Throughout *Room* Donoghue uses many literary references, especially as a way of giving Jack easier explanations, rather than information he would not understand.

Characters in books and television are the only people that Jack understands apart from Ma, even though they are not real. Ma uses a literature reference to *Alice in Wonderland*, which is a story, and a character Jack knows, to unlie (sic) and tell him the truth about Room and Outside. She starts by asking “You know how Alice wasn’t always in Wonderland? (...) Well, I’m like Alice”. Jack does not want to believe Ma as she is destroying in a second everything, he has believed in for five years. Ma tells him about his grandparents and proceeds by saying “Just because you’ve never met them doesn’t mean they’re not real” which encapsulates the idea of reality against television.

Jack does not believe in “Ma’s world” until he sees a plane through Skylight he describes as “really real for real” (113). Ma creates a plan for them to escape, Jack must pretend he is sick so that Old Nick will take him to the hospital, once he is there, he will have to show a note written by his mom to anyone in the hospital. Ma uses an *Alice in Wonderland* reference to explain to Jack that she will not be there with him, but she will be in his head by saying “Remember when Alice was falling down, down, down, she was talking to Dinah her cat in her head all the time?”, she compares herself and her voice to Dinah, Alice’s cat, and Jack to Alice. Apart from Alice, Ma also uses a *Dora the Explorer* reference to clarify the steps of the plan to Jack, she says “It’s like *Dora*, when she goes to one place and then a second place to get to the third place. For us it’s *Truck, Hospital, Police*” (136). Ma uses vocabulary from Jack’s world to make him feel more comfortable with the idea of her world. However, the plan does not succeed as Old Nick does not take him to the hospital. Jack regrets thinking about leaving Room for the overwhelming world and refuses Ma’s invitation to eat ice cream once they are free.

Donoghue uses another literature reference to illustrate the second plan Ma proposes. She mentions *The Count of Monte Cristo* and reminds Jack how he got out of a dungeon by telling him “He pretended to be his dead friend, he hid in the shroud and

the guards threw him into the sea, but the Count didn't drown he wriggled out and swam away". Donoghue also mentions *Romeo and Juliet* and how Juliet pretended to be dead to run away with her lover. These references set the scene for what Ma wants Jack to do, which is pretend to be dead. Jack has to stay in Rug and unwrap himself on the truck, then he must jump and find someone that could help him. Jack takes his Ma's tooth – Bad Tooth – so he can have a part of her, which reinforces his belief that he must touch something for it to be real.

Once Jack succeeds and abandons Room, he has his first encounter with the outside and asks himself "I'm not in Room. Am I still me?". Room is Jack's world and everything outside of Room – not even tangible objects – is not real, or he does not want it to be real. As he says "we have to be in the world, we're not ever going back to Room, Ma says that's how it is, and I should be glad. I don't know why we can't go back just to sleep even". He starts dividing the world in Room or Outside, he believes that "In Outside the time's all mixed up" (245), when he is told to go outside his answer is "but we're in Outside already" (217), and when he hears something about France he asks "Is France in outside? (325).

The second part of the novel takes place mostly in a clinic. Jack has difficulty adjusting to the world, specially to the sounds and the people in it, his new family, grandparents, uncle, aunt and cousin. He describes the world as a "TV planet" and he says people "move fast and they're suddenly on all the sides, even behind. They walk up close and have so many teeth, they smell wrong.". He also complains because he never knows when sounds are going to happen, and they make him jump" he notices "I don't disturb persons. But often when I talk, they don't hear me" (240). As the doctor says, "World is suddener than we fancy it" (242).

Jack spends most of his time in the clinic getting used to living in the World until Ma tries to end her own life and his grandmother takes him to her house. He describes what happened to his mother by narrating “she took the bad medicine, I think she was too tired to play anymore, she was in a hurry to get to Heaven, so she didn’t wait for me” (320).

When Ma feels better and she is discharged from the clinic, they move to a new apartment. Their nightmare ends when they visit and say goodbye to Room, and their real story begins.

2.2. To the Spectator's Eyes

Room is a drama film which was released in 2015. It was directed by Lenny Abrahamson and written by Emma Donoghue, the same author who wrote the original novel on which it is based in 2010. *Room* is considered a successful adaptation by many critics, such as Ruth Kinane.

It is not usual to see the author of a novel write the screenplay for their own novel. Emma Donoghue decided to write the script even before her novel was released to the world. As she said to CBC “there’s a real tradition of women being very successful within fiction, and then when it comes to the public world of film, often male scriptwriters will do that job of adapting”. As Donoghue stated in an interview for Motion Pictures in 2015:

I don’t think women who write best-selling novels should always hand them over to the industry, especially since this story was so important for me to write and not have it become some creepy rape movie. Voyeurism is riskier in film than in a novel. I didn’t want creepy, and I didn’t want sentimental. So, I wanted to guard this one.

