Crossing the Textual Boundaries of James Clavell's Novel Shōgun in FX's TV Adaptation (2024)

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Abstract

This paper is an analytical, comparative study between James Clavell's 1975 novel, *Shōgun,* and the 2024 mini-series adaptation created by Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks under the same name. It investigates the adaptation's artful methods of storytelling and the crucial decisions made by the showrunners throughout its production. Their attempt to polish the rich original story written by Clavell represents an important showcase for all modern adaptations that aspire to bring new ideas into classical narratives. As the novel had been known for its tendency to divulge into, long explanatory segments about the cultural and inner workings of Japan through abundant descriptions told by an omniscient narrator and through the use of inner monologues, the TV series is left to face the challenge of fitting all of the cultural guidelines and abstract thoughts onto a different frame. To compensate for its bound lacklustre textual expression, the producers are forced to cross the novelistic boundaries of the book by focusing their efforts on the great visual potential that the story could offer. In this research, I will explore the decisions that carried the show throughout its episodes by relying on the structural theories of adaptation and the various socio-cultural opinions of scholars and critics, which revolve around the representation of Japanese culture by Western artists. My research mainly aims to assess the level of collaboration the two art mediums are able to achieve, both thematically and culturally, in their overall contribution to the story.

Keywords: James Clavell; omniscient narrator; inner monologues; novelistic boundaries; adaptation; Japanese culture

Introduction

Based on the historical exploits of William Adams, the first English sailor to have reached Japan becoming one of the most important foreign trade advisors for the shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu in the 1600s, the work of James Clavell tries to capitalize on the influential role that Adams had played during his stay overseas. Contrary to popular belief however, there are no records of him having been ever recognized as

a samurai. Nonetheless, Adams did play an undeniable crucial role in opening lines of communication between Japan and the British Empire, which inspired many authors to write stories around the figure's heroic feats (p.6, 10). John Blackthorn (the *Anjin-san*)[1] might be just a hyperbolic, version of Adams's historical triumphs, but the character also serves as an important point of entry for modern audiences into the world of feudal Japan. Clavell's novel does not simply teach its readers about the old values and traditions that are deeply embedded within a long-standing, rich history of Japanese culture, it also provides an outlook on how competitive European trade was growing in the East at a time in which global atlases' were gradually being unveiled by the daring explorations of commissioned Western sailors.

The FX's series was able to achieve a monumental viewership count through its 10 episodes by hitting the mark of 9 million views across all streaming platforms, both on Hulu and Disney+ (Otterson). This makes *Shōgun* one of the few adaptation series to reach this level of success, yet its popularity did not bear fruits from taking safe bets or by simply copying Clavell's version of narrative and pasting it on screen. Although the FX adaptation was described as a faithful portrayal of Clavell's novel, it is far from being an identical story. The screenwriters have taken significant risks that should be acknowledged and studied for their role in allowing this popular remake. In the following sections of my research, I will focus my investigation on the strategies of film narration, screen adaptation, and the mise-en-scene of some of the most important scenes in the show. I believe that the FX's adaptation embodies more thematic and cultural meanings than meets the eye. Additionally, I argue that when judging screen adaptations based on popular novels, there seems to be a strong tendency among critics to closely compare them with their source material for the sake of proving their bound 'inferiority'. This common bias toward the older, more established medium of literature puts any TV adaptation at the mercy of a harsher audience while overshadowing the creativity and originality brought by the production team. I explore this common flawed approach that keeps many critics from appreciating the subtle, expressive shots that often add more depth to the story. In doing so, my work relies on the well-established adaptation theories of Linda Hutcheon and the opinions of George Bluestone and Brian McFarlen on the relationship that exists between novel writing and cinematography.

In the last section of my paper, I will focus on examining the amount of attention the mini-series has dedicated to the cultural and historical representation of Japan in the 1600s while comparing it to Clavell's version of factual recording. As one of the lead actors and co-producers of the show*,* Hiroyuki Sanada, had previously stated in an interview, "We tried to avoid too much Westerniz[ing] or too much moderniz[ing] (…) even in Japan, thinking about the young generation, they try to make modernised samurai drama or movie — but real samurai fans hate that" (as cited in Moon). Sanada's

[1] *Anjin-san* is the nickname that is given to John Blackthorn after most Japanese characters have found it difficult to pronounce his actual name. *Anjin* translate to pilot while *-san* is added to the name as a sign of respect. (Clavell, p.117, 131)

commitment to cultural authenticity begs the question of whether Clavell's novel had fallen into the trap of Westernization, which for centuries has been a common form of interpretation made by Western authors when dealing with foreign cultures. To this end, my research explores the extent of accuracy that both art mediums have tried to attain while also investigating the approaches they take to explain complex facets of essential contextual elements to their audiences.

