

Cinematic Adaptation of Markus Zusak's Novel, *The Book Thief*: A Newfangled Perspective on The Nazi War, Anti-Semitism, and Narrative

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Abstract. The article aims to qualitatively and descriptively examine the cinematic adaptation of Markus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief*. We compare the novel as a corpus with Percival's film and examine cinematic elements and the motivations in detail. This article will focus on three motivations in the film adaptation: economic lures, cultural capital, and personal and political motives. We support the hypothesis with the scenes in the film and the secondary data. In Zusak's novel, there are explorations about the atrocities and anti-Semitism during the Holocaust through Death or the narrator. The film reflects the conditions during the Nazi reign (1939-1942). However, Percival refines the poignant story of the Holocaust through a young girl's eyes. It also deflects the audience's attention from Nazi atrocities. The film is not a film to pursue the violence during the Nazi reign in Munich; instead, it elevates the audience's impression into lovable sides that attract their empathy. Although the film depicts the impacts of war, Percival removes the violent scenes so that all ages could consume the film. We argue that the film highlights humanity and the warm family relationship among Germans or between Germans and Jewish. Percival excellently emphasizes women's resistance, bravery, love, and affections in his film. The director fails to present the narrator as a unique character like in the book.

Keywords: Adaptation, Anti-Semitism, Cinematic, Holocaust, Nazi

1 Introduction

The Book Thief was written by Markus Zusak in 2005 and adapted into a film with the same title in 2013. The novel and film recount a teenage girl, Liesel Meminger, in Germany during World War II. Liesel's communist parents abandon her in the Germans' hands for her survival. However, her identity must be disguised as a communist descendant. *The Book Thief* vividly illustrates Nazi Germany, the relations between Germans and Jews, and the Germans' activities under Nazi reign. In an interview with Miller, Percival mentions that he was fascinated by Zusak's incredible and colorful narrations (2013). In addition, the screenplay written by Petroni ingratiates Percival to adapt *The Book Thief*. After the film was released, it received many awards and nominations for its score.

Ellis (1982) mentions that about 30% of narrative films created by the Hollywood classic period result from the novel adaptation to the film. For example, an outstanding novel series, *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) by J.K. Rowling, was also adapted into films by David Yates (2001-2011). Another example that cannot be overlooked is an adaptation work by Disney Productions. Some fairy tales have been adapted, such as the German fairy tales of Jacob and Wilhelm

Grimm. Richard (2021) states that the adaptation of a book can be helpful to deliver social and political messages. It can be argued that film adaptation might depict a different narrative perspective, and then there is a transformation of the object (Fong, 2016). There is a possibility that the form of the narrative in the novel and its motion picture is different. The collaboration and the flexibility between the author, the director, and the actor in contemporary filmmaking is crucial to avoid the viewers' disappointment. Therefore, this comparably active sense to experience and materialize the imagination for the spectator can lead to disappointment. Hanich (2018:427) claims that "... if the adaptation translates the imagined world of the novel into a very different and irrefutably public form, the reader's concretization may be threatened."

Habitually, the audiences concern about the fidelity to the source when reviewing the film adaptation. Moreover, film critics question the motivations that exist in adapting a literary work into a film. On top of that is how the novelists and filmmakers interpret a similar issue. It is often disputed how the cinematic elements represent the narrative in the novel. It is challenging to examine Percival's interpretation of *The Book Thief*.

There have been many positive and negative responses toward the adaptation of *The Book Thief*. Kendrick (2014) argues that the film managed to envelop the heart of Zusak's novel. On the other hand, he argues that the film failed to explore all the essential things in the novel. Percival has immensely portrayed include as much as he can in a 121-minute film. However, there are still many important moments, such as violent acts that are not exposed in the film.

The themes, characters, and plot of *The Book Thief* have been transformed into a film by using cinematic elements. As Hutcheon says, every performance presented in the adaptation work must be dramatized because the description, narration, and represented thoughts must be transformed into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images (2006:40). Therefore, Percival is perspicacious in sorting out the moments that are fitting to reflect Zusak's book.

