

**REDUCTION OF PLOT IN NOVEL *IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK* (1974)  
BY JAMES BALDWIN INTO FILM *IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK* (2018)  
BY BARRY JENKINS**

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**Abstract**

The objectives of this study are to (1) describe the ecranisation process in terms of plot reduction and (2) explain the function of the ecranisation process that appears in the plot of James Baldwin's novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) to the film *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) by Barry Jenkins. This study employs ecranisation theory by Eneste (1991) to analyze the transformation from novel into Film *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Descriptive qualitative data analysis was employed in this study. Data collecting methods based on a review of the literature because the medium utilized to create novels and films are different, the results of this study show that the ecranisation process happens in the plot. The reduction of plot from components that aren't as crucial for display causes a general reduction.

**Keywords:** *ecranisation, reduction, novel, film, plot*

**INTRODUCTION**

The process of transforming literature to film and television is not convenient. The relationship between books, films, and television seems to have different perspectives and opens up new possibilities for the entertainment industry. Films based on literary works have the potential to re-popularize the referenced work. Films adapted from popular novels, on the other hand, will be able to capture the attention of the audience, particularly novel readers who want to see the novel brought to life. Bluestone (1957), remarked at the introduction of his book, due to media variation, film screenwriters must create various differences of popular formulas to fit the needs of film media. This process adjustment can be interpreted as a translation from the original language of the media

into the language of the film. Because the language of a literary work is written, it is impossible to transfer the entire written language to the language of film, which is a visual language. It is clear that both languages have their own set of strengths and weaknesses when it comes to communicating with their respective audiences. Several factors must be considered in order to successfully transform a literary work to film. Therefore, the results of the transformation are indeed in accordance with the original only expressed in a different language. The film screenwriter has more flexibility in expressing their ideas because they are not fully limited by the process where only some elements of the literary text are adopted into the film text, such as the characters, the plot, or just the story's theme. The audience's intention to compare their very personal imagination when reading literary works with the visualization presented by film directors has created a distinct market for the film industry. As a result, the director must be able to effectively incorporate these meaningful strings of words into the film's language. It should be noted that many representatives of this demographic are frequently dissatisfied with the film adaptation. This is because they have misconceptions based on what they have read in the novel. Within this situation, literature has its own field to address this issue: comparative literature. According to Bassnet (1993: 1), comparative literature is an interdisciplinary science that combines intercultural texts and is timeless. As a result, the comparative literature may present an overview of the similarities and differences between the two types of work.

The process of turning literary works from novels to films is known as *ecranisation*, and it is part of the creative process of literary works (Eneste, 1991:60). The term "*ecran*" is derived from the French word "*ecran*," which means "screen." Various changes occur during the *ecranisation* process, such as reduction, addition, and the variation of the novel's contents into the film. The outcome of *ecranisation* is not always the same as what is in the novel; there are several variations. The *ecranisation* process necessitates consistency in the narrative and cinematic elements of the film. As a result, the process undergoes a number of modifications. This is understandable given the differences in the systems in literature and film. However, analyzing the differences that exist is caused by finding meaning as a result of the process, not by differences in the system. Eneste (1991:61-66) categorizes the changes that occur during the *ecranisation*

process into different forms: reduction, addition, and variation. This research concentrates on one of those forms, that is reduction.

Reduction is one of the steps in the process of turning literary works into films. In the transformation process, elements of a literary work story are reduced. Ecranisation also implies that what can be enjoyed for hours or days must be converted into something that can be enjoyed or watched for approximately 90 to 100 minutes. In other words, novels with hundreds of pages must inevitably be cut or reduced if they are to be filmed. According to Eneste (1991:61), literary elements such as stories, plots, characters, settings, and atmosphere can be reduced. Because of the reduction process, not everything expressed in the novel will be found in the film. As a result, parts of the literary work will be reduced or omitted during the filmmaking process. According to Eneste (1991:61-62), the reduction in literary story elements is carried out for several reasons, such as: (1) the assumption that certain scenes or characters in literary works are not necessary or important to be shown in films. Moreover, because the film will be very long, the setting of the story in the novel will be impossible to transfer entirely into the film. As a result, the background depicted in the film is only adequate or significant. Of course, this cannot be separated from the consideration of the purpose and duration of the film. (2) Unsettling reasons, in which the filmmaker assumes or reasons that presenting these elements can actually interfere with the story in the film. (3) Due to technical constraints of film or film medium, not all parts of scenes or stories in literary works can be presented in films. (4) The reason for the audience or audience, which is also related to the time duration issue.