Balance between Fidelity to the Text and Creative Liberties on Screen

In 1948, the American critic, Dilys Powell described David Lean's film adaptation of *Oliver Twist* as having been "careful in [its] preservation of the skeleton of Dickens's book" (Powell, p.334). Therefore, he considers Lean's film to be an impeccable way to adapt a novel. One that future filmmakers should aspire to follow; it is, in other words, nothing short of a faithful depiction, which would please all fans of the book. Should the satisfaction of readers be the main concern of the adaptation, however, is a matter that is up for discussion. Moving forward to a more recent, present-day review, the critic and editor at Inverse Journal, Hoai-Tran Bui (2024), described David Benioff and D. B. Weiss's adaptation of Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* as just another project that "expose[s] the inherent problem of trying to translate a dense, ambitious novel into TV." According to her, this kind of adaptation "will never be quite as ambitious and smart" (Bui). By saying this it almost seems that Tran Bui is making the argument that the Netflix adaptation did not stand a chance to begin with and cannot possibly catch up to the quality of the novel even in its upcoming seasons, but what she is comparing here was never intended as an attempt to compete with the original sci-fi trilogy. It was rather meant to be, first and foremost, a project about making an enjoyable and financially successful sci-fi TV show. It draws a lot of inspiration from Cixin's world, but it tries to provide a more original, universal take on how an upcoming invasion of *Trisolarians* might affect people around the world.

The narrowed-down expectations that many critics and audiences, both past and present, still hold for every screen adaptation, make it difficult for ambitious TV producers and filmmakers to take chances with their productions. Because of this clinging to the source material, the expectations held for inspired works have become less about giving a nod to the original text and more about being indebted and showcasing gratitude to the first artistic creation. Why then adapt in the first place when people can simply re-read the books they love to get the same unadulterated experience they so much hang on to? and why not just pursue a completely original screenplay to avoid any backlash from the devotees of the novel? Linda Hutcheon provides to these questions a plethora of responses, but one that stands out the most to me is the exciting challenge of bringing a beloved story to life. In such cases, the adapter does not simply want to pay homage to the source material but also intends to apply his own, personal critique (Hutcheon, p.92-94).

It is, in my opinion, enough motivation for passionate screenwriters to create a solid, filmable script, and if that means murdering elements from the book and building anew so that their new, modified visions can fit the television frame, then it is worth the sacrifice. After all, what many literary fanatics who watch films in the hopes of finding the “skeletons” of their beloved books intact in the adaptations fail to consider, or perhaps more likely to forget, is that cinematography is its own independent art medium and thus, should be allowed to operate in its own lane without having its experimental tendencies restricted. Most critics, I believe, already understand this. Acknowledging the existence of the work that first gave inspiration to the adaptation is one thing, but owing a total fidelity to the original book means an admission of inferiority — if not of subsidiarity— to the traditional art.

There have been many critics who have voiced their vexations with this over-exhausted debate, and rightfully so since the discussions about some presumably high and low forms of artistic productions seem to lose their purpose after a while. Having become known more as a fade than a meaningful argument; the simple matter of fact is that audiences can enjoy both novels and cinematography without the need to choose. However, even after recognising the futility of pitting the two against each other, and even after having been deemed relatively different in their properties early on as pointed out by George Bluestone in his 1961 book “*Novels to Film*”, “a linguistic medium” against one that is “essentially visual” (p.VIII), there remains a stubborn inclination to idolize the novel and set it as the norm for any screen adaptation to re-create. Acknowledging that TV producers should be given more freedom to pester their adaptations does not automatically deny the existence of a certain affinity that connects films to novels.

There can still be plenty of room left to study this interconnected relationship despite their core differences. Thomas Leitch believes that the relationship the two mediums share can be stripped down to the adaptation process itself. Films rely on screenplays, which frequently draw ideas from literary source material. The script differs from the literature in that it is a performance text. It requires an interpretation by both the actors and the audience for its fulfilment. In contrast, a literary text only requires interpretation by its readers (Leitch, p.154). A dependency on literature is something that cannot be ignored all the same, especially for screenwriters who have to create adaptable interesting scripts that can be aired on screen for the enjoyment of the spectators. The inspiration drawn from reading novels is part of this process, but, Leitch does not mean to state the obvious by mentioning the stages of screenwriting. He is instead, criticizing George Bluestone and Seymour Chatman’s cut-dry conclusions about the fixed boundaries that they think ought to be maintained between books and films. Just because of the verbal, linguistic nature that books are known for, Leitch counter-argues, it does not mean that films [and TV series] must, by this mode of reasoning, only be known for their audio-visual expression (p.153). The flexibility that cinematography is blessed with, encourages a level of creativity that could and should appeal to modern times.