2 Methodology

The focus of the study is based on the data taken from Zusak's *The Book Thief* and its film. The data describes the alterations, the relation between Germans and Jews, Nazi reign, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust. The data will be categorized into three parts; what is adapted, how is adapted, and why is adapted. The data will be analyzed based on Hutcheon's theory about adaptation and John Gibbs' approach to *mise-en-scene*. The primary data are from *The Book Thief* and the movie entitled, similarly, *The Book Thief*. In collecting the data, we will watch the movie on a website and then try to match the three motivations in the film adaptation. In analyzing the data, we will start by reading the novel and watching the film to investigate the similarities and differences. Then, in presenting the result of the analysis will be presented descriptively.

Hutcheon elucidates that five categories should be deliberated in analyzing a film adaptation (2006:33-158). The first category is 'what,' which refers to the adaptation and parts adapted in the book. Second, the 'who-why' category questions the virtual adapter and why the adapter makes the adaptation. The next category is 'how.' Hutcheon states that the audiences are essential. Their reactions to the film adaptation constitute a significant concern to the adapters. The last ones are 'where- when.' This category is related to time and place.

Hutcheon divides the motivations into four upon adapting a literary (2006:86-95). They are economic lures, legal constraints, and cultural capital, personal and political motives. Undeniable, economic lures affect all stages of the process of adaptation. The economic factor

is an influential significant reason in adapting Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Spielberg made some alterations in adapting the novel due to the demands from Hollywood to increase the selling value of the film (McMullen and Solomon, 1994:171). The legal constraints concern the agreement between the author and the director occur when a literary work is adapted into a film.

The adapters can raise defenses to the ownership of cultural and intellectual property. Hutcheon explains that one way to gain respectability or improve cultural capital is to use adaptations as a pedagogical impulse (2006:92). She also emphasizes that every adaptation work has the adapter's reasons. In adapting *The Great Gatsby* (2013), Luhrmann thought he could see himself through Gatsby's character, born in harsh circumstances and struggling to follow his dream (Anushiravani and Alinezhadi, 2016:81). Director reorganizes the work that he adapts to highlight something that he thinks is important and exciting to be shown on the screen. Disney has changed the ideology of *Snow White*, which is based initially on German values, into American Values (Inge, 2016:141).

Gibbs states that *mise-en-scene* is "the content of frame and the way they are organized. The content of frame refers to lighting, costume, decoration, properties, and the actor" (2002:1-2). When analyzing *mise-en-scene*, it means to analyze framing, camera movement, the particular lens employed, and other photographic decisions. *Mise-en-scene* supports the researchers' understanding of the film. Scrutinizing them in this study is indispensable because it will explain how the director visualizes the narratives conveyed by the author from the book into a film.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 The Adaptation of The Book Thief into Its Fil

One of the significant alterations that Percival made is refocusing the themes of *The Book Thief*. Percival focuses on themes that highlight loving-kindness, such as the power of words or family relationships, rather than prioritizing war and violence. He maintains the hideous moments during the Nazi regime that Zusak vividly illustrates. As the most influential theme, Percival raises a theme about the power of words admirably.

Through the film, the audiences acknowledge that words have an essential role in life, for example, diverting from gloomy foretime, alleviating frightening moments to deal with, and even provoking people. As a diversion, Percival displays it through Liesel that uses books that she reads to distract her from the agony of being separated from her family. Liesel becomes interested in reading and writing after stealing *The Grave Digger's Handbook* at her brother's funeral, Werner. She gets help from her foster father, Hans Hubermann.

The literacy activities are undertaken by Liesel and Hans when they improve the relationship between them to be harmonious. Percival raises a scene featuring Liesel reading a story to appease the people during the sheltering from air raids in the basement. He also shows that words can provoke people and remain calm, for example, through a speech from the mayor that indoctrinates Germans to hate the Jews and execute *The Book Burning* event. Percival presents this scene to strengthen anti-Semitism in the Nazi era.

