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Banias N. Yu.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6974-0790
Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University

Banias V. V.
http://orcid.org /0000-0001-6880-8805
Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University

Lizak K. M.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7873-0535
Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University

DONNA TARTT'S THE GOLDFINCH: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL AND ITS 2019 FILM ADAPTATION

Tht article examines Donna Tartt's novel The Goldfinch (2013) and its 2019 film adaptation directed by John Crowley and written by Peter Straughan from a comparative and intermedial perspective. The study focuses on the ways in which the transition from literary narrative to cinema transforms the novel's narrative structure, characterization, symbolism, representation of trauma, and conception of art.

Particular attention is paid to Theodore "Theo" Decker, whose first-person narration in the novel provides extensive access to his memories, psychological conflicts, moral uncertainty, and gradual process of maturation. The film, constrained by its approximately 149-minute running time, substantially condenses and rearranges the novel's chronology, relying on visual composition, performance, cinematography, music, editing, and voice-over to communicate experiences that are predominantly verbal and introspective in the source text. The analysis demonstrates that the film preserves the principal events and central motifs of Tartt's narrative, including the death of Theo's mother, his possession of Carel Fabritius's painting The Goldfinch, his relationships with Boris and Hobie, his movement between New York and Las Vegas, and his eventual confrontation with the consequences of his actions.

Nevertheless, significant transformations occur in the representation of Theo's interiority, the development of secondary characters, and the philosophical dimension of the novel. Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of artistic detail, ekphrasis, intermediality, trauma, and the painting's function as a structuring symbol in Tartt's novel. The present study argues that the film should not be evaluated exclusively according to the criterion of fidelity. Rather, it should be understood as an independent audiovisual interpretation that translates selected literary meanings into cinematic forms while inevitably reducing some of the source text's psychological and philosophical complexity.

Keywords: *Donna Tartt, The Goldfinch, film adaptation, comparative literature, adaptation studies, narrative, trauma.*

Problem statement. The adaptation of a major literary work into film inevitably involves changes in narrative organization, characterization, perspective, temporality, and modes of representation. Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* presents a particularly challenging case because of its considerable length, complex chronology, first-person narration, psychological depth, extensive descriptive passages, and integration of visual art into the narrative. The novel combines a coming-of-age story with elements of psychological fiction, Bildungsroman, crime narrative, and philosophical reflection. Its central object, Carel Fabritius's painting The Goldfinch, functions simultaneously as a material object, a narrative catalyst, a symbol of memory and loss, and a reflection on the relationship between art and human experience.

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The article explores the strengths and limitations of adapting Donna Tartt's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Goldfinch* (2013) into John Crowley's 2019 film version. Through a close comparative analysis, it investigates how the novel's rich first-person narration, philosophical depth, and slow unfolding of grief translate, or fail to translate, onto the screen. While the film demonstrates strong visual fidelity and impressive cinematography, it ultimately struggles to capture the interior emotional and moral complexity that makes the book so compelling. Drawing on adaptation theory and critical reception, this study argues that literary adaptations of introspective novels often lose their soul when compressed into cinematic form, even when plot elements remain largely intact. The research concludes that *The Goldfinch* serves as a revealing case study in the challenges of translating interiority, unreliable narration, and thematic nuance from page to screen.

This paper examines why a seemingly loyal adaptation struggled to resonate with audiences and critics. It draws on concepts from adaptation studies, particularly the tension between fidelity to plot and the need to translate narrative voice and psychological interiority. By comparing key elements of both works, the analysis highlights what is gained and lost when moving from the expansive freedom of prose to the visual constraints of film.