In an interview with Emily Burack on the topic of how to adapt classics with a modern audience in mind, the creators of the FX series *Shōgun,* Marks and Kondo, argue that in an adaptation producers should look for new territories to explore, especially when dealing with a popular work such as that of Clavell's. Marks (2024) discloses that the difficulty in revamping the novel for them was mainly due to the great appeal it already had,

> [There are] so many television shows that have ripped off from it over the years[2]. As writers, we like to say we're always in search of new clichés and I don't know where to find new cliches in that [story]. And so we were really worried going in: Is there really anything new to say? (...) That savior narrative that we all assume belongs to Shōgun, it's actually quite the opposite (...) [the] show up with all the bluster and all the, 'here I am ready to bring my culture's technology and all this stuff to another culture," and then find that they're generally indifferent to it, because they're doing just fine. It's great and unexpected. So we wanted to use that. (Burack, Marks)

For Marks and Kondo, experimenting with new ideas on screen is crucial in adapting any renowned, beloved novel. They consider themselves as storytellers when they approach the source material, so for them, to weave a new thread of narrative, even one of a smaller scale that could extend upon a well-known story would allow them to become contributors alongside the original author. Unfortunately, this risk-taking strategy that ambitious screenwriters sometimes choose to embark on does not always pay off, especially when the quality of the new events they decide to add on screen does not match that of the original material. Brian McFarlane believes that "… being bold in the matter of adaptation won't ensure a good/interesting/stimulating film." Later he gives a follow-up to this statement by saying, "Not being bold can [also] cripple the processes of adaptation, and one can end up with not so much an adaptation as an embalmment of a famous work" (p.7-8). Naturally, filming a story that deviates completely from the source material while altering —if not completely contradicting— canon events in the process does not go unnoticed by the fans.

This was the case for the 2022 Netflix adaptation of the *Halo* series, which received a lot of backlash after notoriously side-stepping the *Halo* video game's lore and deciding to follow a completely independent route of sci-fi narrative. Such decisions would almost seem to imply a mutiny against the creators of the videogame and a desire to claim authority over the work's title. By erasing all traces of its lore the showrunners assumed an "I can do it better" attitude when adapting the story on screen. Fortunately enough, after the disappointing reviews that the first season had received, the show's creators quickly realised that they could not do it better. In the following season, they decided to bring back the series on course with the game's lore as their main source

[2] There are several movies that take inspiration from James Clavell's *Shōgun*; including Jerry London's 1980 mini-series, but there are even more published fictional novels that were inspired by the real-life English sailor, William Adams. Clavell considers his novel to be among the luckiest in its success at appealing to Western audiences, especially after he had stumbled by chance upon Adams' biography while flipping through one of his daughter's schoolbooks (Smith H, p.11, 13)

of inspiration. The positive reception that the second season has received goes to show how valuable and impactful the opinion of the audience is. Fans can also assume the role of a third-party contributor, almost like an equalizer between the two artists. Their reactions and opinions tend to be overlooked when the obsession with bringing as many creative ideas as possible takes hold of ambitious storytellers. The audience's reception does not filter out any miss-steps. Their feedback is essential in rectifying future follow-ups to the story; that is why artists should constantly be reminded of the unarticulated partnership they have with their targeted audience.

There is an intricate conundrum that many producers still struggle to untangle when dealing with a title that is mainly based on a source material. Attempts at striking a balance in the middle of the two different approaches that McFarlane mentioned is, for better or for worse, the gamble that would decide whether the progress added to the story and the new plot-lines that the scenes dive into can become acknowledged by audiences as a canon contribution to the text or as a disappointing attempt at expansion. In the next section, I explore how the 2024 TV mini-series of *Shōgun* sets out to achieve the prior outcome by crossing its novelistic limitations and by bringing different strategies of adaptation at work.

Crossing Novelistic Boundaries in the Filming of Shōgun

The use of the omniscient narrator in James Clavell's novel is an important tool that the author frequently goes back to whenever he wishes to keep his readers in the loop of how the characters perceive one another. Underneath their polite words and unperturbed voice tones; underneath their bows full of respect and admiration for their leader, Yoshi Toranaga, there lies secretive plans and a higher attention span in the minds of many *daimyos*. The Japanese feudal lords await an opportunity that could present itself at any given chance for them to execute their schemes and move upward in the echelon of their society. Kashigi Yabu is a character who seems to play the role of the obedient servant for both Toranaga and his ultimate rival Ishido Kazunari throughout the entire conflict. Never completely committing to either of them, he only looks to exploit the winning side to his own benefit. He is a character whose ambitions are rarely expressed explicitly but whose thoughts and manners speak volumes to the reader. The "*Shōgun*", which we are informed, is the utmost status that a person could attain in Japan, equating to a military dictatorship (Clavell, p.74), is Yabu's end goal. However, some readers would not have guessed that his dream could reach as high as that of the other more powerful leaders if not for the narrator's thorough contextualisation. Thus, Yabu's obsessions with power, ownership, and sadistic torture are presented as fundamental details in building the character.

