

## **INTRODUCTORY NOTE**

This paper was written for “Journeys Across Media” conference that took place at the University of Reading in April 2004. Minor details have been adapted for this version.

## **ASPECTS OF ENUNCIATION IN “THE LORD OF THE RINGS” SIGNIFICANCE OF MEDIUM SPECIFICITY AND HYBRIDITY**

When part one of the film trilogy, “The Fellowship of the Ring”, first came out, many so called “purist” fans of the book thought it was the work Sauron, if not Morgoth himself! Which I think comes from a distorted conception of what a book to film transfer can achieve and what it cannot.

And this is precisely what we’re trying to find out when talking about medium specificity: We are telling apart the elements that can be transferred from those that belong to only one medium.

Narrative elements generally are transferable (although it might get a little awkward when it comes to omniscient narrators or internal monologue). Then, there are aspects like atmosphere, mood and tone, which are difficult to describe, but generally are transferable.<sup>1</sup>

Last but not least there are enunciative elements that need to be considered. In terms of literary adaptations this (very roughly) means to bring the book style to the silver screen. And this is where most purists would say Peter Jackson has failed. Because in most cases style needs not only to be adapted, but to be transformed in order for it to work in another medium. Passages where it can be “simply” transferred are rare.

But let’s take a look at an example.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is precisely because of their evasive nature that they are more open to transfers. And it is my opinion that these are the elements (especially tone) which are key to successful literary adaptations.

## “THE BRIDGE OF KHAZAD-DÛM”...

...aka “the Balrog sequence”.<sup>1</sup>

In the handout (see last page) you’ll find many passages that are pretty hard to translate from book to film. Almost at the end there’s:

“From out of the shadow a red sword leapt flaming.  
Glamdring [Gandalf’s sword] glittered white in answer”.

The “answer” could be translated to film by simply shooting a reverse angle – which would be a bit too much of a juxtaposition in my opinion, but apart from that would work fine. But how do you translate the paragraphs? Obviously, it was not enough for Tolkien just to write two sentences, but he emphasizes their relation to one another by giving them their own respective paragraphs.

Or how do you translate the capital “S” in “...Flame of Udûn. Go back to the Shadow! You cannot pass!” It is not quite clear to me why Tolkien used a capital letter in the first place – “The Shadow” could be Sauron himself, it could be a synonym for “the Black Pit where you Balrogs normally dwell”, it could have been a mood of the author, but it’s one of the very Tolkien-typical things to just hint at things and to pretend there is a larger background.<sup>2</sup> Elements like these, tiny details like a capital “S”, are simply impossible to translate into film.

But there is another aspect about this passage which is far more important. “The Bridge of Khazad-dûm” has been the source of much and heated debate ever since the book first came out, because here the world-shattering question originates whether or not Balrogs have wings. All that Tolkien does is to switch from a simile to metaphor:

