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Seeing Beyond *The Giver*’s Film Adaptation

In a world without color, emotion, or memory, Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* explores the cruel oppression of a feigned utopia. In exchange for stability and certainty, the community and its members sacrifice their own sense of humanity in a stifling set of rules and “Sameness.” As the new Receiver of Memory, Jonas, a twelve-year-old boy, is able to see beyond the black-and-white scenes that strip people of their individuality. Despite Jonas’s own fear and isolation, he holds all the community’s painful, yet rewarding, memories. The novel conveys significant and memorable details regarding Jonas’s character development; however, director Phillip Noyce’s version of *The Giver* establishes a dissimilar and disappointing film adaptation. The film misconstrues essential plot components, essentially depriving Jonas’s own individual journey. While the novel amplifies intense emotional depth, the film focuses on distracting and unnecessary entertainment qualities. To accommodate conventional tropes and visually appealing scenes, the dramatic, action-packed film diminishes Jonas’s core identity and further underscores an inconsistent portrayal of Lowry’s young adult novel.

One of the most noticeable renderings of the book-to-film adaptation is the appearance of the young adult characters. Aside from the characters’ physical attributes, who blatantly appear taller and stronger than normal twelve-year-old children, the film also makes a significant change in word choice. During the Ceremony, the film disregards Jonas, Fiona, and Asher’s age and rather classifies them as generally “the Graduates” (*The Giver* 00:08:40). The film uses the “Graduates” as an ambiguous term, not a defining characteristic. The film completely removes the paradoxical undertones of the community’s ironic ways of life. The Ceremony of Twelve reinforces the idea of immediate and instant “adulthood” that Jonas is forced to assimilate and conform. However, by casting an older actor, who is conventionally charismatic and charming, the film completely disregards Jonas’s emotional struggle and internal conflict. His older appearance and ambiguous age ultimately downplay the impact of Jonas’s character development, especially his courage and determination. The film adaptation diminishes Jonas’s innocence and an essential aspect of his overall character: his childhood adolescence.

Furthermore, the film eliminates another physical attribute and significant detail: Jonas’s pale eyes. This distinct feature ultimately separates and isolates Jonas from the people around him. However, his defining feature also solidifies the bond between him and The Giver. Jonas often looks “self-consciously into the pale eyes that mirrored his own” (165, this and all other quotations in this paper are taken from *The Giver* by Lois Lowry). Jonas and The Giver’s eyes further signify their ability to see the world in vibrant colors and raw emotions; they can see from a different perspective and the world beyond “reality.” However, the film replaces this physical difference with a dark birthmark on Jonas, Gabriel, and The Giver’s wrist. Without any significant meaning other than to briefly show their similar mark, the detail remains forgotten and neglected; thus, Jonas does not physically appear different from the community. The film further undermines the severity of his internal and external conflict while unnecessarily rendering the plot’s significant details. To fulfill a sense of convenience and visual appeal, the film reduces the significance of Jonas’s unique identity and his physical bond with The Giver.

In addition to altering the appearance of the characters, the film redundantly adds a conventional love trope. Throughout the novel, Fiona’s significance is minor as she primarily plays the role of Jonas’s fleeting crush and brief fantasy. However, the film characterizes her as a definite love interest who ultimately wavers Jonas’s decision-making. While the novel solely focuses on Jonas’s separate journey of loneliness and isolation, the film uses unnecessary and distracting scenes of romance to essentially diminish his individualism. The film presents a “boy chases girl” trope where Jonas persistently attempts to reveal his Capacity to See Beyond through intimate handholding and lip-locking. One prominent example is when Jonas immediately attempts to transfer the memory of a rainbow to Fiona (*The Giver* 00:26:34–00:27:26). The film hastily shows how Jonas is willing to carelessly expose his power and knowledge multiple times throughout his training; rather than reaffirming courage and strong will, Jonas reinforces more of his carelessness and immaturity. The romance overshadows his own personal growth and integrity as he minimizes the overall significance of his job as Receiver of Memory. The film focuses on the idealistic conventions of love as a “twelve-year-old" boy rather than Jonas’s personal growth and emotional struggle.

By pushing for unnecessary romance, the film essentially ignores Jonas’s inability to connect with the people around him. In the novel, Jonas’s experience with the memory of war is intensely disheartening. He is “overwhelmed with feelings of loss. His childhood, his friendships, his carefree sense of security — all of these things seemed to be slipping away” (165). The film ignores Jonas’s complex emotional struggle and replaces his isolation with an unrealistic romance. In reducing his apprehension and self-reflection, the film misconstrues Jonas’s internal and external conflict; he acknowledges how genuine emotions and bonds are nonexistent in his community, excluding his relationship with The Giver and Gabriel. Without the help or influence of secondary characters, Jonas’s path to adulthood centers around his ability to make his own decisions. However, the film’s adaptation weakens Jonas’s intense emotional experience, especially regarding his feelings of displacement and loss.

To accommodate the film’s lack of emotional depth, another obscure rendering is lessening the significance of Jonas’s close relationship with The Giver, the most essential and prominent adult figure in Jonas’s life. By altering how The Giver transfers memories to Jonas, the film renders their physical intimacy and emotional connection. Throughout the novel, The Giver places his hands on Jonas’s bare back, a significant juxtaposition to the lack of physical touch between non-family members in the community. However, the film forces The Giver and Jonas to only hold their arms, thus devaluing an underlying level of trust and vulnerability. Furthermore, the novel amplifies Jonas’s genuine love and care for The Giver, even stating how he wants The Giver to be his “grandparent” (155). Yet, the film completely removes this sentimental and significant scene that further distinguishes their genuine familial bond. The film employs surface-level mutuality, a mentor-and-student relationship, rather than sharing a deep, spiritual connection. In changing their dynamic, Jonas’s sense of love and direction becomes more inconsequential than meaningful and significant.

With an intense and overwhelming focus on action scenes, the film’s ending ultimately takes away from Jonas’s final acts of courage and determination. In the film, The Giver transfers memories of strength to Jonas before Jonas escapes from the community (*The Giver* 01:04:20–01:04:49). However, the novel emphasizes how Jonas acts on his own individual courage; he does not visit The Giver, nor does he have the help of his friends to make his escape. Without any guidance, Jonas makes the painful, exhausting journey on a traditional bicycle–not a high-tech motorbike that Jonas easily rides in the film. The adaptation ultimately destroys the extent of Jonas’s mental and physical resolve as a twelve-year-old boy protecting Gabriel, a newborn child. Traveling at night and sleeping by day, the troubles Jonas must face are extreme: a twisted ankle, starvation, and the constant fear of search planes. Yet, the adaptation does not visualize Jonas’s realistic struggles and desperations but rather dramatizes the use of technology and action scenes. An absurd example is when Jonas and Gabriel fall from a flying drone and into a fast-moving stream of water (*The Giver* 01:15:45–01:16:40). Instead of focusing on how Jonas navigates through the outside world of chaos and unpredictability, the film chooses to underscore a nonsensical and distracting subplot.

The book-to-film adaptation attempts to encapsulate two of the most overused and convoluted film components: romance and action. Although the film reinforces vibrant and visually pleasing scenes, the film ignores the essential bulk of the novel’s significance: Jonas’s identity and his character development. The novel follows the emotional journey of a twelve-year-old boy who discovers what it truly means to be human, while the film adaptation of *The Giver* follows the conventional components of a Hollywood film.