

Having looked at the work of some of the more notable figures in Russian literature, it is vital to look at these works by the likes of Chekhov and Dostoevsky and see how they really shaped the films that were based on them. In some cases, the novels are more popular than any films that are subsequently made. In others, people don't even know that the novel or play exists. In any case, many of the films we have seen take unique approaches to how they follow or don't follow the novels and plays on which they are based.

Numerous films were made based on the enormously famous novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky Crime and Punishment, however none of them followed the sequence of events in the story quite as it was originally written. An interesting adaptation of the novel was Woody Allen's film Match Point. In Allen's film, the order in which things happen is much different than the order in Dostoevsky's novel. The general concepts in both stories are essentially the same. In each, the protagonists find themselves in a situation where they feel so helpless that they determine they must commit murder. In both cases, the protagonists wind up killing one innocent bystander in the process. However, the differences between the two are just as important. In Dostoevsky's novel, his main character, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, murders a pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna, in order to rid himself of a debt. In the process, he encounters Alyona's sister Lizaveta, whom he also kills. The novel then goes into a sequence of events in which it

becomes evident to the reader that Raskolnikov is going to endure a great amount of guilt for his actions. He becomes exceedingly paranoid and eventually confesses to the crime. However, his subsequent imprisonment is not the greatest punishment Raskolnikov must deal with. It is the burden of the guilt he is now stuck with. Dostoevsky's novel is almost larger-than-life, and is one of the instances where none of the films could expect to outweigh the original novel's reputation. Even the great German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche holds the book in great regard. In a 1951 article in the Russian Review, Rene Fueloep-Miller writes "afterwards, when [Nietzsche] read *Crime and Punishment*, he recognized that: 'Dostoevsky is the only psychologist who has anything to teach me. I consider my acquaintance with his works one of the finest strokes of luck in my life, even better than my discovery of Stendhal.'"<sup>1</sup>

Woody Allen takes a different approach with his adaptation. In Match Point, it isn't until much closer to the end of the story that the protagonist, this time named Chris Wilton, commits his own murders. In this case, it is not a debt, but could still be viewed as a similar situation. Wilton has impregnated a woman with whom he has been cheating on his wife. His options are very limited, one of them being that he can leave his wife which would also cost him his career. Initially, this is more or less what the audience is

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<sup>1</sup> Fueloep-Miller, Rene. Dostoevsky's Literary Reputation. The Russian Review. Volume

expecting. However, as the film continues and Chris does not make a decision, it becomes more and more evident that he has no intention of leaving his family for his mistress. Finally, Chris is compelled to kill his mistress, Nola Rice, as well as her neighbor Ms. Eastby. He does so by bringing one of his father-in-law's shotguns to Nola's apartment complex before she comes home from work. In the meantime, he enters Ms. Eastby's apartment and shoots her, then steals her jewelry and medicine in an attempt to make it look like a drug related crime. Eventually Nola returns home and Chris kills her as well. The fact that he used a shotgun indoors and didn't draw any attention to himself is a flaw in the film, but that's not entirely relevant to this comparison. In the case of Allen's film, however, there is far less guilt. There is one scene in which Chris, in a dream, encounters Nola and Ms. Eastby. However, even then, he does not seem to be terribly shaken. He certainly does not encounter the same paranoia that hampered Raskolnikov in the novel. Chris is only briefly a suspect in the murders before another man is detained while carrying Ms. Eastby's stolen ring (which Chris had attempted to throw in a river but failed). The message in the film is a bit different than that in the novel, because at the end of the film Chris is still living the life he chose, now with a child, and his family is happy.

An interesting point about Allen adaptation is that he originally made it as an independent film, but after a successful showing at Cannes Film Festival, the film was picked up for U.S. distribution by DreamWorks SKG. In two other films that were

screened, both also based on Crime and Punishment, there were equally notable differences. In Pickpocket by Robert Bresson, the crimes take place throughout the course of the film, but they are mere petty thefts of things like wrist watches and wallets. In Le Fils or The Son by the Dardennes brothers, the story is of a man who had his child killed by a thief, and then subsequently becomes the teacher of his son's killer. However, the most strong contrasts seem to be found between the novel and Woody Allen's film.

In another Dostoevsky novel we read, The Gambler, the trials and tribulations of the author's own life are more evident. His issues with gambling and his debts are shown in the characters in his story. What was especially interesting was that in both of the film adaptations we saw, there is a character who plays Dostoevsky (or someone based on Dostoevsky), and his story, and then there are the characters in the story he is writing. It's a unique concept but the movies, or at least one of the two, manage to pull it off.