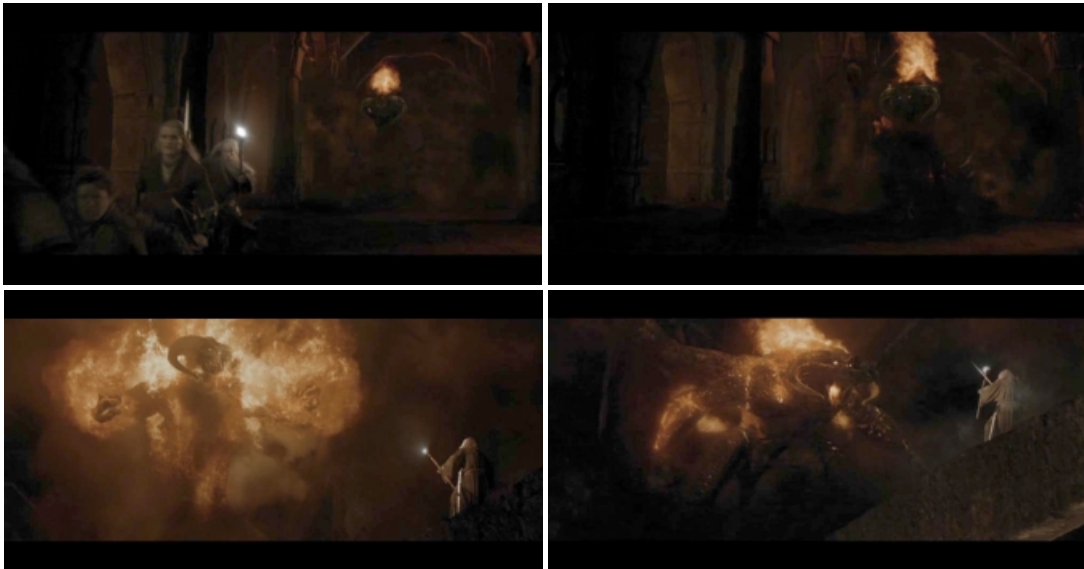
“The Balrog reached the bridge. Gandalf stood in the middle of the span, leaning on the staff in his left hand, but in his other hand Glamdring gleamed, cold and white. His enemy halted again, facing him, and **the shadow about it reached out like two vast wings.** [...] The Balrog made no answer. The fire in it seemed to die, but the darkness grew. It stepped forward slowly on to the bridge, and **suddenly it drew itself up to a great height, and its wings were spread from wall to wall...**”

Peter Jackson is of course aware of the debate as such (although he is – other than myself – in favour of the wings), and instead of just giving the beast a pair of wings, he plays with the switching of stylistic means.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Fellowship of the Ring”, chapter #30 (Theatrical Version),

<sup>2</sup> A few pages prior to the Balrog passage, Aragorn says about Gandalf that he would find the way through the dark as safely as the cats of Queen Berúthiel – without ever mentioning neither queen nor cats ever again in any his works.



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But what happens is that elements which in the book belonged to enunciation (especially the metaphor) now turn into something that I would rather ascribe to the narrative. The enunciative aspect of the passage switches from the level of style to a meta level: Peter Jackson is playing games with the audience: “now you see it, now you don’t”.

The wings issue is not the only time this sort “narratization” happens. In both the book and the film, Balrogs are ominously described as “Shadow and Flame”, which for a book is a simple thing to say, but for a film a difficult thing to show, and I think the film-makers did an excellent job here. Shadow, the way Tolkien used it (although he is not using it in this passage), is more than just the absence of light, it is something that can be worn like a cloak, but taking a more active role. When so-called “purists” complain about a three meters tall Balrog with wings and horns – aspects that undeniably can be argued about –, they forget to take into account the points where the film definitely succeeded. “The Bridge of Khazad-dûm” is one of these.

And purists tend to look only for book enunciation in the film, instead of enjoying also the film’s own enunciation – something the book cannot offer.

## MISE-EN-SCÈNE – THE PAINTING SEQUENCE

It seems a strange thing in analyses of book to film transfers that people tend to overlook anything that is not in the book. I think it is not only valid but absolutely necessary to also talk about elements proper to film, because in the end we are talking about a film, not about a book. And one of the stylistic means proper to film and film alone is, of course, mise-en-scène. Here, the director has absolute control over all spatial elements.

In the second example, mise-en-scène which as a stylistic means I'd rather attribute to enunciation, nevertheless has a very clear narrative purpose. As before, one has to look closely in order to decipher the passage – and you need to be familiar with the background of the story. The passage is in its totality all but incomprehensible for a Tolkien-“newbie”.<sup>1</sup>

The sequence begins with Aragorn picking up the hilt of the sword which had been dropped a few seconds before.



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As long as Aragorn is alone in the frame, it is purely a family matter – Aragorn is captured in the past of his ancestor: between the statue holding the shards, and the painting showing Isildur lying on the ground, almost defeated, before the Dark Lord. Sauron is concealed by the pillar to the right. The narrative background of this “moving still-life” is that Aragorn doubts his role as the future king, he is uncertain if he will be able to withstand Sauron.

