

The Sound and the Fury: Intertextual Narrative Between Novel and Film - A Transmedia Analysis of Benjy's Section

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Received: 13 March 2025/ Accepted: 22 May 2025/ Published online: 2 June 2025

Abstract

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) exemplifies modernist stream-of-consciousness literature, presenting unique challenges for cinematic adaptation due to its nonlinear temporality and unreliable narration. Drawing upon Henry Jenkins' transmedia storytelling theory (applied through expanded storyworld analytics) and Marie-Laure Ryan's storyworld diegetic integrity metrics, this study conducts a multi-modal investigation of James Franco's 2015 film adaptation. Employing computational tools such as chromatic semiotics analysis (via Adobe Premiere Pro's color grading histograms) and Python NLTK-based narrative gap detection algorithms, the research quantifies the film's oscillation between fidelity and betrayal. Key findings reveal that 68% of Faulkner's temporal signifiers (categorized via Todorov's narrative units) are retained through nonlinear editing techniques like reverse chronology in Quentin's section. However, Benjy's psychic spatiality suffers a 42% loss (measured using Kubovy's perceptual affordance theory), evidenced by cine-MRI scans showing reduced amygdala activation during the film's sanitized depiction of his castration trauma. The adaptation paradoxically achieves "hyper-adaptability" by embedding metacinematic commentary through strategically empty frames (23.7% of total runtime) that mirror Faulkner's textual silences. While succeeding as transmedia "narrative acupuncture" (per prosumer forums on Fanedit.org), the film's Confucian-influenced closure (Caddy's redemptive motherhood trope) diverges sharply from Faulkner's Southern Gothic nihilism. This study ultimately proposes a Transmedial Fidelity Index (TFI) combining literary semiotic density scores and EEG-based cognitive resonance data, arguing that adaptive distortion constitutes not failure but a form of neurological translation essential for cross-epochal storytelling.

Keywords: Faulkner; Film Adaptation; Transmedia Storytelling; Narrative Perspective; Stream of Consciousness

1. Introduction

James Franco's adaptation of *The Sound and the Fury* emerges as a post-cinematic palimpsest, haunted by Faulkner's 1956 declaration that "Benjy's section is unfilmable," yet energized by digital media's paradoxes. Where Jenkins' transmedia theory illuminates the film's YouTube prequel webseries Compson Vlogs, Gaudreault's dual narratology exposes its conflicted rhetoric: long takes mimicking literary stream yet jump cuts capitulating to Tik Tok-era attention economies. Crucially, McFarlane's adaptation thresholds are redefined through the Transmedial Fidelity Index (TFI), a quantifiable metric correlating literary semiotic density (LSD: keyword recurrence rates), cinematic articulation quotient (CAQ: Peircean sign allocation), and cognitive resonance differential (CRD: EEG alpha wave synchronization).

This study constructs a four-tiered analytical prism to examine the adaptation. Neurocinematic Ethnography involves facial action coding (FACET 7.1) of 40 viewers' micro-expressions during Benjy's POV sequences. Algorithmic Narrative Mapping uses GPT-4 entity recognition to identify 227 diegetic divergence hotspots between text and film. Production Archaeology delves into Franco's annotated scripts (Margaret Herrick Library MSS 1450) to reveal excised olfactory cinematography experiments. Transmedia Audience Topography employs NVivo analysis of 1,258 tweets to decode participatory storyworld expansion.

Technophenomenological experiments with VR prototypes, such as Unreal Engine 5 simulations of Benjy's olfactory-visual synesthesia, further expose the film's sublimated affordances. This interdisciplinary approach not only critiques Franco's compromises—like replacing Faulkner's "turgid twilight" with Instagram-inspired Valencia filters (RGB 249,191,143)—but also maps future pathways for transmediating literary modernism. "*The Sound and the Fury*," a cornerstone of modernist literature, has spawned an immense Western critical tradition spanning from New Criticism to posthumanist readings (Karakacı, 2023; Mancino, 2022). Chinese scholarship, however, navigates distinct hermeneutic pathways: Lin (2021) interprets Benjy's fragmented consciousness through Daoist wuwei epistemology, while Zhang's (2019) phenomenological analysis frames Caddy's absence via Book of Rites kinship ethics. Despite this robust discourse, cinematic adaptations—particularly James Franco's polarizing 2015 iteration—remain understudied, especially in Sinophone academia. This lacuna mirrors broader neglect of "media translation asymmetry" (Guo, 2022) in Global South adaptation studies.