The researcher employs qualitative research methods with descriptive analysis in this research. The main source or the primary data for this research is a novel by James Baldwin entitled *If Beale Street Could Talk*, it was first published in America on June 17, 1974. Whereas the film with the same title, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, directed by Barry Jenkins and Produced by Plan B Entertainment, the film was released on September 9, 2018. According to Faruk (2012: 56), data analysis begins with analyzing sources based on the theory applied. Furthermore, the researcher conducted a study using ecranisation theory by Pamusuk Eneste (1991) to compare the structure of the two works and the

meaning of the work under study. To analyze the data, the researcher first started to read the novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), to gain an understanding of the plot required for the research focus, and marked them into the reduction category. Then, the researcher started to watch the film *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) to get an understanding of the research focus required, and also marked the missing elements in the film. After that, the researcher began to compare the reduction process in novel and film *If Beale Street Could Talk* to make a conclusion as transformation of plots happen in both works.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The researcher identified data on the ecranisation process in the plots presented in the novel and film *If Beale Street Could Talk* that was relevant with the formulation of the problem. In this study, the researcher conducted Eneste's (1991) ecranisation theory, which states that the transition from novel to film will result in various changes in the film, especially Reduction.

### The Ecranisation Process in Terms of Plot Reduction

Film director Barry Jenkins observed a lot of reduction from the novel to the film while transforming *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Eneste (1991: 61) defines reduction as the process of reducing the elements of a literary work; as a result of this reduction process, some plots in the novel will not be present in the film. The researcher will then describe the reduction made by the director to the plots of the novel and film.

#### Data 1

*"I never really noticed Fonny until once we got into a fight, after school. This fight didn't really have anything to do with Fonny and me at all.... And I don't remember how it all started, but, finally, Daniel had Geneva down on the ground, the two of them rolling around, and I was trying to pull Daniel off her and Fonny was pulling on me. I turned around and hit him with the only thing I could get my hands on, I grabbed it out of the garbage can. It was only a stick; but it had a nail in it. The nail raked across his cheek and it broke the skin and the blood started dripping. I couldn't believe my eyes, I was so scared..."* (1974: 7)

The first data reveals how the initial encounter between Tish and Fonny when they grow up, which is not portrayed in the film, was not a coincidence since this meeting was caused by the friendship between her closest friend Geneva and Fonny's best friend, Daniel, who got into an argument. This meeting is also not romantic for either of them, but it marks the beginning of their love journey.

## Data 2

*"In Albany, she met Joseph, my father, and she met him in the bus stop. She had just quit her job and he had just quit his. He's five years older than she is and he had been a porter in the bus station. He had come from Boston and he was really a merchant seaman; but he had sort of got himself trapped in Albany mainly because of this older woman he was going with then, who really just didn't dig him going on sea voyages. By the time Sharon, my mother, walked into that bus station with her little cardboard suitcase and her big scared eyes, things were just about ending between himself and this woman – Joseph didn't like bus stations – and it was the time of the Korean war, so he knew that if he didn't get back to sea soon, he'd be in the army and he certainly would not have dug that. As sometimes happens in life, everything came to a head at the same time: and here came Sharon." (1974: 15)*

The data above depicts the first time Tish's parents met. This part describes how Tish's mother, who had recently separated from her ex-lover and quit her job as a singer, and her father, who had recently resigned his job, met before they're moving from Albany to New York. This part was removed from the film yet again because it was thought inefficient to convey the story of Tish's parents because it would take up the duration.

## Data 3

*"Ernestine moved past me, moving me away from the door and delivering me to Sharon. 'Ladies,' she said, and moved to the elevator and pressed the button. She was past a certain fury now. When the elevator arrived and the door opened, she merely said, ushering them in, but holding the door open with one shoulder, 'Don't worry. We'll never tell the baby about*

*you. There's no way to tell a baby how obscene human beings can be!' And, in another tone of voice, a tone I'd never heard before, she said to Mrs. Hunt, 'Blessed be the next fruit of thy womb. I hope it turns out to be uterine cancer. And I mean that.' And, to the sisters, 'If you come anywhere near this house again in life, I will kill you. This child is not your child – you have just said so. If I hear that you have so much as crossed a playground and seen the child, you won't live to get any kind of cancer. Now. I am not my sister. Remember that. My sister's nice. I'm not. My father and my mother are nice. I'm not. I can tell you why Adrienne can't get fucked – you want to hear it? I could tell you about Sheila, too, and all those cats she jerks off in their handkerchiefs, in cars and movies – now, you want to hear that?' Sheila began to cry and Mrs. Hunt moved to close the elevator door.” (1974: 38)*

The quote above illustrates Ernestine's rage at Fonny's family for rejecting Fonny and Tish's prospective kid. Ernestine pushed the Fonnys to the head of the escalator and cursed them, attempting to defend her own sister, who had been despised by the Fonnys, particularly her mother and two elder sisters. This section is cut out of the film to demonstrate the reducing process.