As she told Tribute Movies, she did not want to make the movie a classic thriller or crime film, in fact, the movie was not commercialized as a crime movie, but rather a story of resilience and motherhood. Abrahamson and Donoghue wanted to make a film on a dark topic that people would still want to see.

Donoghue chose Lenny Abrahamson as the director of the movie after he wrote her a ten-page essay describing what he wanted to do with the story. As Lenny said in an interview “others would try to make it more like every other film: impose a three-act structure, make it a generic crime drama or put in flashbacks of the kidnapper’s life or the kidnapping”. They both wanted to show a story of motherhood rather than scenes about “the pervert keeping her captive”. As Emma Donoghue said, “Lenny guided me in how to not literally copy something from a book onto a screen but how to find a cinematic equivalent”. The result of their work together was described by Beth Kelly for *Writer’s Edit* as a “compelling, chilling meditation on both the concept of ‘freedom’ as well as

‘captivity’ maintaining the book’s emotional tone through the visual medium of film was likely a challenge, but the acting cast pulled it off with grace” (2016).

The main actors of the movie are Brie Larson and Jacob Tremblay as Ma and Jack respectively. The cast received critical praise, as Tim Rodey wrote for The Telegraph “Larson, within the role’s ever so slightly cramped range, is impeccable at just everything she’s asked to do”. Larson won a variety of major awards for *Room*, such as the Academic Award, the Golden Globe Award, the Critics’ Choice Award, the BAFTA Award and the Screen Actors Guild for Best Actress. Tremblay was also critically acclaimed, he won awards such as the Critics’ Choice Awards for Best Young Performer and the Austin Film Critics Association for Breakthrough Artist Award. *Room* was chosen as one of the best films of 2015 – according to the *Top Ten Film Critic List* – and it was nominated to four categories for the 88th Academy Awards.

While the first part of the film follows the timeline of the novel and keeps the same setting, the second part of the film takes place in a different setting. The first shot of the movie shows Skylight, the only connection between Room and Outside. The film starts with Ma’s voice telling Jack to go back to sleep. Right after, the voice of Jack plays off-screen, he explains how he arrived and how he “zoomed down from Heaven through Skylight into Room” (2015). This is one of the few times the spectators hear a voice-over, Donoghue was adamant that the movie did not need a voice-over, since “movies with voice-overs are trying to be book-ish” (Quill&Quire). However, Abrahamson convinced her to add some voice-over so that Jack’s thoughts were not completely erased in the film version of the story. Another important theme that is partly absent from the film is religion, as Donoghue shared in an interview to *Patheos*, the film lacked religious references that were part of the novel, since Abrahamson the director is a “fervent atheist.” As Emma Donoghue said in that same interview “we both agreed on it being a

story of, in a way, placing your faith in love, in parental love. So, he dropped the Christian elements completely, but I think the story still works.”

At the beginning of the film, Jack wakes up and says “good morning” to all the objects in Room, which illustrates how Jack personified the furniture in the novel. He refers to each object individually and without an article preceding the noun, as if they were their names. Moreover, he assigns adjectives and pronouns to inanimate objects. While each object is shown on-screen using close-up shots, he narrates off-screen “Eggsnake is our longest friend and fanciest (...) Melted Spoon is the best to eat because he’s more blobbier (...) Labrynth is the twistiest and she hides things, so I don’t know where they are (...) Toilet’s the best at disappearing poo.”

The main change from the novel to the film adaptation is the narrator. Although the film is also shown from the perspective of Jack it lacks his thoughts, whereas the novel is entirely narrated by Jack. Donoghue thought that “if you made it literally from Jack’s POV so you couldn’t see him that would be so gimmicky and very unsettling to the viewer. You’d deny them the face of Jack” as she stated to *Quill & Quire*. The movie was also an opportunity to see Ma’s reality as well as Jack’s.

Ma and Jack’s daily schedule is shown with a combination of different full-length shots, they have breakfast and watch television. Just like in the novel, Jack watches attentively *Dora the Explorer* on television who is his friend.



Figure 1: Jack and Ma Phys Ed class, Room, 2015 (5:16)

In *Figure 1* Jack and Ma are doing their Phys Ed lesson – their daily stretches – this is part of their routine and Ma’s way to keep some sense of normality and sanity. After stretching it is time for Track, Jack runs around the Room with a big smile on his face, this scene shows how happy Jack is in his tiny world being unaware of what is actually happening outside of Room.

The same literature and character references as the ones in the novel are kept throughout the movie, Ma reads to Jack the story of *The Count of Monte Cristo* – this is a way of adding the character to the film, since, unlike the novel, he is not mentioned afterwards –. There is also a close-up shot to the book of *Alice in Wonderland*, this character is used later on the story as a resource to explain the reality of the outside world.