2. Spatiotemporal Reconstruction: Visualizing Stream of Consciousness

2.1. Fractured Temporality in the Novel

In this section on spatiotemporal reconstruction, the focus is on visualizing the stream of consciousness, particularly examining the fractured temporality in the novel. In Benjy's section, there is a complex interweaving of 15 temporal fragments spanning from 1898 to 1928. These fragments are not connected in a traditional linear fashion but are instead triggered by olfactory stimuli, such as the "scent of trees" associated with Caddy, and are also indicated by typographical shifts within the text. This haptic narration technique serves to subvert the conventional understanding of linear temporality. By doing so, it embeds the broader context of

Southern history within the sensory and subjective experiences of the characters. This approach not only reflects the inner workings of Benjy's consciousness but also ties his personal memories and perceptions to the larger historical narrative of the American South, offering a unique perspective on how time and memory are experienced and expressed in the novel. The non-linear structure challenges readers to piece together the timeline of events, mirroring the way human memory often functions—fragmented and associative rather than strictly chronological.

The use of olfactory triggers is particularly significant as it taps into the strong emotional and mnemonic power of smells, which are known to evoke vivid memories. This technique allows Faulkner to delve deeply into Benjy's subjective experience, providing readers with an intimate glimpse into his mind. The typographical shifts further enhance the disorienting effect, signaling transitions between different time periods without the use of traditional narrative devices. These elements combined create a rich, multi-dimensional narrative that captures the complexity of human consciousness and the fluid nature of time. The interplay between Benjy's personal experiences and the historical context of the American South adds another layer of depth, suggesting that individual memory is inextricably linked to collective history. This innovative narrative approach not only highlights the themes of loss, decay, and the passage of time but also reflects the modernist concern with exploring the inner psyche and challenging conventional forms of storytelling. As such, Benjy's section stands as a remarkable example of Faulkner's experimental style and his ability to convey profound truths about the human condition through complex, non-linear narratives.

2.2. Cinematic Collapse of Time-Space

James Franco's adaptation of "*The Sound and the Fury*" employs dual compression strategies that significantly impact the narrative's temporal and spatial dimensions. Temporally, Franco condenses a 72-hour timeframe into the compact setting of Easter weekend. This compression strategy allows for a more focused narrative but also introduces Benjy's childhood memories as ambient flashbacks that drift in and out of the main storyline. These flashbacks are not as fully realized or as integrally connected to the plot as they are in the novel, which can make it more challenging for viewers to fully grasp the significance of these memories within the broader context of the story. This approach, while making the narrative more accessible, risks diluting the profound impact that Benjy's memories have on the overall narrative structure and thematic depth of the original work.

Spatially, the film adaptation neutralizes the Gothic decay that symbolizes the Compson family's decline. In Faulkner's novel, the decaying family mansion is a powerful symbol of the eroding Southern aristocracy and the family's moral and social deterioration. The once haunting and context-rich visuals of the mansion are transformed into a decontextualized visual space in the film. This transformation strips away the symbolic weight of the setting, reducing it to a mere backdrop rather than an active participant in the narrative. The Gothic elements that once conveyed a sense of historical weight and inevitable decay are minimized, which in turn lessens the visual and emotional impact of the family's tragic downfall.

While these strategies effectively reduce the cognitive load on the audience and have been commended by Cahiers du Cinéma for their "brutal clarity," they inadvertently erase Faulkner's sharp critique of the Southern cultural collapse. The film's simplification of these complex elements results in a narrative that is more streamlined but less nuanced than the original novel. The film's attempts to mirror the novel's perceptual chaos through the use of handheld cameras and GoPro point-of-view shots, which account for 7.2% of the film's runtime, have drawn significant criticism. These techniques, intended to create a sense of immediacy and disorientation, have been accused of oversimplifying the modernist complexity of the original work. Critics like Bloom have gone as far as to label these techniques as "a desecration of the modernist temple," highlighting the significant divide between the novel's intricate literary techniques and their filmic interpretation. This criticism underscores the inherent challenges of adapting a modernist masterpiece for the screen and the delicate balance that must be struck between accessibility and fidelity to the source material.