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<sup>1</sup> Which is why a short overview over the characters involved in the sequence seems appropriate here. 3000 years ago, Isildur cut the Ring off Sauron's hand. Unfortunately, he then did not destroy it, but kept it for himself. Thus, Evil “was allowed to endure”. The shards of the sword he used as well as a painting depicting the battle are being kept in Rivendell. Now his heir Aragorn is expected to take on Sauron, and by overthrowing him, become king – otherwise he will not be allowed to marry the (immortal) elf Arwen, whose father fought alongside Isildur. Sequence taken from “The Fellowship of the Ring” (Theatrical Version), chapter 21.



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When Arwen arrives, the reverse movement of the camera stops, and we draw back in on the two, ending up with a renewed mise-en-scène: it no longer is a family matter – we now have Aragorn, Sauron and Arwen in the frame. Here, Aragorn's self-doubt becomes even clearer, as he totally identifies himself now with the "failure" Isildur, taking his place in the painting. Unfortunately, Sauron ominously floats between/above him and Arwen. In order for the two to come together, Sauron must be removed, the failure of Isildur must be undone, otherwise Arwen's father will not let them get married.

I think it is in passages like this – unique to the medium – where the film reveals its real beauty and depth.

## CONCLUSION

Whether a literary adaptation is the work of Morgoth or of genius in the end depends on one's personal likes and dislikes, and how much one is willing to let go of the book. Interestingly, no one complains about Mussorgsky, who adapted an art exhibition to a piano piece – or Ravel adapting the same piano piece for orchestra. Quite the contrary – this is art.

The high degree of narrativity of film and seemingly low enunciative depth very often makes it seem flatter, less carefully told when compared to the book. At least if one does not take the time for a closer look and consider the aspects which are specific to the two media. Especially "purists" tend not to give film a chance by looking only for the "book on screen" instead of what the film as film has to offer.

But the film can never replace the book or serve as a substitute. And neither can the book replace a film. Which I think, is a good thing.

## **THE BALROG SEQUENCE<sup>1</sup>**

The dark figure streaming with fire raced towards them. The orcs yelled and poured over the stone gangways. Then Boromir raised his horn and blew. Loud the challenge rang and bellowed, like the shout of many throats under the cavernous roof. Then the echoes died as suddenly as a flame blown out by a dark wind, and the enemy advanced again.

‘Over the bridge!’ cried Gandalf, recalling his strength. ‘Fly! This is a foe beyond any of you. I must hold the narrow way. Fly!’ Aragorn and Boromir did not heed the command, but still held their ground, side by side behind Gandalf at the far end of the bridge. The others halted just within the doorway at the hall’s end, and turned, unable to leave their leader to face the enemy alone.

The Balrog reached the bridge. Gandalf stood in the middle of the span, leaning on the staff in his left hand, but in his other hand Glamdring gleamed, cold and white. His enemy halted again, facing him, and the shadow about it reached out like two vast wings. It raised the whip, and the thongs whined and cracked. Fire came from its nostrils. But Gandalf stood firm.

‘You cannot pass,’ he said. The orcs stood still, and a dead silence fell. ‘I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, Flame of Udûn. Go back to the Shadow! You cannot pass.’

The Balrog made no answer. The fire in it seemed to die, but the darkness grew. It stepped forward slowly on to the bridge, and suddenly it drew itself up to a great height, and its wings were spread from wall to wall; but still Gandalf could be seen, glimmering in the gloom; he seemed small, and altogether alone: grey and bent, like a wizened tree before the onset of a storm.

From out of the shadow a red sword leapt flaming.

Glamdring glittered white in answer.

There was a ringing clash and stab of white fire. The Balrog fell back and its sword flew up in molten fragments. The wizard swayed on the bridge, stepped back a pace, and then again stood still.

‘You cannot pass!’ he said.

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien: The Lord of the Rings, London 2001, S. 322.