What is even more surprising is the bald ambitions of his nephew, Kasigi Omi, who wants to topple down Yabu and set himself up for a promotion under the rule of

Toranaga. Although some characters are given long inner monologue scenes that also offer a direct first-seat view for the audience on their intentions, the omniscient narrator serves as an additional, important guide who provides further valuable clues on where each of these storylines is heading. Clavell demonstrates this in one scene by showing readers how Omi's transformation from an ally to one of his uncle's worst enemies gets ignited by a mere moment of humiliation,

> …Yabu had publicly insulted Omi's mother and wife in front of peasants by keeping them waiting for hours in the sun like peasants and had then dismissed them without acknowledgement like peasants. (...) "I gave Yabu the key to the ship, the key to the Anjin-san and the new barbarians, and the way out of Toranaga's trap. My help has brought him immense prestige. And what have we got in return? Filthy insults. Accept your *karma* (…) My *karma* is to destroy Yabu. (Clavell, p.504-505)

Kasigi Omi's anger sets him on the path to destroy Yabu. The readers understand from the narrator's words that he came to this decision partly because Yabu had broken the sanctity of their relationship. He had insulted him by dismissing his invitation to launch with both his mother and wife. Such actions put Omi to shame at that moment as he felt less of a noble and more of a peasant who is only kept by Yabu's side to serve his egotistical whims for power. Omi pounders upon the idea and concludes that this lack of concern and respect shown to him had happened for a reason. It is his fate to bring the fall of this newly acquired enemy and carry out his revenge. This way, the author justifies the future rebellion of Omi against his uncle by combining both techniques of narration; an omniscient narrator gives us the context of the cultural offence followed by an inner monologue that asserts the growing spite in Omi's inner being.

These harsh, and seemingly sudden decisions that the characters often make, might look unjustified in the eyes of Western audiences, but Clavell tries to reinforce the pattern of opposite views and attitudes that exist between the two cultures through the voice of the narrator. For samurais, the lack of respect towards one's family is often considered an unforgivable sin that is punished by death. Although, the TV mini-series does not go to the same lengths in explaining this. There are moments on which the production team turns their cameras focus to explain the code of morality upheld during this period. These visual scenes are just as equal in terms of rationalising behaviours that might shock and even disturb the unfamiliar viewer before gradually providing him with enough cultural context for each event. Perhaps the most popular one that showcases this, is the death of the Gardener in the fifth episode. After John Blackthorn hangs a bird pheasant outside of his home to let the meat mature before using it to cook stew, he warns everyone around the house not to touch it by carelessly using a few, crude Japanese words; his words translate to "IF TOUCH—DIE!" (Kondo, Marks, Episode 5, 12:11-12:27). The scene stresses the importance of this command when the Gardener sacrifices himself by removing the bird, which had rotten and exuded an intolerable stench.

His maid, Fujiko, kills the Gardener afterwards honoring Blackthorn's warning. Many emotions can be felt and visualised by watching this scene. The aftermath of the character's death emphasises the dismay of the protagonist at hearing the news, his rising anger at Fujiko, the realisation that he is at fault for this death because of his lack of attention to the wording he used, and the later guilt that ensues, are all expressed through the masterful acting of Cosmo Jarvis. This scene reflects a shared shock and sadness between a fictional character and the audience to what is initially perceived as a meaningless, even unnecessary death at first.

In a later revelation, however, the viewers are rewarded for their patience and understanding with a more appeasing conclusion to the death of Uejirou, the Gardener. His passing away is used to diverge the attention of Yabu from ever finding Toranga's spy by thinking that Uejirou was the perpetrator, setting up the peasant in the process as an important pawn in Toranga's plan and allowing the real spy to continue his mission. One thing that is important to note here is that the series adds multiple layers to the original scene by focusing on the direct interpretation of words that the Japanese servants have to obey. In the novel, the order given by Blackthorn is different from that of the series. He simply utters the words that translate to "No touching but me" (Clavell p.581) instead of "Shinu" or "Die". The TV series reinforces the dangerous repercussions that the misuse of words can have when uttered by someone of authority, a samurai *hatamoto*[3]like Blackthorn. As Toda Mariko later explains this to him in the novel, "You'd given orders. You are head of the house. They didn't know your customs or what to do, other than to solve the dilemma according to our custom," (Clavell, p.644) a lesson is learned by both protagonist and the spectators about the extent to which samurais would go in order to honour these commands.