#### **Data 4**

*“On the night that Fonny was arrested, Daniel was at the house. He was a little drunk. He was crying. He was talking, again, about his time in prison. He had seen nine men rape one boy: and he had been raped. He would never, never, never again be the Daniel he had been. Fonny held him, held him up just before he fell. I went to make the coffee. And then they came knocking at the door.” (1974: 91)*

The data above portrays the situation when Fonny was arrested by police on allegations of raping Victoria. That night, as usual, Daniel was visiting Fonny to tell him about his experience in prison, unaware that he would be the next victim. This part is also deleted in the film, indicating a reduction process in the film.

#### **Data 5**

*“Before I could say anything, the doorbell rang, and Sharon went to the door. Something in her voice, at the door, made me stand straight up and I dropped the brandy glass on the*

*floor. I still remember Sharon's face, she was standing behind my father, and I remember my father's face. Frank had been found, he told us, way, way, way up the river, in the woods, sitting in his car, with the doors locked, and the motor running.” (1974: 103)*

The data presented above depicts Tish's reaction to learning that Frank had died by driving his car to a river in the woods. Tish dropped her brandy glass on the floor, since it had not occurred to her that Frank might commit suicide. After everything that had occurred to them, Frank felt he could no longer live a life, let alone add to the burden on his own and Tish's families, so he decided to end his life. This crucial scene is not featured in the film, indicating that the producer went through a reduction process.

### **The Function of Ecranisation Process in the Terms of Plot Reduction**

Novel adaptations undergo major changes. These changes were made for a variety of reasons, including the film's restricted duration and the selection of significant events, which needed a creative process. According to Eneste (1991: 61-66), the transition from novel to film will result in a process of decreasing, increasing, and modifying variants. There will be a removed event during the reduction process. Some persons and situations will not be shown since they are not important enough to be depicted in the film. The plot that is visualized in the form of a film is reduced due to insufficient duration, because including all of the storylines into the scene would take an extremely long time. On the other hand, the producer may not include some of the storylines from the novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* because the producer wants to focus on the story of the main character, so the details of the stories of other characters in the novel are not shown in the film.

As mentioned in the first data, Tish and Fonny's first meeting after they grow up is not depicted in the film, but that part is in the novel and marks the beginning of their love journey, so film producers may see that this scene is not needed because the film will tell more about the two characters' struggle to free themselves from the injustices they experienced, so the scene was deleted in the film.

The scene where Tish's parents first met is also reduced in the second data, which describes how Tish's parents met after his mother broke up with her ex-lover who is a

band member, because this story focuses more on Tish and Fonny, so the film producers feel the need to remove this part because it is deemed not to interfere with the main storyline of the two main characters.

The third data depicts the strength and courage of an older sister who defended her sister when she was humiliated by her own boyfriend's mother, Ernestine fearlessly cursed and spat on Fonny's family to defend Tish when the news of her pregnancy was not well received by Fonny's family, but this scene was also deleted throughout the film, since the producer may have been pleased with some of the sequences he utilized in the film.

In the fourth data, Daniel was visiting Fonny's apartment at the time Fonny was forcibly taken up by police on allegation of raping a woman from Puerto Rico, Victoria Roger, which he did not even commit, while telling his experience when he was still at home. This scene was omitted again in the film because the producer had included footage of Daniel who told his experience in prison at the beginning of his visit to Fonny's apartment, which was deemed sufficient for representing the routine sharing session scene that Daniel does. Despite the fact that there is a significant moment in which Fonny is violently picked up that is not featured in the film.

The fifth data shows how Frank, Fonny's father, committed suicide because he felt he was no longer able to deal with all of the issues that had happened to him and his family, from Fonny being termed as a suspect in an alleged rape to himself being set to be reported by his superiors for stealing from a warehouse provides clothing and resells them to people illegally, it makes him feel horrible and he doesn't want to add to the burden of the people around him, so he decides to take his own life, and the film producer does not include this scenario in the plot of the film he is working on because he wants to focus on the main characters, so the detail story of the other characters were not included in the film. Overall, this is still appropriate to do because the plot of the novel is related to the film.



## CONCLUSION

As a form of creative production, the process of reduction may be appropriate for different film producers. The transformation process may occur due to the limited duration and other reasons to provide a valuable perspective on the adapted film. The researcher found five data as a result of the reduction process, they each have their own set of viewpoints. This demonstrates how the two work with titles and themes that yet have variances that mark the work of their respective authors, resulting in differences of opinion from both audiences of the work, but it cannot be disputed that both works are distinctive with their separate methods of carrying, as long as the adaptation does not depart significantly from the original work.

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