The first film was Karoly Makk's The Gambler, which was a well put together film in which the protagonist was Dostoevsky and the plot was essentially his need to finish a book in order to keep his publisher from gaining ownership of all his work. However, there is much more to the film than just this, and a lot of it serves as sort of a biography of Dostoevsky's life. It tells the story of Dostoevsky dictating his story to Anna Snitkina, whom he later marries, and also tells the actual story he is dictating. In it, his protagonist (Alexei) loses everything gambling, which is a reference Dostoevsky is making to his own life. Interestingly, the film delves into Dostoevsky's gambling issue

but not much into his physical ailments, which included a well-documented battle with epilepsy. The film has some fairly notable actors, including Dominic West (playing Alexei), who American audiences will be more familiar with as James McNulty from “The Wire”. It’s an all around well-acted, well conceived spinoff of the original novel, which is part of why the following screening was so disappointing.

Compared to Makk’s adaptation of Dostoevsky’s novel, Rob Reiner’s film Alex and Emma is a bit of a joke. The film has big name Hollywood actors, but that’s about all that can be said for it. Dostoevsky wouldn’t be especially happy with this film, and ironically, it isn’t even really an adaptation of his novel. Instead, it’s an adaptation of Makk’s film. What Reiner attempted to do was take Makk’s adaptation and turn it into a modern American romantic comedy with Luke Wilson and Kate Hudson as his catalysts. Unfortunately, it just turns into a bit of an insult to Dostoevsky’s work.

The best thing about The Gambler is that Dostoevsky had true inspiration to write it. While it may be sensible that Crime and Punishment is the film that he receives the most praise for, it is hard to say that The Gambler is not also a great work. Joseph Frank of the Hudson Review points this out, saying “The Gambler is one of the most engaging, easily accessible and widely read of all Dostoevsky’s works, but it has attracted very little critical attention. One reason for this is certainly that it seemed to offer so few problems. Everyone knew that Dostoevsky was given to compulsive gambling from time to time, and the depiction he gives of the gambler in his story – a young Russian named Aleksey

Ivanovich – has been widely accepted as a classic portrayal, nor even quoted in psychiatric textbooks.”<sup>2</sup> We see this in the first version of The Gambler, Dostoevsky’s works are passionate and in some cases that can even resonate through the films that have adapted his novels.

While Dostoevsky gained inspiration for his novels from various places, Boris Pasternak was able to gain his simply from looking at his own country. The novel Doctor Zhivago, which wasn’t published until 1957 (Pasternak won the Nobel Prize for literature the following year), tells the story of one man’s life during the Russian Revolution. The man, Yuri Zhivago, is a doctor who doesn’t quite follow any side’s ideology of the time. Instead, the Revolution essentially winds up being his downfall. During the novel, Zhivago finds himself caught between not only many different ideologies, but also two different women. Pasternak had strong opinions towards Czarist Russia, and since this story takes place on the cusp of Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union, those opinions are reflected in the novel.

The film adaptation by David Lean follows the book fairly closely. Lean makes sure to keep Yuri Zhivago as the protagonist who simply can’t catch a break. The audience sympathizes with Zhivago through his treks in Siberia whether with his family

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<sup>2</sup> Frank, Joseph. The Gambler: A Study in Ethnopsychology. Hudson Review: Volume 46, No. 2. 1993.

or the reds. It is somehow evident throughout the film that things will not work out. In the end, as a result of the incredible mayhem his body had been through, his heart gives out on him. Of course, this only happens after he is sitting on a trolley car and sees his love, Lara, walking by. It is when he tries to leave the trolley and chase her down that he collapses, which is sort of a microcosm of the story: So close to the life he wanted, yet so far from it.

Of course, Doctor Zhivago was not the only book written about what went on during the Russian Revolution. American John Reed experienced the events first hand while alongside some major Bolshevik leaders. As a result, he produced a non-fiction book entitled Ten Days that Shook the World. The introduction to the book is actually written by Vladimir Lenin, which gives some insight into just how sharply contrasting the ideologies in Russia were at that point. Lenin was on his way out, Stalin on his way in. Reed's story was originally going to be an article for a magazine, but evolved into 371 pages of his experiences. Throughout the book, Reed admits that he is not entirely neutral in his writing, and that he sides more with the Bolsheviks and their ideologies.