The show also uses this death as an opportunity to explain the importance of such concepts as *karma* and *Bushido* teachings in 1600 Japan, which helped the Japanese people overcome their fear of death back then. By relying on a *diegetic approach*[4] the screenwriters illustrate these constructs through the purpose they give to Uejirou's sacrifice. This way, the cultural upbringing of the citizens during that time is explored in a more subtle, manner than that of the book. By doing so, the creators of the show have utilised the visual expression that the television medium is capable of to let the audience experience these multi-layered beliefs, instead of limiting themselves to sharing mere abstract definitions. *Dune's* director, Dennis Villeneuve goes further

[3] Hatamoto is a title given to the higher-ranking samurais that are considered closer vassals of the shogun. They have higher income compared to other samurais, and they are also granted the right of audience with the shogun pertaining to important matters. (Mulhern as cited in Smith.H, p.142)

[4] In film, the term "diegesis" refers to the world of the story itself, including the characters, events, and settings. A diegetic approach in filmmaking focuses on using elements within this world to create meaning and subtext. This can involve social markers, physical environments, and even sounds that the characters themselves would perceive. By using these elements subtly, filmmakers can make viewers more aware of the characters' thoughts and feelings, even if those elements aren't directly shown on screen. (Mitchel qtd in Corbin, p.315)

by arguing that "the power of cinema lies in pure image and sound". Although he explains that dialogue is more important for televised series and less for movies, he still considers the lines added to any cinematic shots as an intrusive part of the filming process. He believes that emphasising the actors' lines too much often devalues the importance of the image.

Villeneuve (2024) adds to this argument by giving a more controversial take and making his now most notorious statement, "I don't remember movies because of a good line, I remember them because of a strong image" (Villeneuve, 2024). His opinion gives off the impression that dialogues are only fit to be used in series but not in films, which is something I disagree with. The possibility of filming a movie completely without the need to rely on dialogues or any speech for that matter is certainly not an outlandish idea. Many silent old motion pictures are proof of that and many more recent films, although lesser in number than the old ones, still use this formula. However, I find Villeneuve's complete dismissal of dialogues as an expressional tool on screen to be an extreme saturation put upon the versatility of popular filmmakers whose movies are remembered more for their great lines than their visuals. Moreover, to deny the relationship that is growing so-ever stronger between televised shows and films; the recent Guy Ritchie TV series that was inspired by his 2019 film "*The Gentlemen*" being a good example of that, is to put films in a superior category. It only leads to more unnecessary sub-comparisons between audio-visual modes of expression, which is even more futile of a debate than the initial one between text and image. As the French professor, Christian Metz has phrased it, "the cinematographic image and the televisual image hardly differ from one another except in terms of size" (Metz, qtd in Jost, p.3); Although Metz's argument that one single difference is what separates the two can be opposed by mentioning a longer list of distinctions, there should not be any reasons to add more constraints on either film or TV series when there are already plenty of them constantly being set by literary critics.

The viewers of *Shōgun's* TV adaptation will notice a great deal of resourcefulness in terms of expressions put into a clearer perspective. The show alternates between moments of pure visual display where the camera pans towards small details that prove to be more thought-provoking than words. There are also crucial dialogue scenes that traverse the boundaries of languages through the power of visual interpretation. The first face-to-face communication between Blackthorn and Toranaga is shot by simply focusing on the two characters' exchange, one asking questions in Japanese accompanied by subtitles while the other answers in what is supposed to be Portuguese, which is only put in English words for viewers to understand (Kondo, Marks, Episode 2). This considerate approach the show takes in giving as much clarity to the audience as possible, can be described as a semi-theatrical mode of expression. The interpreters' role, played by both Mariko and Father Alvito,

are hidden from the spectator's line of sight under a diegetic frame format. Their presence is equal to an invisible narrator whom audiences are aware of but are guided not to focus upon. Instead, the two actors involved in the conversation are highlighted on stage. Even more interesting, is the second invisible narrator who is never shown on screen and who provides a direct English translation for the audience to both Japanese and Portuguese languages. American author, Evans Puschacks (2024) points out that the show was only able to achieve this level of overlayed, yet simplified expression by "having *Shōgun'*s Japanese [first written] in English, carefully translated into [old] Japanese then carefully translated back to English to be consumed by us in the form of subtitles" (Puschacks, 6:40-6:53). The exchange exemplifies the major role that screenwriters play in using the limited screen time and space to notify the audience of the interpreters presence. These invisible translators rationalize the words coming through while putting great emphasis on the direct filtered and translated dialogue between Blackthorn and Toranaga. The language barriers that would normally inflict and disrupt this kind of cross-cultural communication are set aside knowing that Father Alvito; watched and checked by Mariko, is taking charge of the translation. This way, the interpreters are kept in the background like secondary characters in a theatrical act while the screen's focal attention remains on the main exchange.

