

From Page to Film

"Film is visual brevity.... If the novel is a poem, the film is a telegram."—Michael Hastings

A film or TV episode, by its nature, has to make visual what may be implied on the page. It's making a picture in a particular reader's mind real for all its viewers, and it changes how we interpret the story. So when you are watching the filmed version of a Sherlock Holmes stories, here are some things to pay attention to:

1. How faithful an adaptation are you watching? What elements from the original story have been retained? Changed? Re-sequenced? Dropped? And why?
2. What visual images does the director (and cinematographer/DOP) choose to stimulate your imagination?
3. In almost all of the Holmes stories, Watson is the narrator, and his perceptions mediate our experience of the story. Is the narrator present in the filmed version? If so, who is it? If not, what replaces that narrative point of view, and how does it affect our perception of the story?
4. In a filmed version of the story, we're hearing other voices than just the author's. Beyond the voices of the actors performing the lines, we also hear the 'voice' of a composer, see the 'voice' of a set designer, see the 'voices' of costumers and hairdressers and makeup artists and special effects wizards. How does this collaboration of voices compare to getting the information directly from one voice, the author's?
5. What themes does the filmed version highlight? Are they the same ones as in the written text, or are they different (or differently balanced, so that something subordinate is made a priority or vice-versa)? What might be the reasons for doing so?
6. In a written detective story, the clues are hidden throughout the text, and the crime itself is often told in past tense—it has already happened when we start reading the story. In film, the director often chooses a different way of presenting the clues and the crime. Has that happened in this version, and if so, what are the results of the director's choices?
7. What do the director's selection of camera shots (wide-angle, close-ups, flashbacks, dissolves, dialogue vs action scenes, repeated images, cutting between scenes) do to your understanding of the story?
8. What happens to the language of the story? Is description from the story incorporated into the filmed dialogue? Does the dialogue in the story get changed, retained, re-assigned to other characters, reproduced in some other way?
9. What happens to the settings and description from the written text? How do those come through (retained, altered, omitted, transformed) in the filmed version?
10. What happens to characterization from the written text? How does that characterization play out in the filmed version?