In an adaptation of *The Book Thief*, Percival remakes some characters. First, one significant change of Liesel is the way she undertakes the thievery of books. Percival creates Liesel, who becomes more audacious. She does all thievery of books by herself. Whereas she often commits it with her best friend, Rudy, as described in the novel. In the film, Percival prefers to elevate Liesel over Rudy, who also often steals. Liesel, portrayed as a beautiful,

whiny, poor girl, is remodeled into a vigorous girl who is more resilient and healthier. Second, Percival remodels Hans Hubermann, Liesel's foster father, to enhance the amiable side of the film. Compared to the book, Percival excessively portrays a perfect parental figure through Hans. He even exaggerates every action of Hans to be more impeccable.

Then, Hans becomes the most well-liked character in *The Book Thief*. Percival creates Hans as a loving and amiable person and also does not discriminate between Germans and Jews. To strengthen the amiable side, Percival turns down a scene when Hans slaps Liesel as in the book (Zusak, 2005:116). Instead, Percival dramatizes a moment by presenting a shot that shows Hans's solicitous face to Liesel. Percival abolishes the slap scene because it will undermine the perfect image of the parental figure. With an actor's expertise, Geoffrey Rush, who plays Hans's character, becomes more enchanted.

Considering the plot in the book, Percival condenses and removes some parts of *The Book Thief*. First is when her schoolmates bullied Liesel at school. In the book, there are two characters that bullying Liesel, Ludwig, and Franz. However, Percival eliminates Ludwig and enhances Franz to do bullying toward Liesel. Percival also removes the character of Hans Junior, Hans Hubermann's son, and deputized by a soldier, Wolfy, to persuade Hans to join the Nazi Party. These happen because there are similarities of characters and scenes; as a result, the film becomes more efficient without having to eliminate the message conveyed in the book. Second, Percival also does not show scenes that feature war scenes and reduces violent content in the film. While in the book, Zusak displays some narratives that describe war or bloodshed. As a consequence, the film becomes more pleasing.

Third, Percival modifies the plot pace in *The Book Thief*. For instance, there is a dialogue that Rosa is concerned about Werner's absence, Liesel's younger brother (at 00:05:11-00:05:38, *The Book Thief* 2013). Percival adds this shot to emphasize Rosa's character as an unfriendly person. There is also a scene when Hans plays riddle with Liesel and calls her "your majesty" (at 00:07:28-00:07:32, *The Book Thief* 2013). Percival appends those scenes in order to strengthen Hans's character as a loving person. Consequently, the audiences assess Rosa and Hans characters earlier in the film than in the book.

Percival diminishes the tension of the climax of *The Book Thief*. Zusak already created a complicated climax, and Percival converts them into more ordinary. Percival does not display Liesel's anger, who blames words as the cause of her suffering. Thus, the climax is not as intense as in the book. Percival does not show Liesel who found Max during the parade of Jews as in the book; instead uses camera movement to show Liesel's expression looking for Max amid Jews (at 01: 48: 07-01: 49: 10, *The Book Thief* 2013).

In addition, Percival also modifies the scene when Rudy expresses his hatred toward Hitler (Zusak, 2005:426). In the book, only Rudy blatantly shows his hatred, but Percival makes Liesel do the same, even though Liesel is the one who dominates (at 01: 42: 12-01: 01: 43: 15, *The Book Thief* 2013). As a result, the role of Rudy's character, which should also have a significant influence in the story as it is in the book, becomes lessened.

In the final scene, Percival dramatizes when Himmel Street is bombed and kills Hans, Rosa, Rudy, and his family; only Liesel survives. Percival reversals Hans's position with Rudy as the last person found by Liesel. The scene when Liesel finds Rudy dying is pretty cliché, while Rudy is found already dead by Liesel in the book. Percival remakes this scene to embellish the romantic side of the film. If only Percival imitates the ending of the book, certainly it will make a scene more heartbreaking, and it will be intriguing the audiences' sympathy.

Overall, Percival's film successfully represents the heart of *The Book Thief*, such as the power of words. From the alterations Percival made, the film turns into a family film that earns acquisition. By eliminating horrific narratives from the book, more people can enjoy this film

and raise the profit. This film is also used as a learning reference about struggle, conflicts, historical events, and situations during the Nazi regime.