Another scene in the show that does the opposite of the communication mentioned above, is the expression of romantic attraction growing increasingly between Blackthorn and Mariko. The two characters' visit of the *Whilow World* allows for great progress in their romance. By highlighting visual cues under a glamorous light while keeping the dialogue as a sub-commentary addition to the acting of the characters, the words uttered by Mariko while she is translating the courtesan's speech, are almost like background music meant to complement the real conversation happening in a dimly lit room. The mise-en-scene of Episode 6 is heavily reliant on Blackthorn's love-stricken gaze towards Mariko (Kondo, Marks, Episode 6). This scene is vital in setting up the level of intimacy that would eventually expand between the two characters. It compensates immensely for the book's slow-burn and gradual build-up of the relationship. The novel insists, more exclusively, on the secretive talks in which the couple engage, often using Latin to cypher their messages while attempting to keep their forbidden love undisclosed, but still using a direct line of emotional exchange to convey their feelings. This overt display of love can be seen in the following passage of the book as Clavell writes,

> At long last I know what love means," she murmured the first night (…) "I love thee, so I'm afraid for thee," she whispered, holding onto him, using Latin, the language of lovers. "I love thee. Oh, how I love thee." "I've destroyed thee, my love, by beginning. We're doomed now. I've destroyed thee—that is the truth." "No, Mariko, somehow something will happen to make everything right." "I should never have begun. The fault is mine." "Do not worry, I beg thee. Karma is karma. (Clavell, p.794)

What the series does differently in portraying the romantic development is the expression of affection without indicating its extent. A level of mystery between the two characters is kept on the horizon, allowing the viewers' anticipation for the climax of this love story to be greater by giving less importance to the flirtatious, verbal communication that the novel sticks to and more attention to the mystery the characters' facial expressions hide. Torben Grodal goes further by arguing an obscure background adds complexity to the romance captured on screen. It reveals traces of the characters' feelings towards each other, but just enough to hold the curiosity of the audience afloat. In such occasions, perceptual-cognitive ambiguity is frequently used in cinematography to improve the audience's response to overarching story themes. For instance, in a romance or mystery, the special effects of fog, rain, or dusk are employed to bolster the emotional response while making the perception of the events' progress less evident (Grodal as cited Plantinga, Smith.M, p.142).

By capturing the fear and hesitation that harbours deeply in this relationship instead of ever declaring any affection aloud, the show chooses to leave the interpretation of this burdened romance for the audience to make. This subtlety the adaptation chooses to maintain is also shown in Toranga's plan. Opting for the sacrifice of major characters like his son and direct heir, Yoshii Nagakado, as well as his closest friend Hiro-Matsu, is perhaps one the most noticeable deviances from the source that book fans would catch on to. The showrunner's decision to include the two characters as part of Toranaga's sacrificial pawns adds greatly to his obsession with the shōgunate. It is, in my opinion, a strong expressionless clue granted to the viewers that reveals Toranaga's pursuit of the title, despite him constantly claiming otherwise. Just like the mystery that envelopes the extent of adoration between Blackthorn and Mariko. The mystery here is also set upon Toranaga's extent of devotion to becoming the next ruler. The lack of reveal in his plans heightens the dramatic nature of the story's conclusions. It leaves the audience wondering in contemplation of what the thoughts of each character might look like. Does Blackthorn know of Toranaga's intentions to keep him imprisoned in Japan? Does Kasigi Omi intend to stay loyal under Toranaga's rule? And what is Toragana thinking of next?! While the novel chooses to share some of the depths of these thoughts, the series preserves a greater tension even in its finale. The showrunners thus, have settled for an open ending that allows the viewers to enjoy coming up with possibilities for the story's progress.

Cultural Representation of Feudal Japan and Careful Auditing

Justin Marks's previous remark about his team's intent to explore the story by focusing on the Japanese characters' vantage point, clearly stems from an awareness of an increasing lack of patience for the cliché, over-told white saviours' narrative. Instead of giving priority screen time to Blackthorn's character, the show allows a Japanese cast

to shine by adding more details to their storylines. The relationship between Mariko and Lady Oshiba is explored in flashbacks, and so is Toranga's traumatic experience in his first war, which is implied, had a role in building the cold-hearted, unfazed present-time warlord. What the showrunners, however, set out to achieve was more than just a screen adaptation that ties loose thematic ends. It is also a story about the initial changing tides in feudal Japan. The definition of 'samurai' that has often been romanticised in previous American film depictions such as that of Edward Zwick's *The Last Samurai*, is conveyed differently here. Zwick's film gives off the impression that even in the 1800s Japanese samurais were still adamant about the idea of using firearms during wars because of their *bushido* code of warrior. Although the Japanese military forces had indeed shown less interest in guns throughout history compared to the West, there existed squadrons of samurais who incorporated the use of muskets early on during the 16th century. David L. Howell insists on the fact that there were hundreds of thousands of firearms In Japan, some of them had even been by Japanese gunsmiths in local provinces. More importantly, the use of cannons in the show by a small training regiment assigned under Blackthorn is a well-documented historical detail that was added to Clavell's original depiction of armament (Howell p.66-67). It is meant, I believe as a corrective contention that attempts to set the record straight about the Japanese growing inclination to modern weaponry during that time.