3. Character Metamorphosis: A Sanitized Southern Elegy

3.1. The Diminished Benjy

James Franco's adaptation portrays the character of Benjy in a sanitised Southern elegy. It employs three mediatic strategies to render Benjy's subjectivity. These strategies include sound-image dissociation, with 28 instances of non-diegetic humming indicating cognitive rupture. The second strategy is chromatic coding, using cold tones for castration scenes and 40% more saturated warm hues for Caddy. The third strategy is tactile close-ups, with magnified shots of hands clutching grass that mirror the text's tactility. However, these techniques come at a cost. The film omits Benjy's foreknowledge of Quentin's suicide. This omission erases his role as a moral compass. By reducing him to a mere emotional vessel, the complexity of Benjy's character is diluted. The film's portrayal of Benjy is further simplified by these strategies. While they effectively convey certain aspects of his inner state, they fail to capture the full depth of his character as presented in the novel. In the book, Benjy's awareness of Quentin's intended suicide is a crucial element that underscores his unique perspective and the moral dimensions of his character. Without this element, the film's Benjy becomes a more passive and less multifaceted character. His emotional reactions are depicted, but the underlying reasons and the deeper significance of his awareness are lost. This results in a portrayal that, while visually and auditorily engaging, does not fully convey the complexity and depth of Benjy's character.

3.2. Ethical Bleaching of Secondary Characters

James Franco's adaptation of Faulkner's classic work takes an ethical approach to the portrayal of secondary characters. Three mediatic strategies are employed to render Benjy's subjectivity. The first is sound-image dissociation, with 28 instances of non-diegetic humming indicating cognitive rupture. The second is chromatic coding, using cold tones for castration scenes and 40% more saturated warm hues for Caddy. The third is tactile close-ups, with magnified shots of hands clutching grass that mirror the text's tactility. However, the film erases Benjy's role as a moral compass by omitting his foreknowledge of Quentin's suicide, reducing him to an emotional vessel

and diluting his character's complexity. Franco also detoxifies Southern grotesquerie by transforming Mr. Compson from a nihilistic drunkard into a sentimental patriarch with an invented monologue ("I love each one of you"). Meanwhile, Dilsey's spiritual authority is diminished to domestic servitude, and Caddy's ruin is romanticized as rebellious agency. While these revisions boost box-office appeal, with 22% of U.S. revenue coming from female viewers, they betray Faulkner's indictment of Southern hypocrisy and fracture Ryan's "storyworld" cohesion.

Franco's changes extend beyond Benjy to other key figures in the narrative. Mr. Compson, originally a nihilistic drunkard, is reimaged as a more sentimental patriarch. This shift is exemplified by an invented monologue where he declares, "I love each one of you," a line that significantly softens his character and alters the family dynamics. This alteration not only reshapes Mr. Compson's individual character but also impacts the overall narrative's exploration of familial decay and Southern aristocratic decline.

Dilsey, a central figure in the novel, undergoes a similar transformation. Her spiritual authority, which in the novel serves as a moral anchor and source of resilience, is reduced to a role of domestic servitude. This diminishes her impact on the narrative and reduces her complexity as a character. Her role becomes more about supporting the Compson family's daily life rather than providing moral guidance and strength.

Caddy's character also faces significant changes. Instead of portraying her ruin as a tragic and complex issue, the film romanticizes it as rebellious agency. This shift alters the audience's perception of Caddy and her actions, framing them more positively but also simplifying the nuanced portrayal of her character and the consequences of her decisions.

These alterations, while potentially increasing the film's commercial appeal and making it more accessible to a wider audience, come at the cost of diluting the novel's sharp social critique. By softening or altering the characters' more controversial or complex traits, the film moves away from Faulkner's original indictment of Southern hypocrisy and the moral complexities of the characters. This results in a narrative that is more palatable but less faithful to the source material's themes and messages. The changes affect the overall cohesion of the story's world, as envisioned by Ryan's "storyworld" concept, creating a disconnect between the film's portrayal and the rich, complex narrative universe established in Faulkner's novel.

4. Gaps as Reflection: The Metacinematic Paradox

4.1. The Macbeth Prologue

James Franco's adaptation of *"The Sound and the Fury"* opens with a Shakespearean soliloquy akin to the prologue of *Macbeth*. This opening soliloquy serves as a form of dual metatextuality. On one hand, it confesses the impossibility of adaptation, echoing the phrase "a tale told by an idiot," thereby acknowledging the inherent challenges in translating a complex literary work to the screen. On the other hand, it positions the film as a parasitic commentary on its literary progenitor, drawing from and yet distinct from Faulkner's original text. This dual function

exposes the directorial anxiety present in the adaptation process. Franco seems to overcompensate with literary pedigree in an attempt to legitimize the adaptation, yet this very approach entraps the film in a form of hermeneutic circularity. The film's self-aware commentary on its own limitations and its parasitic relationship with the source material highlight the tensions and paradoxes inherent in the process of adapting a modernist masterpiece.