3.2 The Analysis of Cinematic Elements of “The Book Thief”

The Book Thief has three elements that need special attention when adapted into a film: the depiction of the power of words, the social conditions of Germans and Jews during the Holocaust, and the narrator, Death. These elements are challenging parts to be adapted by the director. Percival utilizes the proper cinematic elements to raise those elements. Therefore, the heart of the book can be depicted in the film thoroughly.

In the film, Percival dramatizes some scenes to show the power of words as the central theme of The Book Thief. Percival reduces the presents given by Liesel to Max in the hope that Max can recover. In the book, Liesel gives thirteen kinds of presents to Max such as one ribbon, one pinecone, one button, one stone, one feather, two newspapers, a candy wrapper, a cloud, one toy soldier, one miraculous leaf, a finished whistler, and a slab of grief. Whereas in the film, Percival appoints only one moment, that is a story Liesel reads. Percival uses camera movement by making a shot with a medium close-up that focuses on Max’s ailing face and Liesel, reading a story.

These shots are repeated alternately in order to indicate that words alleviate Max. Percival also adds in Max’s dialogue about how important the role of words. When Max recovers from his high fever and thanks Liesel, he says, “with all that reading, you will not leave me in peace” (at 01:27:49, The Book Thief 2013). As a result, the power of words in the film is more exaggerated.

In the Book Thief, several events show about Germans and Jews society during the Holocaust. In an interview with Stein (2013), Percival mentions that one of his intentions is to make this film illustrate the Holocaust and the horrific events during the Nazi reign. In the film, Percival demonstrates the humane society of the Nazi reign. He wants to maintain that Germans who resist the policies made by Nazi but not all events in the book that tells about it are explored in the film. For example, there is a scene in the book when Hans gives bread to Jewish prisoners during the parade.

The Jew stood before him, expecting another handful of derision, but he watched with everyone else as Hans Hubermann held his hand out and presented a piece of bread, like magic. (Zusak, 2005:394). This moment does not appear in the film to avoid abusive scenes perpetrated by Nazi soldiers against the Jewish and Hans. Consequently, the audience is not exposed to the cruelty during the Nazi reign when watching The Book Thief. By eliminating this moment, Percival also ignores one of Zusak’s inspirations while writing The Book Thief.

In order to reinforce social conditions during the Nazi reign, Percival’s film raises some historical events during the Nazi reign to show anti-Semitism. They are The Book Burning, Kristallnacht or The Night of Broken Glass, Parade of Jews, and Hitler’s Youth program. The Book Burning event generates the audiences to imagine Nazi’s anti-Semitism, particularly toward Jews’ works. Percival also chooses Kristallnacht event to strengthen anti-Semitism in the film. The scene is created remorselessly by showing Nazi soldiers who torture Jews and destroy their houses and shops. In this scene, Percival aggravates the scene by using *Kampflied der Nationalsozialist* by Kleo Pleyer sung by Liesel with her classmates in Hitler Youth as background music (at 00:18:27-00:18:29 The Book Thief 2013). One of the meanings of the song lyrics is “we do not create a brother pact with Jews or non-Germanic.”

As the preeminent uniqueness of The Book Thief, Percival does not present Death as the narrator powerfully. Zusak utilizes Death as a narrator to describe the conditions during the Nazi reign. The narrator's existence is intense and vivid, and its narration is necessary to make the

reader more understand what is or will or has happened. Through the narrator, Zusak expresses Nazi cruelty and mass murders happened. The role of Death as a narrator is constructive to replace the reader's eyes to see the horrible events from the grim reaper's side. While in the film, Percival ignores the narrator's viewpoint. Assuredly, it is going to be more terrible scenes. Therefore, the horror of war described by Zusak in his book is not fully exposed in Percival's adaptation.