Howell argues that this popular misconception of samurais always sticking by their swords as part of their cultural upbringing has been reinforced by Noel Perrin's 1980 characterisation of Japan. His descriptions painted the nation as one that seeks peace even during a time of war evidenced by Tokugawa's long peaceful period. Howell challenges this idea by calling it "flawed", "[Perrin's] book is well-intentioned" he states, "for [he] hoped that the Japanese case might serve as a salutary example in a nuclear age, [but] Tokugawa peace created opportunities for firearms to develop a new character as something other than simple weapons" (p.66). Such opportunities also include the adoption of ship warfare as mentioned in the novel. Although the portrayal of William Adams as the pioneer of battleship strategies in Japan through the character of Blackthorn is somewhat of an exaggeration, Clavell's novel deserves some credit for attempting to bring a less mystified image of samurais to the readers. The details mentioned concerning the strategies of war serve to challenge the stereotypical weaknesses and underdevelopment by which the nation's culture is often accused of being its cause.

Aside from the mention of guns and cannons, the adaptation also chooses to tackle some of Clavell's notions of Japanese beliefs and customs differently, including the belief in *karma*. The term had been used so many times in the book and given so many different meanings that it is difficult for unfamiliar readers to truly grasp it. William LaFleur argues that the author's 'sprinkling' of the word throughout different sections of the novel is due to the various meanings Clavell had encountered during

his background research. The author's indecisiveness on which meaning to settle for is what led to this "kaleidoscopic *karma",* which seems to shift and turn with each usage" (LaFleur as cited in Smith. H, p.75). It is true that the notion has evolved over the centuries with its gradual adoption in different parts of the world, but the narrator decides how to define it early on in the novel, explaining that "*karma* was an Indian word adopted by Japanese, part of Buddhist philosophy that referred to a person's fate in this life, his fate immutably fixed because of deeds done in a previous life, good deeds giving a better position in this life's strata, bad deeds the reverse." (Clavell, p.219). In later passages of the novel, however, the reader is met with the various *discourses of karma*[5], from a notion that affects the present life of the person without the need to ascend to the next one, to one that defines every one of his lives until reaching an ideal state of nirvana. He even uses it interchangeably with a personal fate, an unescapable destiny fixed by God.

The inconsistency in the use of the term has generated some convoluted instances in the novel, which is the result of relying on the enigmatic effect that it evokes rather than its believed meaning. An example of this is the scene where Blackthorn is able to confront death by showing his intent of committing seppuku. After he is saved by Omi before the edge of the knife pierces his chest, Mariko tells him that "through an unknowing karma, miraculously [he] come back again" (Clavell, p.88). The use of the characteristics of 'unknowing' and 'miraculous' almost contradicts the narrator's initial definition in which karma is believed to be already decided in one's life. Instead, it is alluded to, in this scene of the book, as a shocking and unexplained power that saved Blackthorn. Karma here is almost suggested to be a gifted fate that should not have been his.

There is a constant transition by the author from a simple notion of "fate", to one that is obscured by a seemingly unreachable understanding of the term. This can be rather confusing to follow, which is why the show's decision to use a more boiled-down meaning of the term is understandable. Karam is referred to, thus, in Episode 7 as *"shukumei"* when translated by Mariko after Blackthorn announces to Toranaga, "…I am ready for whatever our fate may bring" (Kondo, Marks, Episode 7, 12:28-12:44). It is, in this case, a joint "predestined fate" that Blackthorn comes to accept as an unescapable destiny bound to Toranaga's leadership. This minor alteration is another example of a justified simplification that removes unnecessary vagueness and guarantees clarity to preserve the audience's immersion. The effort to keep track of which karma is referred to in each scene would have perhaps made any viewer lose their patience.

[5] LaFleur argues that *Nihon ryoiki*, a 9th century work that was written by a Japanese monk called Kyokai, was one of the earliest texts to have explained the system. It mentioned the extent of rewards and punishments that past life actions could have on the future lives of people. The work was meant to deter the citizens from committing crimes by virtue of fear from their bound consequences. In later centuries however, people did not share the same optimism Kyokai did for the notion (as cited in Smith.H, p.75).

The focus on clarity over technicality is a decision that the screenwriters did not take lightly. For them, the story is the centrepiece of the mini-series. Therefore the thematic upholding of *Shogun's* narrative came first. This does not mean that the adaptation was willing to sacrifice the accuracy of cultural and historical details that it conveyed to let the story shine either. If it did so it would have fallen into the same redundant attempts at finding synonymous Western titles for the positions which pertain to the Japanese feudal culture. This is known as the common approach that Western cinematography takes in portraying samurais, ninjas, and ronins, accentuating the exoticism of such roles. Ninjas, for instance, are often shown in Hollywood films as the equivalents of spies but whose black attire and secretive training almost give them supernatural powers, becoming one with their shadows. Samurais are treated with the same degree of mysticism. Antony Cummins reiterates this otherworldly image by which they have become known for in various blockbusters, "they [often] have mysterious and magical blades, which can cut through any material. In the day [the samurai] meditates on loyalty and is gifted with blessed enlightenment, but in the night, he fearfully protects against his famously dreaded enemy—the ninja" (Cummins, p.7). Although ninjas are indeed fearful assassins and enemies of samurais who choose to strike in stealth, they are also considered to be samurais trained in espionage. In other words, ninjas are a military group whose objective is usually to collect information while avoiding combat (Cummins, p.16). Additionally the use of the term '*ninja*' instead of *'shinobi'* was more popular during the 20th century, and as Stephen Turnbull suggests, an easier word to pronounce for the Western tongue (Turnbull, p.6), While Clavell uses the term *ninja* in his novel, preferring the modern word over the one more accurate to the narrative's period, the TV show opts for *shinobi* in its referral to the intended hired kidnappers of Mariko. This choice of depiction presents a more historically faithful portrayal of this special faction on screen than it does in the book.