From Reed's book, a film was born in Warren Beatty's Reds. Beatty himself takes on the role of John Reed, and actually does a great job with the part. Interestingly, it seems to be the consensus that while Beatty's film is based on Reed's real life account of the events of the Revolution, whereas Doctor Zhivago is a novel, it is the latter that people are more drawn to. Generally, "based on a true story" is a major selling point for

any film. The textbook Film Art by David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson goes as far as to call the film a “blockbuster”. This certainly isn’t to say that Reds is a bad film. In fact, critically it was extremely well received. Roger Ebert, who published his review of the film on New Year’s Day of 1981 described the film as having “glorious romanticism, surprising intelligence, and a consistent wit. It is the thinking man's "Doctor Zhivago," told from the other side, of course.”<sup>3</sup> And Ebert wasn’t the only one who felt this way. Critics from all places, ranging from The New York Times to The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette all liked the film for many things, including how well it held to Reed’s story. Ebert also weighs in on that topic, saying that Beatty may have been loyal to Reed even to a fault. Ebert writes, “It is that personal, human John Reed that Warren Beatty's "Reds" takes as its subject, although there is a lot, and maybe too much, of the political John Reed as well.” Whether it was too much like the book, or just right, Warren Beatty’s film Reds holds true to its source.

Once we get past Doctor Zhivago and Ten Days that Shook the World, there is a substantial dropoff in terms of works that are politically charged. This may come in part due to the fact that those books were written about (and in one case during) the Russian Revolution. One of the works that was somewhat politically charged was Chekhov’s play, Uncle Vanya. In actuality, the play said virtually nothing about things such as war

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<sup>3</sup> Ebert, Roger. Review :: Reds. The Chicago Sun Times. January 1, 1981.

or contradicting political ideologies. Instead, some of the adaptations made for the screen put their own twists on the story. In fact, the play was written many years before World War I or the Russian Revolution ever took place. It is just in the films that the setting is altered. For example, in the book, the doctor is simply that; he is a doctor and a friend of the main family. However, in Michael Blakemore's cinema adaptation A Country Life, which takes place in Australia after the war, the doctor (in this case known as Dr. Max Askey) is also a lecturer who speaks about many topics, including the conflicts involving his country. In one scene he is called a Bolshevik by some soldiers, one of whom punches him in the face.

A Country Life was another one of the critically acclaimed films in the class.

Once again, Roger Ebert had positive things to say about the film. He also noted that it is not plainly explained to the audience that the movie is based on Chekhov's play, but rather that some inference is required, saying "clever readers will have identified this as basically the plot of Chekhov's 'Uncle Vanya' (just as even cleverer readers noticed that 'Clueless' was based on Jane Austen's 'Emma')." <sup>4</sup> Other critics, such as Caryn James of The New York Times, describe the film as being a much more blatant takeoff on Chekhov's play. James also finds the film to be endearing, writing "Mr. Blakemore transports Chekhov's plot and characters to a sheep ranch in Australia in 1919, and

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<sup>4</sup> Ebert, Roger. Review :: Country Life. The Chicago Sun Times. August 4, 1995.

creates a film of charm and visual splendor.”<sup>5</sup> Blakemore used plenty of artistic freedom in making this film, but did so in a way that didn’t damage the integrity of the film as it relates to the original play.

Another spinoff of Chekhov’s play is Louis Malle’s Vanya on 42nd Street. The film is essentially somewhere between a narrative and a documentary. The film has somewhat of a star-studded cast, including Julianne Moore and Larry Pine, which makes the story of how the movie came to exist even more interesting. Director Andre Gregory had spent years taking a cast to various places in New York City to perform the play. In some cases, performances were even staged in people’s apartments. Wallace Shawn, a well known actor from major Hollywood films such as The Princess Bride and Clueless was also a part of this little experiment. The movie is basically a filming of one of these stagings, however with a slightly beefed up cast. There is also some dialogue before the play and during an intermission that appears to be scripted. Nonetheless, there is a charming feel to the film, and they do act it out extremely similarly to how the play unfolds.

Whether it’s Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Pasternak or any of the others we’ve seen, it’s clear that filmmakers have had to take different approaches when making movies based

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<sup>5</sup> James, Caryn. Another Take on ‘Uncle Vanya,’ Set in Australia. The New York Times.

July 28, 1995.

on their works. Chekhov's plays can not be adapted for screen the same way a Dostoevsky novel can. In the case of John Reed and Warren Beatty, how does one approach screenwriting a true story? There are many different styles and methods among these literary legends, and the unique techniques used to put their works on screen are what have made studying them so interesting.

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