

They're Making it into a Movie: The Trend of Adapting Teen Novels to the Big Screen

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Abstract: Movie adaptations of YA novels have been booming, and yet, many movies do not meet fans' expectations (Alter, 2014; Strickland, 2013; Bowles, 2014). We examine the question of making a good film adaptation based on teen novels, while discussing successes and failures.

How many movies adapted from teen novels can you name? It probably would not take long to come up with a good list. The hype and the publicity around each new release is not easily missed. These days, movie rights to YA novels are even bought before the publication of the book (Alter, 2014; Tiffany, 2013; Kung, 2011). In her 2004 article "Pimples, popcorn and paperbacks", Sue Ramin reports noticing a growth in teen movies adapted from books, giving examples such as *The Princess Diaries*, *Ella Enchanted*, and *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* (Ramin, 2004). Lindsay Williams of Gotham Group, an intellectual property management company, points out that publishers are 'expand[ing]' what can be considered YA material (Williams, as cited in Ramin, 2004, p. 103), which means the teen movie trend is just going to grow. However, as more recent articles point out, it was really the successes of the *Harry Potter* movies (Braun, 2015; Kung, 2011), and then of the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* sagas, that really launched this recent deluge of movies adapted from teen books (Deutsch, 2013, Kung 2011). As Lindsay Deutsch reports Keith Simanton, the managing editor of the Internet Movie Database, saying, making such adaptations is "worth even a chance of creating a franchise like *Twilight*" (Deutsch, 2013).

And yet, numerous articles have reported on the decline and the struggle to keep up the YA bestseller movie trend (Alter, 2014; Strickland, 2013; Bowles, 2014). Many of these movies have just failed to meet their anticipated success, no matter the popularity or the success of the novel, and no matter the anticipation around the movie's release (Alter, 2014, Bowles, 2014). What is it, then, that makes a good movie adaptation of a YA novel?

At one point there was a “defined ‘it’ factor to predict success” (Deutsch, 2013). There used to be a trend to supernatural YA movies, and, as Alter (2014) states, “vampires and wizards” were the “infallible formula for success” (para. 15). However, other genres of YA fiction are now making it to the big screen: Alter (2014) lists *If I Stay*, *The Fault in Our Stars* and *The Giver* as examples, and cites John Green saying that YA movies are now reflecting the diversity of the YA genre, moving away from the strictly paranormal. Erik Feig, of Lionsgate studio, said they are “wary” of making movies that are so similar to *Twilight*: they do not want to do more of the same thing (Alter, 2014, para. 8). Alter (2014) and Deutsch’s (2013) articles suggest that it is harder today to predict what will be a hit.

Ashley Strickland tackles the question of successful movie adaptations in her article “Young adult books from page to screen” (2013). Her article, as well as Kung’s (2011), explains that “[f]ilm adaptations are a balancing act of fan expectations and filmmaker priorities -- especially when fans have grown up with a book series or character. If a movie deviates too far from the book's plot, changes characters or fudges dialogue, readers can quickly lose faith in it” (Strickland, 2013, para. 6). In other words, it is important to preserve the ‘feel’, the ‘soul’ or the ‘look’ of the novel (Strickland, 2013, para.8; Karger as cited in Bowles, 2014, para. 14).

Many others have thoughts as to what makes a successful movie adaptation. Cassandra Clare suggests that teen books are ideal for movies because “[w]hen you write for teens, you know you have to grab their attention quickly [...] YA (young-adult) novels are plot-propelled. That makes them cinematic” (Clare, as cited in Deutsch, 2013, para. 10). Dave Karger, a Fandago columnist, claims romance is the key (Bowles, 2014). The proper casting is also a must, both in terms of “appearance” and “personality” (Strickland, 2013, para. 13). Karger predicted *Divergent* would be a success because the “subject matter, characters and tone” resemble those of the *Hunger Games* (Karger, as cited in Bowles, 2014, para. 10).

The *Divergent* franchise was pitched as the follow-up to the *Hunger Games* (Alter, 2014; Strickland, 2013). Summit Entertainment even helped promote the book’s release at the opening of *The Hunger Games*:

Catching Fire movie (Alter, 2014). As *Divergent* producer Lucy Fisher explains, people like to relive enjoyable experiences similar to ones that have ended (Alter, 2014). But she admits there are risks to this approach as well: fans can be disappointed, and you don't want to nurture false expectations (Alter, 2014; Strickland, 2013). This is especially important because fans play a big part in a movie's success: fans of a particular novel have been called "imperative" to "spread[ing] the word" about the movie by Simanton (Simanton, as cited by Deutsch, 2013). And yet, even that is sometimes not enough: *City of Bones* was said to have one of the biggest online fan bases, yet the movie did not succeed (Vilkomerson & Lee, 2015; Alter, 2014).

Fans have also begun to get more involved in the production of their favorite books' movie adaptation, whether this help is solicited or not (Strickland, 2013; Kung, 2011). As Strickland explains, "[b]efore the rise of Internet culture, films were made in a relative vacuum, and potential fans didn't know much about a movie until the trailer released. Now, movie headlines are created before the script is even finished, and fans aren't afraid to share their opinions on the script, casting and plot" (Strickland, 2013, para. 17). Kung reports Alyson Noël saying she receives video trailers from fans of her series *Immortals* (Kung, 2011). Lauren Oliver, author of *Delirium*, says she received "full cast lists" from her fans (Oliver, as cited in Vilkomerson & Lee, 2015). Bob Shaye, a producer, says it is important to meet fan expectations: "you have to give people exactly what they want and do it well" (Shaye, as cited in Kung, 2011, para. 14). However, filmmaker Bryan Young explains that it is difficult to meet all these expectations: "You have all of these voices who think they are absolutely right [...]. Then the filmmaker has to do their job and take all of this into account. It's not fair to expect them to work as an artist under those conditions" (Young, as cited in Strickland, 2013, para. 18). The enthusiasm and the involvement of fans speaks to the success and the popularity of YA movies based on novels, however, this means the stakes are higher if the film fails to meet expectations, and with so many different opinions, it is so hard to please everyone.

Bottom line, so many factors come into play when making a movie based on a YA novel, and it is difficult to tell what will resonate with fans and movie-goers and what will end in a disappointment, for fans and for filmmakers (Deutsch, 2013; Alter, 2014). While many movies seem to have had trouble mixing these factors together, others have certainly thrived, to the delight of many. Strickland says the goal of adapting these novels into movies is to “to give readers a new opportunity to walk through their favorite world” (2013, para. 4). It is clear that many teens thirst for the opportunity to relive their favorite book, even if it ends in disappointment. Shaye does not believe this trend will last forever (Kung, 2011), but for the time being, these movie adaptations just extend the potential and the enjoyment of excellent YA literature.

So which movies are considered the best? Which ones are flops? Opinions differ and lists are long, but here’s a run-down based on articles by Braun (2015), Bowles (2014), Alter (2014), Kung (2011) and the Movie Review Query Engine (n.d.):

Best:

- *Harry Potter* series, particularly *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*
- *Hunger Games* series, particularly *Catching Fire*
- *Twilight* series
- *Divergent* series
- *Hugo*
- *The Princess Bride*
- *The Lord of the rings*
- *Holes*

Worst:

- *Mortal Instruments: City of Bones*
- *Ender’s game*
- *The Host*
- *Vampire Academy*
- *Beautiful Creatures*
- *Eragon*
- *I am Number Four*
- *The Golden Compass*

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