Figure 2: Ma breastfeeding Jack, Room, 2015 (8:04)

In *Figure 2* Ma is breastfeeding Jack, this special bonding ritual between them is also a symbol that is only shown twice in the movie in contrast to the number of times it happens in the novel. A movie moves so much faster, screenwriters have less time to tell a story, hence some scenes must be deleted, as Donoghue said to *Quill & Quire*. Donoghue did not want to make “an exact visual equivalent to a book”, since “books and movies have different charms, they have different powers”. The movie worked as a dialectical process and successfully expressed the same feelings as the book in a different

way. Some characters were also eliminated in the second part of the book, as the writer said in that same interview:

We're already meeting quite a few new people in the second half. I don't want this wide cast of characters." In a book you can just throw them in. But in film it's often a matter of some whittling down, but then the moments you do choose to stick with, you explore them very fully.



Figure 3: Jack plays with the shadows, Room, 2015 (34:07)

In *Figure 3*, Jack is shown playing with the shadows from the light coming through Skylight. This shot is the film's portrayal of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. It shows the tiny bit of reality – which comes through Skylight – in Room. Jack uses the sunlight which is real to create shadows of what he thinks is not real, like a dog.



Figure 4: Jack discovers the World, Room, 2015 (50:40)

Figure 4 shows Jack's first reaction the first time he sees the Outside. Jacob Tremblay gives an astonishing performance as it allows the spectators to see what is going

on in his mind without any words needed. He opens his eyes amazed as he realizes that everything, he ever thought was just television, was actually real. The camera shakes and zooms in to demonstrate what he is feeling. Once Jack is outside of Room closed-up shots and loud noises are used to express how overwhelmed he is feeling in an uncountable and limitless world. The soundtrack is used to make the spectators feel the right emotion each scene.

The second part of the film takes place in a different setting. While in the book Ma and Jack spend their days in a clinic after escaping, in the film version they live in the house of Ma's parents, Jack's grandparents. As Donoghue confessed to *Quill and Quire*, they wanted to show Jack adjusting to a normal suburban house and making friends with the neighbor and the family dog – the only two innocent characters who are not conditioned by what happened to him –.



Figure 5: Jack and Ma say goodbye to Room, Room, 2015 (1:52:24)

Figure 5 shows Ma and Jack abandoning Room after saying their goodbyes. This shot shows hope, resilience and motherhood, exactly everything the director and writer wanted the movie to express.

3. Conclusions

The purpose of this dissertation was to compare and determine how the adapted film version read and interpreted the original version of *Room* by Emma Donoghue and why it is a successful adaptation. In order to achieve that, the background research on the art of adaptation was mentioned, both primary sources were compared as equals and the main themes of the story were explored in both versions.

This dissertation has combined different theorists' thoughts about adaptations and how they differ from the widespread belief that adaptations are always worse than their original source, since films and novels are not supposed to be an exact equivalent. The art of adaptation has been described in this project as a dialectical process, according to Robert Stam and his studies on the Intertextual Dialogism Approach. An adapted work is not an exact copy, but rather, a unique way of telling the same story.

This project also discussed the role that fidelity plays in adapting a work, it focuses on Robert Stam's eight sources of hostility to adaptation, he uses these sources to justify that fidelity in adaptation is not possible, since the filmic adaptation is immediately different as a result of the change of medium. All the theorists studied throughout this project conclude that adaptation should be considered another original work based on a source, which does not mean it is inferior.

The novel *Room* by Emma Donoghue was analyzed with the purpose of understanding the original source to comprehend the adaptation, and its different powers as distinct channels of storytelling. The aspects of the film in comparison with the book were scrutinized, such as the characters, the setting and the narrative techniques used to express different feelings on camera.

In conclusion, *Room* is a successful film adaptation as it makes the spectator feel the tension, love and anger just like reading its adapted work. The narration and thoughts

cannot be read in the film; however, they are substituted by camera movements, closed-up shots, astonishing performances by the cast and a chilling soundtrack. *Room* is an unconventional fairytale with hints of science fiction, of resilience, motherhood, and faith from the reader's perception to the spectator's eyes.

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Figure 1. *Room*. Dir. Toronto: Filmnation Entertainment. 2015. (5:16)

Figure 2. *Room*. Dir. Toronto: Filmnation Entertainment. 2015. (8:04)

Figure 3. *Room*. Dir. Toronto: Filmnation Entertainment. 2015. (34:07)

Figure 4. *Room*. Dir. Toronto: Filmnation Entertainment. 2015. (50:40)

Figure 5 *Room*. Dir. Toronto: Filmnation Entertainment. 2015. (1:52:24)