Analysis of recent research and publications. This comparative study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in literary and film analysis, informed by adaptation theory as outlined by scholars such as Linda Hutcheon[3], who emphasises that successful adaptations often involve creative reinterpretation rather than strict fidelity. Studies published in 2023 also examine John Crowley's cinematic treatment of the novel. Asha and Benitta analyze Crowley's artistic signature, cinematic vision, and visual aesthetics in the film, while their other studies address trauma and materiality in Tartt's novel. "John Crowley's adaptation of Donna Tartt's The Goldfinchoffers an interesting case study when viewed through the lens of the auteur film theory. The film showcases Crowley's adeptness at crafting a narrative that breathes life into the canvas of cinema, while also highlighting the intricate challenge of translating the essence of a renowned painting into moving imagery" [1, p. 1242]. Olha Kozii's research emphasizes the importance of artistic detail in *The Goldfinch*, demonstrating how visual and auditory details contribute to the psychological representation of the protagonist and to the construction of artistic space. "Because of such careful author's treatment to the artistic time and space the most appropriate way to study seems to be the analysis «in succession to the author» [4, p. 83]. Recent research on Tartt's protagonists likewise emphasizes first-person narration, intertextuality, intermediality, and the protagonist's process of maturation.

Thematic elements such as grief, the value of art, morality versus crime, and addiction, were coded and compared across media. The study acknowledges its limitations: it relies on publicly available materials rather than production notes or director interviews, and it reflects a subjective interpretation shaped by my own reading and viewing experience. Nevertheless, the consensus across reviews offers a robust foundation for discussion.

The purpose of the article. The purpose of this article is to provide a comparative analysis of Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* and John Crowley's 2019 film adaptation, focusing on the transformation of narrative, characterization, symbolism, temporality, and representations of trauma and art.

The study pursues the following objectives:

– to compare the narrative structures of the novel and film;

– to examine the transformation of Theo Decker's characterization and interiority;

– to analyze the changing function of Fabritius's painting as a symbol;

– to identify major narrative omissions, condensations, and rearrangements in the film;

– to examine the role of cinematic techniques in replacing literary description and internal narration;

– to evaluate the adaptation as an independent artistic interpretation rather than solely according to fidelity to the source.

The methodology combines comparative literary analysis, narratological analysis, adaptation studies, and an intermedial approach. Particular attention is given to the difference between literary narration and cinematic showing, as well as to the ways in which visual composition, cinematography, editing, sound, music and acting communicate meanings originally conveyed through prose.

Outline of the main material of the study. Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* is a monumental coming-of-age novel that follows Theodore "Theo" Decker from adolescence into adulthood. The story begins with a devastating terrorist bombing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which kills Theo's beloved mother and sets the protagonist on a path marked by loss, guilt, addiction, and an obsessive attachment to a small 17th-century Dutch painting titled *The Goldfinch* by Carel Fabritius.

Theo steals the painting in the chaos of the explosion, and it becomes both a literal burden and a symbolic anchor, a chained bird representing fragility, survival, and the redemptive power of beauty amid random disaster.

Spanning over 770 pages, the novel weaves together themes of grief and mourning, the moral ambiguity of forgery and crime, the redemptive yet dangerous nature of art, friendship and dysfunctional family bonds, and the role of chance in human life. Tartt's first-person narration immerses readers deeply in Theo's psyche, allowing for lengthy philosophical reflections on fate, morality, and the ways beautiful objects can ground us in a chaotic world. The book's length, while sometimes criticised for being excessive, ultimately serves its purpose by mirroring the long, winding process of grief and moral reckoning.

The 2019 film adaptation, directed by John Crowley and written by Peter Straughan, stars Oakes Fegley as young Theo, Ansel Elgort as adult Theo, with supporting performances by Nicole Kidman, Jeffrey Wright, and Finn Wolfhard as young Boris. At approximately two-and-a-half hours, the film condenses the epic narrative while attempting to remain faithful to the major plot points. Despite high production values–including stunning cinematography by Roger Deakins, and a star-studded cast, the movie received largely negative reviews. Many reviewers praised its visual beauty but criticised it for feeling "inert," emotionally hollow, and lacking the novel's introspective depth.

One of the most noticeable differences lies in structure. Tartt's novel unfolds largely in linear fashion, allowing readers to experience Theo's psychological descent gradually through his reflective narration. The film, however, employs a more nonlinear approach with frequent flashbacks that shift between young and adult Theo. While this technique aims to create a cinematic rhythm and bookend the story with the Amsterdam sequence, many critics found it fragmented and confusing, "a confused ball of yarn" that dilutes emotional momentum. "Where the book is chiefly a linear, coming-of-age story concerned with transience and immortality, the nonlinear film is a confused ball of yarn, a lot of vignettes that don't say much, together or in isolation" [2].