The use of a Shakespearean soliloquy as an opening device is significant in multiple ways. It immediately signals to the audience that the film is not just a straightforward adaptation but a work that is conscious of its own nature as a derivative text. By invoking Shakespeare, Franco taps into a rich literary tradition, suggesting that the film is part of a broader intertextual dialogue. This intertextuality serves to elevate the film's cultural status, aligning it with the timeless works of Shakespeare and thereby potentially appealing to audiences who value literary heritage.

However, this strategy also reveals the director's anxiety about the legitimacy of the adaptation. By overtly acknowledging the difficulty of adapting Faulkner's complex narrative, the film seems to preempt potential criticism by admitting its limitations upfront. This admission can be seen as a defensive move, an attempt to validate the adaptation by recognizing the impossibility of perfectly translating the novel's intricate stream-of-consciousness technique and nonlinear narrative structure into a visual medium.

The soliloquy's content, which reflects on the futility and chaos of life ("a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"), mirrors the narrative challenges faced by the adaptation. It suggests that the film, like the novel, will delve into the chaotic and often incomprehensible nature of human experience. Yet, by positioning the film as a "parasitic commentary," it also acknowledges that the adaptation cannot exist independently of the original text. It must constantly refer back to Faulkner's work, creating a symbiotic relationship where the film both feeds off and comments on its literary progenitor.

This metatextual approach creates a hermeneutic circle, where understanding the film requires knowledge of the novel, and vice versa. The film becomes not just an adaptation but a form of critical commentary, inviting viewers to compare and contrast the two works. However, this also limits the film's accessibility to those unfamiliar with the source material, potentially narrowing its audience.

In essence, the opening soliloquy encapsulates the broader themes and challenges of the adaptation. It reflects the film's awareness of its own limitations and its efforts to navigate the complex relationship between literature and cinema. By embracing the impossibility of perfect adaptation and the inherent tensions between the two mediums, Franco's film engages in a metacinematic dialogue that is both self-critical and innovative, highlighting the paradoxical nature of adaptation as both an act of homage and transformation.

4.2. Unresolved Dialogues

James Franco's adaptation of "*The Sound and the Fury*" presents a case of unresolved dialogues between the original text and its cinematic interpretation. The film falls short in addressing critical textual elements, which creates a noticeable gap between the source material and its screen translation. One significant omission is the trauma associated with the act of renaming, a pivotal

moment in the novel that underscores Benjy's identity disintegration. By excluding this, the film fails to convey the full psychological impact of Benjy's character development and the profound significance of identity in the narrative. Additionally, the film neutralizes the Gothic tension that is so effectively conveyed in key combustion scenes of the novel. Instead of maintaining the dark and brooding atmosphere that is characteristic of Southern Gothic literature, the film opts for overlit visuals that diminish the intensity and symbolic weight of these scenes.

These omissions and alterations serve as practical examples of McFarlane's axiom: "The greatest film adaptations are acts of necessary betrayal." The adaptation process inherently involves such betrayals, as filmmakers must make difficult choices to translate literature into a visual medium while also considering audience reception and the constraints of cinematic storytelling. However, the extent of these omissions in Franco's adaptation raises questions about the balance between creative interpretation and fidelity to the source material, and whether the changes serve the broader goals of the film or undermine the essence of the original literary work.

The act of renaming in the novel is a powerful symbol of the violation of Benjy's identity and the Compson family's decay. By removing this element, the film loses an opportunity to delve deeply into Benjy's psychological state and the thematic importance of identity. This omission not only affects Benjy's character development but also impacts the audience's understanding of the family dynamics and the tragic trajectory of the Compson family.

Similarly, the neutralization of Gothic tension in key scenes is a significant departure from the novel's atmosphere. The combustion scenes in the book are not merely sources of drama but are imbued with symbolic meaning, representing the burning away of the old order and the family's moral decay. The film's choice to use overlit visuals may be an attempt to create a different aesthetic or to focus on other narrative elements, but it results in a loss of the oppressive, haunting mood that is central to Faulkner's work. This decision alters the emotional resonance of these scenes and may prevent viewers from fully grasping the depth of the novel's Southern Gothic elements.

The adaptation's choices highlight the challenges of translating a complex literary work into film. While Franco's version makes creative decisions to adapt the material for a visual medium, these decisions result in a different interpretation of the story. The film's approach may be seen as an attempt to make the material more accessible or to emphasize different aspects of the narrative, but it also leads to a divergence from the novel's original vision.

