The Invention of Hugo Cabret: From Novel to the Oscar-Winning Film *Hugo*

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Abstract: The present paper aims to discuss the journey from page to screen of *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, a gripping novel written and illustrated by Brian Selznick. Throughout this process, critical approaches will be examined to understand how specific narrative elements have been condensed or reimagined for the purpose of cinematic flow. This article delves into the fascinating world of film production and emphasizes the harmonious relationship between film and literature.
Keywords: *cinema, visual effects, new media, film, art, graphic novel.*

During the last decades, with the ongoing technological progress, the statement of contents has acquired the incommensurable powers to combine different literary and visual elements, in order to transpose it into authentic symphonies of images and words, exceeding the borders of traditional narrative. The graphic novel has succeeded, nowadays, in the 21st century, to metamorphose the classical narrative methods, reliving modern literature and cultural expression. This genre represents a distinct form of literary art for all ages, relying on a bold approach, and assimilating, gradually, the cinematographic industry as well. In this context, we witness the emergence of a strong connection between the graphic novel and the world of film dramaturgy, a relationship that emphasizes the creative, gripping, challenging universe of an emotional and aesthetic trip that is without precedent.

In order to illustrate such a subtle relationship, we shall focus on a roughly accurate screen play, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret,* which represents a novel of Brian Selznick, included in the category of historical fiction, with both text and images. However, how do we certify that this novel is a graphic novel as well? In order to obtain an answer to this question, it is essential to explore how graphic novels use a distinct and gripping approach in the narrative expression, combining literary and graphic form within an integrated and immersive system:

> In graphic novels, the dual formalisms of literary and graphic expression articulate narrative in an integrated system that is extensive and immersive. They make use of characteristics of visual materiality that are enhanced by recent developments in print technology and other forms of mass visual culture. In scope and intensity, they

> suggest a new dimension of storytelling. Graphic novels synthesize the language of cinema, the sensibilities of contemporary literature, and the appeal of mass media in a format that calls attention to artistry and technique. (Drucker 2008: 1)

The novel may be approached from the wider perspective of classification of graphic novels, starting from visual narrativity, variation of genres, artistic expression, cultural influence or the innovative and experimental form. Based on the assertion of the author Brian Selznick, the novel is not exactly a traditional novel as he rather considers it a synergy of literary and visual elements:

> [...] not exactly a novel, not quite a picture book, not really a graphic novel, or a flip book or a movie, but a combination of all these things. (Selznick 2007)

Therefore, despite the uncertain definition of his own work, a range of critics and readers include this novel in the category of graphic novels. Nonetheless, the detailed illustrations and the narrative rhythm projects the reader into a land of art and human interaction. Consequently, by this narrative art, we notice the emergence of a border between modern and post-modern world and the intensification of the fight of the aesthetic values used as means of expression to transpose the story line in the context of graphic novel.

On the other side of the spectrum, the graphic novel relies on *art* and, essentially, it is equally difficult to define. This profound expression, creating the power of humanity, by its own specificity, represents a form of artistic knowledge which reveals the beauty and depth of existence. The graphic novel has been developing, transforming, has become an invocation and imagination vector and it is compared to the survival of art itself, as it creates and fights beyond the limits and borders. It is obvious that there may be often a comic contrast between appearance and essence when we speak about this illustrious concept called *art*, being usually defined as one of the most "elusive of the traditional problems of human culture". (Wollheim 1980: 1)

Notwithstanding, let us direct the screening of the novel *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* in order to understand briefly the steps from novel to the cinematographic product. Our objective is to understand, however, not only the journey from novel to a simple cinematographic product, but, moreover, to an Oscar-winning film. Briefly, which are the steps taken to turn a simple novel into an exceptional cinematographic product? Which is the impact of such metamorphosis on the story line?

The film *Hugo*, signed by Martin Scorsese, was produced, based on the novel previously discussed, being included in the category of drama, adventure, fantasy and mystery. The cinematographic project follows-up the story line of the novel *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* and it was released in 2011, portraying a young boy, a 12-year old hero played by Asa Butterfield. He is living on the street, as an orphan, after the death of his father, going from one station to another, without a place to call "home". In between his trips, Hugo continues the work of maintenance and repair of clocks, that he learnt from his father. His earnest dream is to repair an automatic machine that could unlock a life-changing

secret. The challenging journey of the young man crosses that of Georges Méliès, and the story acquires a new direction, full of adventure, in the search of one's own identity.

For a new dimension of the story, this journey from novel to film is usually sinuous, being undertaken by the members of the production team, technical and non-technical staff included. For a firm conceptual validation, the transformation passes through a remarkable pre-production phase, when each and every fine detail is primordial. In the context of the film *Hugo*, one should notice the remarkable manner of attracting the consumer to the cinema hall by artistic and narrative elements, completed by a carefully shaped story, a screenplay of the novel, maintaining the sensitivity and authenticity of the story *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. Since the key elements were combined with certain technical skills during the production and post-production period, the screening enjoyed a wide success with strong visual storytelling, artistic expression, and emotional impact. Based on the information offered by IMDB (International Movie Database), the film won 5 Oscars and other 61 prizes and 192 nominalisations. We witness, therefore, the making of a reference model in the cinematographic space, worldwide.