The film remains impressively faithful to the novel's major plot events: the museum bombing, Theo's time with the wealthy Barbour family, his chaotic years in Las Vegas with his father and the charismatic Boris Pavlikovsky, his apprenticeship with the antique restorer Hobie, the involvement in art forgery, and the climactic events in Amsterdam. However, compression inevitably leads to omissions. The novel devotes significant space to Theo's memories of his mother, her personality, their shared love of art, and the profound void her death leaves. In the film, her character feels more like a plot catalyst than a fully realised emotional presence, reducing the depth of Theo's grief "...if it was day or night, but on the last and worst of these nights I dreamed about my mother... she was smiling at me, more beautiful and yet not older, black hair and funny upward quirk of her mouth, not a dream but a presence that filled the whole room: a force all her own, a living otherness." [5, p. 6].

Subplots and secondary characters are also streamlined. Elements such as Boris's troubled girlfriend Kotku or more detailed explorations of Theo's drug addiction and moral compromises receive less attention. Hobie's physical description in the book (a tall, white man resembling "Irish poets and pugilists"), his explanation of beauty is altered for actor Jeffrey Wright, though his warm, gentle character remains largely intact. These changes make the story more manageable for a theatrical runtime but sacrifice some of the novel's Dickensian richness and character texture.

The novel's greatest strength is Theo's unreliable, introspective voice. Tartt allows pages of reflection on topics such as the randomness of disaster ("random disasters… converging on the same unseen point"), the ethics of forgery, and how art provides meaning in a meaningless world. "What held me fast in these brief library-book accounts was the element of chance: random disasters, mine and his, converging on the same unseen point, the big bang as my father called it, not with any kind of sarcasm or dismissiveness but instead a respectful acknowledgment for the powers of fortune that governed his own life" [7]. These philosophical passages transform what could be a simple crime story into a profound meditation on loss, morality, and survival. The painting itself exerts an almost mystical pull on Theo; readers feel his compulsion and guilt viscerally.

In contrast, the film relies on visual storytelling and minimal voiceover. While Roger Deakins's cinematography beautifully renders the painting and various settings, it cannot replicate the internal monologue that makes Theo's obsession and moral ambiguity so compelling. Ansel Elgort's performance conveys brooding melancholy effectively, but the character often feels distant or "hollow" compared to the torrent of guilt and self-justification in the book. Themes of addiction and redemption appear softened or rushed, and the film's pacing sometimes moves

too quickly from one vignette to the next, preventing deeper emotional resonance.

Critics frequently noted that the movie captures the "what" of the story but struggles with the "why", the internal why that drives Theo's actions and gives the novel its philosophical weight. Beautiful objects and their emotional significance, so central to Tartt's exploration of art's redemptive power, often feel "glanced over" rather than deeply felt on screen. " And I keep thinking too of the more conventional wisdom: namely, that the pursuit of pure beauty is a trap, a fast track to bitterness and sorrow, that beauty has to be wedded to something more meaningful" [6]

The film's technical achievements cannot be overlooked. Crowley's direction, combined with Deakins's luminous cinematography, creates visually striking sequences, particularly those involving the painting and the luxurious yet cold Barbour household. Performances by younger actors, including Oakes Fegley and Finn Wolfhard, bring energy to the earlier sections. Yet these strengths highlight the central paradox: a film that looks cinematic struggles precisely because Tartt's prose already possesses a highly visual, almost cinematic quality that is difficult to improve upon without losing its introspective soul.

Ultimately, the adaptation's commercial and critical failure (it was a notable box-office disappointment) underscores a broader challenge in literary adaptations: highly interior novels like *The Goldfinch* may resist condensation more than plot-driven stories. The film honours the source material's events but cannot fully convey the slow-burn immersion and moral complexity that made the book a Pulitzer winner and bestseller.

For readers and viewers alike, the experience reinforces the unique power of the novel form to explore the human mind in ways film sometimes cannot. The Goldfinch reminds us that some stories are best encountered on the page, where grief can unfold slowly, objects can carry symbolic weight over hundreds of pages, and a chained bird can teach us about both fragility and unexpected endurance. Future adaptations of dense literary works might benefit from longer formats, such as limited series, to better honour the source material's rhythm and depth.

Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* and its 2019 film adaptation offer a fascinating case study in the possibilities and pitfalls of literary-to-cinematic translation. While the movie preserves the novel's core narrative and delivers strong visual artistry, it loses much of the psychological depth, philosophical reflection, and emotional texture that define Tartt's work. The comparison reveals that fidelity to plot alone is often insufficient; true adaptation success requires finding cinematic equivalents for literary interiority.

Conclusion. The comparative analysis demonstrates that John Crowley's *The Goldfinch* maintains the basic narrative framework of Donna Tartt's novel while substantially transforming its modes of storytelling. The film preserves the central trajectory of Theo Decker's life: the traumatic death of his mother, his accidental acquisition of Fabritius's painting, his displacement between different families and social environments, his friendship with Boris, his involvement in the antique business, and his eventual confrontation with guilt, deception, and responsibility.

The most significant difference concerns the representation of Theo's interior world. Tartt's first-person narration gives the reader direct and sustained access to memory, anxiety, guilt, obsession, moral hesitation, and philosophical reflection. The novel therefore constructs Theo not only through his actions but through his interpretation of those actions. The film cannot reproduce this extensive verbal interiority without becoming dependent on narration or exposition. Instead, it attempts to communicate psychological states through acting, framing, color, lighting, editing, music, and cinematography.

This analysis, while focused on one specific case, contributes to ongoing discussions in adaptation studies about medium-specific storytelling and the enduring value of interior narrative voices. The comparison confirms that the novel and film are best understood as two interconnected but autonomous artistic works whose differences arise from the distinctive expressive capacities of literature and cinema.

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Баняс Н. Ю., Баняс В. В., Лізак К. М. «ЩИГОЛЬ» ДОННИ ТАРТТ: ПОРІВНЯЛЬНИЙ АНАЛІЗ РОМАНУ ТА ЙОГО ЕКРАНІЗАЦІЇ 2019 РОКУ

Статтю присвячено порівняльному аналізу роману американської письменниці Донни Тартт «Щиголь» (The Goldfinch, 2013) та його кінематографічної адаптації 2019 року режисера Джона Кроулі за сценарієм Пітера Страгана. Дослідження спрямоване на визначення основних способів трансформації художньої оповіді під час переходу від літературного тексту до кінематографічного твору.

Основну увагу зосереджено на особливостях наративної структури, характеристиці головного героя Теодора Декера, репрезентації травматичного досвіду, функціонуванні образу картини Карела Фабріціуса «Щиголь», а також на змінах у часовій організації сюжету та системі персонажів. У романі історія Тео подається переважно через нарацію від першої особи, що забезпечує читачеві безпосередній доступ до його спогадів, психологічних переживань, почуття провини, моральних сумнівів і філософських роздумів. У фільмі значна частина цієї внутрішньої перспективи скорочується або трансформується за допомогою візуальних і звукових засобів: композиції кадру, монтажу, кольорової гами, музики, акторської гри, освітлення та кінематографічної організації простору. Аналіз сучасних досліджень свідчить про важливість інтермедіальності, художньої деталі, травми та символіки мистецтва для розуміння роману. Особливе значення має картина «Щиголь», яка функціонує не лише як сюжетний предмет, а й як символ пам'яті, втрати, провини, збереження краси та зв'язку людини з мистецтвом.

Порівняння показує, що кіноверсія зберігає основну фабульну лінію роману, проте суттєво скорочує його психологічну та філософську глибину. Зміна хронологічної структури та концентрація великого обсягу матеріалу в межах повнометражного фільму впливають на розвиток персонажів і емоційну мотивацію подій. Водночас кінематографічна адаптація не повинна оцінюватися винятково за критерієм її відповідності літературному першоджерелу. Відповідно до сучасних теорій адаптації, вона є самостійною формою художньої інтерпретації, яка використовує специфічні можливості кіно для переосмислення літературного матеріалу.

Ключові слова: *Донна Тарт, Щиголь, екранізація, адаптація, порівняльний аналіз, оповідь, травма.*

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