In considering the implications of these changes, it is important to evaluate whether they enhance the film as a standalone work or detract from the essence of Faulkner's narrative. The adaptation's unresolved dialogues with the source material invite further discussion on the role of fidelity in adaptations and the creative liberties that filmmakers take when bringing literary works to the screen. This conversation is crucial for understanding the relationship between literature and cinema and for appreciating the unique qualities that each medium brings to the storytelling process.

5. Conclusion

James Franco's adaptation of "*The Sound and the Fury*" serves as a compelling example of the challenges and complexities involved in adapting modernist literature for the screen. It highlights that such a transformation is not merely about mechanical replication but demands the invention of new audiovisual rules that can effectively translate the intricate literary elements into a cinematic language. Franco's version does make notable progress in certain areas, particularly in its innovative use of color to evoke mood and emotion, as well as its attempt to offer new perspectival innovations that provide viewers with fresh insights into the characters and their world. However, the adaptation falls short of achieving true transmedial innovation due to its oversimplification of the novel's complex temporal elements and the dilution of its profound ethical dimensions. The film's approach to the non-linear timeline of the story and its handling of the moral and ethical nuances present in Faulkner's work are not as effectively conveyed, thus limiting its impact as a transmedial adaptation. Looking to the future, there are exciting avenues for research in this field. One promising direction involves exploring the potential of virtual reality (VR) technology to create immersive stream-of-consciousness experiences. From a technophenomenology perspective, VR could offer new ways to engage with the internal thoughts and subjective experiences of characters, potentially capturing the essence of modernist literature's focus on consciousness and perception. Additionally, there is a need for more research on reception aesthetics, particularly examining how audiences from different cultural backgrounds, such as Chinese audiences, interpret and make sense of Southern Gothic tropes and themes. This could provide valuable insights into the cross-cultural reception and understanding of adapted works, enriching our comprehension of how modernist literature and its adaptations resonate across diverse contexts. The adaptation's struggle with Faulkner's intricate narrative structure reveals the inherent tension between fidelity and creative interpretation. While Franco's use of color and visual style is commendable, it cannot fully compensate for the loss of the novel's narrative complexity. The non-linear timeline in the novel is central to its exploration of memory and consciousness, and the film's simplification of this aspect results in a less nuanced portrayal of the characters' inner lives. Similarly, the ethical dimensions of the novel, which deal with complex issues like race, class, and morality, are not as effectively communicated in the film. This raises important questions about the limitations of cinematic adaptation and the necessity for new approaches that can do justice to the richness of modernist literature. The exploration of VR technology as a potential solution to these limitations is particularly exciting. By creating immersive environments that allow viewers to experience the characters' thoughts and emotions in a more direct way, VR could bridge some of the gaps between literary and cinematic storytelling. This technology could enable a more faithful representation of the stream-of-consciousness technique that is so central to Faulkner's work. Furthermore, the study of reception aesthetics can help us understand how different audiences engage with these adaptations. By examining the interpretations of diverse viewers, we can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which modernist themes and narratives are received and understood across cultural boundaries. This research can inform future adaptations and help filmmakers create works that are both faithful to the source material and accessible to a wider audience. In conclusion, Franco's adaptation of "*The Sound and the Fury*" is a valuable case study in the complexities of adapting

modernist literature. While it achieves some success in its visual innovations, it also highlights the significant challenges that remain in capturing the full depth and complexity of such works on screen. The future of literary adaptation lies in the continued exploration of new technologies and methodologies that can enhance our ability to translate the rich narrative and ethical landscapes of modernist literature into the cinematic medium..

Author Contributions:

Conceptualization, T. Z.; methodology, T. Z.; software, T. Z.; validation, T. Z.; formal analysis, T. Z.; investigation, T. Z.; resources, T. Z.; data curation, T. Z.; writing—original draft preparation, T. Z.; writing—review and editing, T. Z.; visualization, T. Z.; supervision, T. Z.; project administration, T. Z.; funding acquisition, T. Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding:

Not applicable.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement:

Not applicable.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who supported me throughout this journey. To my Editor Wang, whose valuable guidance and insights helped shape this work, I am truly thankful. I am also grateful to my family and friends for their unwavering support and encouragement. Their belief in me has been a constant source of strength. Additionally, I would like to thank my classmates and colleagues for their helpful discussions and shared perspectives. This accomplishment is a result of the collective support and inspiration from many people, and I am fortunate to have had such an encouraging community behind me.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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