To distinguish an Oscar-worthy film from a mediocre cinematic production, *Hugo*'s success is not solely attributed to the screenplay or the source novel but also to the incorporation of *new media* aesthetics and dimensions in its production. As any other cinematographic product relying on novels, screenplays may include different adjustments more or less significant and observe the film format or the producer´s requisites, offering the public an experience as unique as possible, depending on the film genre. *Hugo* is an amalgam of live and virtual action, completed by imaginative technology and offering an exceptional visual and emotional experience to consumers. Notwithstanding the foregoing, it is essential to outline the unique direction of Martin Scorsese, the exceptional actors (Asa Butterfield, Christopher Lee, Ben Kingsley, Chloe Grace Moretz, Sacha Baron Cohen, Ray Winstone, Emily Mortimer, Helen McCrory, Jude Law), the artistic subtext and the universal topics, the visual effects and the sound track.

Since *Hugo* is a *3D* film of adventure, the abundance and quality of cinematographic effects is essential and increments the profit of the film. Relying on the novel, Marin Scorsese confers aesthetic value to the film using the *new media* and the *computer-generated images (CGI),* that have significantly changed the manner how individuals perceive, watch, and produce films, leading the cinematographic space to a new form of artistic expression and technological innovation. For the purpose of illustration, the majority of sequences are computer-generated and rich in *visual effects (VFX*) and *3D effects*. *Hugo* represents one of the stereoscopic films emphasizing the indispensability of 3D incorporation within a cinematographic product. For representativity and intensification of polyvalence degree of the current cinematographic wave, the stereo cameras have been provided with 3D lens and specifications supporting the 3D aspect of the entire film. On the other hand, we notice the virtual cameras used during the production, for 3D recording and live performances.

Some of the main technical equipment used in the production of the film *Hugo* signed by Martin Scorsese are:

- Arri Alexa
- Cooke S4
- Objective 5/1 and Panchro

Therefore, if we decide to emphasize certain preliminary considerations, we may say that the film *Hugo* has gradually initiated the journey towards the frequent use of *3D* technologies and the projection of the consumer of cinematographic product into an immersion-related land. At first glance, we see that the modern cinematographic industry includes an amalgam of visual and sound effects, and, in the majority of cases, the contemporary films include computer-generated images and virtual reality that, despite the apparent complexity, inspire the humanity. By combining the scenario and the story based on the novel *The Invention of Hugo Cabret,* completed by the cinematographic language, means and techniques, *Hugo* manages to develop a feeling of identity and humanity through the creation of an emotional connection without precedent between the cinematographic characters and the public.

Considering such issues, we witness a process of transformation of the novel *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* into a story brought to life on the silver screen that becomes gradually a journal of technological transformations related to 21st century. Due to this reason, to pass from a novelistic to a cinematographic product, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* combines the elements of visual narrativity with the artistic expressiveness, in order to metamorphose a particular typology of cultural and artistic creation, in a distinct format. The product obtained communicates with and impresses the audience by a range of significant vectors in the field of narration, visuality, interpretation, technology and production. Therefore, by the production of the film *Hugo*, Martin Scorsese extends the limits of imagination, providing new horizons to the artistic creation.

In the light of such facts, *Hugo* represents the absolute tool of distinction between new and old media in the context of cinematographic industry and marks out one of the artistic masterpieces that portrays the influences of the new media on contemporary cinematography. Martin Scorsese is finely representing the necessity to bring at the forefront the ideas of production of the period films and the contemporary need of innovation, afferent to technological evolution. The producer combines a wide range of modern technologies and of the *new media* in order to create one of the most spectacular dramaturgic journeys towards evolution. This progress has significantly influenced several branches in the industry and contemporary society has been gradually directed towards a detachment from the traditional environments of film production and even marketing, at first, mainly under the influences of *old-media*.

For such reasons, the related areas of interest such as the marketing have been metamorphosed as a consequence of the technological progress and the new forms of artistic expression and the film *Hugo* may be currently watched on different online platforms. Several arguments come to the fore to assert that the creation of cinematographic products in the digital era has

significantly changed the means of production, consumption, storage, promotion, and distribution of films. On the other hand, in the analogical era, the films were stored and distributed physically, and, during the current digital revolution process, the cinematographic products allow distribution on online platforms such as *YouTube, Netflix, Vimeo, Hbo Max, Disney Plus*, etc. The streaming platforms represent powerful marketing tools that the producers of digital era may use to obtain a profit for the production and distribution of content.

The reality and the examples presented prove the existence of an amalgam of fields with innovative technologies that have brought significant changes, including, indubitably, the graphic novel. As this genre and the thematic diversity spread out, the interest for the cinematographic screenplays of such kind of novels has increased. This artistic environment has metamorphosed in all forms, it has become increasingly difficult to define and contributes to several cultural and aesthetic trends.

Eventually, the extension of the limit of readers' imagination by thematic diversity or of the means of artistic and social expression reinforces nowadays the graphic novel, transforming it into an influential form of art in contemporary society. On the long term or not, the evolution of this genre is incontestable, and, despite the apparent challenges, the field of artificial intelligence included, the graphic novel will adjust to the new trends, managing to stand out in its own artistic environment.

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