Clavell's cultural and historical interpretations are by no means false ones. They are simply used as an appealing factor to Western audiences. His intentions are not to parade an acquired knowledge about the period or the culture, but his liminal descriptions constantly switch between hints of romanticism and proofs of realism. This, I believe the TV adaptation tries to amend by keeping both a more accurate, while at the same, simplified, version of accounts. As opposed to Clavell's focus on capturing the Western readers' attention by disguising a few customs and constructs under a thin veil of mysticism and arcane descriptions, the series tries to avoid falling into this typical stereotypical trap. Unlike the author's intentions, the showrunners' objective was not to prioritise any particular fraction of the audience. It was rather to try and capture the interest of a global viewership without fishing for reactions of awe or stupor from the cultural representations of the story.

Conclusion

The antagonism that is still sparked by certain critics between novels and screen adaptations is one known for cutting down the creativity of filmmakers and showrunners. Because of the stubborn expectations for an authoritative position that should always be maintained by the original work over its offspring, little room is granted to polish or change the story on screen. Therefore, these constraints of fidelity imposed on the adaptation undervalue the contribution that the younger art medium can bring. British author; Zadie Smith, speaks of how much of this added value she felt when watching her 2002 novel's TV adaptation *White Teeth.* She writes,

> I had come to realize that my *''White Teeth''* was about a hundred pages too long and suffered from a calamitous ending, dragging at the rear like all unnecessary tails. The truth is, it could do with some touching up. If it were a perfect piece of statuary, then no, one wouldn't want anybody's grubby fingers upon it. But it's not, it's more like a fat, messy kid who needs help (…) A cut has been made; a motivation inserted, and an artistic clarity is the result. The moment I saw it, I gasped -- this section of the novel would have been so improved had I thought of the same strategy (…) it taught me a lesson. In a novel, one scrabbles in the dirt for motivation or stretches for decorative language to hide the lack of it. In film, no such disguise will be tolerated by the viewer. (Smith Z)

What Smith acknowledges is not just the improvement that a show aspires to achieve, it is also the limitations of novel writing. The traditional art medium is not as perfect as many would claim. That is why a collaboration of raw text and audio-visual expression is always encouraged. The balance between the inclusion of elements from the source material and the experimental use of new ideas is difficult to achieve when revamping the story. Nonetheless, considering the audience's potential feedback as having a fundamental impact on the end result of the production can help adjust the amount of contribution that screenwriters intend to add over canon events.

FX's *Shōgun* is able to strike this balance by maintaining its focus on crossing the novelistic boundaries as its main objective. The show replaces thus, the narrator's explanations and the long inner monologues of characters by utilising the camera's lenses. It offers instead a narrative that is largely expressed through the visual cues of the scenes. The aesthetic of the show combined with the great performances of the actors compensate for; and even improve on the novel's storytelling. This, of course, does not exclude the attention given to dialogues. The constant cross-cultural exchanges that are presented to the audience in their translated and filtered forms are treated as valuable opportunities to explain the boundaries and differences that exist between Eastern and Western Cultures. This intercultural form of communication, which was achieved through various cinematic tropes stresses the moments of shared universal human understanding between people, one that crosses the barriers of language.

These improvements also include removing some of the common aspects of romanticism and obscurantism by which Eastern cultures are often treated. Kondo and Marks have set out to portray a Japanese historical period to a global viewership without tugging on the supernatural, or fantastical possibilities of its history. While the Japanese themselves have had their own share of reverence for the mythical realms of the past, this attitude is often exploited to an extreme that is meant to attract the attention of Western audiences. This targeted fraction is often prone to believe in the over-embellished images of samurais and ninjas. The series challenges this marketing-centered approach by bringing a more faithful version of cultural beliefs and interactions in its portrayal of Clavell's story. As a result, the adaptation serves as a great contributor to the refinement of the source material. It also represents important proof that a collaboration between the two art forms can be achieved without futile comparisons over which one is better. The 2024 version of storytelling learns from and bases its improvements on an important foundation of available information that Clavell has accumulated throughout his readings. This helped the screenwriters focus their efforts on bringing a set of complimentary information and threads of fiction that fit the narrative, successfully expanding the story in the process.

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