To explore Death as the narrator, Percival uses *mise-en-scene*, especially camera movement, music background, and the wardrobe. The film begins with the camera shooting the sky accompanied by a narration explaining Death to bring out that the one who speaks is Death. Zusak creates Death, who has feelings and affections like a human. To exhibit it, Percival uses the music background dominated by piano and violin during Death's narration and makes it more comforting.

A scene presents a man dressed in a black coat and black hat, stopping in the middle of a street at midnight. Percival adds that character as Death, and then the narrator starts narrating and approaches the characters one by one (at 01:54:51-01:55:50, *The Book Thief* 2013), and then Himmel Street is bombed. To further reassure the audiences, Percival also brings a scene when England declared war on Germany, there are some kids cheered and happy, and Death says, "They were running to me"(at 00:51:30 *The Book Thief*, 2013).

3.3 The Motivations in adapting "The Book Thief" into Its Film

Percival has three motivations in producing *The Book Thief*. One of the reasons that cannot be circumvented is economic lures. After *The Book Thief* was released, it achieved a profit of nearly four times its production cost. Mostly, the novel that becomes best-sellers has a good storyline and has an interest often become the target of the directors to be adapted into a film. Percival obtains a profit by gaining more audiences. To achieve this goal, Percival discards some parts that will reduce the audiences' interest, such as bloodshed or war scenes of the book.

The second reason is the cultural capital contained in *The Book Thief*. The book features some critical historical events, such as *The Book Burning* and *Kristallnacht*. Percival aims to make the film a pedagogical impulse that subtly portrays the Nazi reign and the Holocaust. In addition, Zusak's book also has a detailed picture of the conditions during the Nazi reign. Percival succeeds in reviving the Nazi regime on a screen. As a result, the audiences imagine how the social conditions during the Nazi regime that full of propaganda and anti-Semitism. It mesmerizes the audiences by the dreadful setting, but Percival also displays them with a warm, kind, and humorous story.

Percival contemplates certain Germans-Jews, who have atrocious memories of Nazi reign and the Holocaust. By not judging German society toward what their predecessors had done, Percival decides to reduce the atrocities of the Nazis in his film. Rather than exploring it, Percival deflects the audiences' attention from the atrocities of the Nazi reign and focuses more on love, affection, family, and human struggle. That makes the audiences aware that there is humanity that was heartwarming during World War II.

The last motivation is personal and political motives. In an interview with Schmidlin (2014), Petroni says that there is a demand from the production company, Fox 2000 Pictures, to remove the magic realism that features in Zusak's book and upholds family issues. Percival also presents his film with a straight and dramatic tale. When we watched the film, no political motives touched our sensitivity except the Nazi reign. A clear delineation of Nazi atrocities contained in the book becomes its interest to be adapted. Due to this background, *The Book Thief* can generate different views for the readers and audiences about the social conditions and public relations during the Nazi reign.

4 Conclusion

In adapting *The Book Thief*, Percival has interestingly altered in violence reductions and kindness dramatizations. Percival has minimized the things of The Nazi reign that can provoke controversial issues, such as showing the concentration camps or displaying Hitler figures in his film. The film focuses on minimizing the horror of the Nazi regime. On the other hand, Zusak bravely explores the habits of Germans during the Nazi reign who like to act inhumanely. By using cinematic elements, Percival manages to give an overview of how words could be compelling in life and anti-Semitism during the Nazi reign.

The film enables the audience more aware that during the Holocaust, there are Germans who resisted the policies of the Nazi and refused to be anti-Semitic. Percival's film ultimately shows that a storytelling book could be a successful novel on the screen. The novel and the film expose that Liesel is a strong, brave, and loving girl. Rosa, Liesel's foster mother, and Liesel irrefutably grow as powerful women. Liesel can gain masculine characteristics during the Nazi war.

The presence of Death as the narrator in the film provides a new perspective of humans and sympathy. However, some events in the book about the victims of anti-Semitism are not exposed to the audience, making the film get some unfavorable critiques. The film confirms a famous quote by motivational speaker Erin Gruwell that writes, "Remember not all Germans were Nazis." Percival solely produces a family film that upholds human kindness and love. The film becomes a narrative consolation and captivatively entwines a consistent thread of humanity.

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