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► **To cite this version:**

Delphine Letort. Adapting John Green: From Print to Screen. Publije, 2018, Les cultures ado : consommation et production. hal-04791029

HAL Id: hal-04791029

<https://univ-lemans.hal.science/hal-04791029v1>

Submitted on 19 Nov 2024

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2018-n°1

Heather Braun, Elisabeth Lamothe, Delphine Letort (dir.), *Les Cultures ado : consommation et production*

« Adapting John Green: From Print to Screen »

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Résumé

L'adaptation cinématographique de *Nos étoiles contraires* et *Margo* ont fait connaître le nom de John Green, auteur de romans pour jeunes adultes qui a construit sa carrière et accru sa popularité en utilisant différents médias. Cet article envisage les stratégies narratives et thématiques développées par l'auteur à travers différentes plateformes médiatiques, notamment YouTube où figurent de nombreuses vidéos à but éducatif et de divertissement (Crash Courses, TED talks, Vlogs, etc). Une approche comparative des productions de Green met en relief les valeurs mises en avant par un auteur dont le succès repose sur la proximité qu'il est capable de cultiver avec son public adolescent.

Mots-clés

adaptation filmique, célébrité, roman pour jeunes adultes, Vlogging, YouTube,

Abstract

Primarily known as a young adult author whose novels *The Fault in our Stars* and *Paper Towns* have been adapted to the silver screen, John Green has built a multimedia career that has broadened his popular appeal. This article examines the narrative and thematic strategies developed by the author across different media platforms, including YouTube which features many educational and entertaining videos (Crash Courses, TED talks, Vlogs, etc.). A comparative approach to Green's productions spotlights the values endorsed by an author whose success relies on the proximity relationship he is able to maintain with his teenage audience.

Keywords

celebrity, film adaptation, Vlogging, Young Adult novels, Youtube,

John Green's literary career has blossomed since his first novel *Looking for Alaska* (2005) was awarded the Michael L. Printz prize in 2006. The American writer has pursued multifarious activities beyond the literary field to develop his popularity with a young adult audience. Not only does he maintain a large literary output that allows him to remain in the limelight,¹ but he has also fabricated himself a popular persona through engaging with social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc.)—a medium which enables him to keep connected to an audience of young adult subscribers. The use of YouTube has proved instrumental to his successful career as an author whose novel copyrights appeal to Hollywood producers. The film adaptations of *The Fault in Our Stars* (Josh Boone, 2014) and *Paper Towns* (Jake Schreier, 2015²) demonstrate that Green negotiates the literary world of young adult fiction and the glamour of Hollywood, expanding cultural capital across a variety of products. Embodying a “pop culture phenomenon”³ that branches out across social media platforms, Green acts out as a literary celebrity whose voice extends to politics, using self-irony to cast a critical look at various newsreel events.⁴ His Internet videos and public interviews portray him as a committed writer who is sincerely and truly interested in teenagers' perspective on life. Dubbed the “teen whisperer” by *The New Yorker*,⁵ Green considers teenagers with understanding and remembers the years of adolescence as a time of acute questioning and discovery:

I love the intensity teenagers bring not just to first love but also to the first time you're grappling with grief, at least as a sovereign being—the first time you're taking on why people suffer and whether there's meaning in life, and whether meaning is constructed or derived. Teenagers feel that what you conclude about those questions is going to *matter*. And they're dead right. It matters for adults, too, but we've almost taken too much power away from ourselves. We don't acknowledge on a daily basis how much it matters.⁶

Green's novels convey this intensity of feeling by delving into highly dramatic situations: *Looking for Alaska* evokes the first sexual encounters of a youth who goes to boarding school after being bullied only to discover the impact of death on his peers; the protagonists of *The Fault in our Stars* struggle with cancer and grieving, while awakening to sensuousness and desire; *Paper Towns* explores the fascinated gaze of a male narrator at his female neighbor, a young girl whose life adventures break with the normative conventions of a middle-class education. While such themes have built Green's success with a teenage reading audience, the films based on them shy away from any direct representations of the most provocative themes – including sexuality.

¹ *An Abundance of Katherines* (2006), *Let it Snow: Three Holiday Romances* (with Maureen JOHNSON and Lauren MYRACLE, 2008), *Paper Towns* (2008), *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (with David Levithan, 2010), *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012).

² The other books are currently being discussed for production. <<http://time.com/3967996/john-green-movie-adaptations/>>, accessed 31 January, 2016.

³ Kathleen DEAKIN, Laura A. BROWN, James BLASINGAME Jr., *John Green, Teen Whisperer*, New York & London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, 9.

⁴ Green used his Twitter and Facebook accounts to criticize Donald Trump during the election campaign.

⁵ <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/06/09/the-teen-whisperer>>, accessed 31 January, 2016.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

Adapting John Green's novels to the silver screen may be consistent with marketing policies that aim to capitalize on the cultural popularity of a writer whose name rings familiar in the ears of teenagers with frequent cinema-going habits;⁷ yet a close analysis of *The Fault in our Stars* and *Paper Routes* points out the limits of the process of adaptation to multiple platforms.⁸ John Green's narratives have been modified to address a broad mainstream audience in line with the established conventions of the "teen film" genre which, film scholar Timothy Shary notes, revolves around recurrent themes (delinquency, teen rebellion, crime, sex, drugs) and portrays stereotypical figures (deviant youth, bad girls) in archetypal settings (i.e high schools).⁹ Green's YouTube videos show that his success as a young adult writer is linked to his capacity to maintain an active link with a network of "nerdfighters"¹⁰ whose codes of intercommunication he has managed to adopt both to promote his self-proclaimed ethics and to advertise every new book or film release. While his novels relate stories that offer guidance to readers who question social and gender orders, Green fosters a rhetoric of teen empowerment through adopting and manipulating their language in his novels' dialogues and his Youtube videos. He is thus able to bridge the generation gap that separates him from his readers, which the films adapted from his novels fail to grasp due to censorship issues.

The paper routes to adulthood

John Green's novels may be understood as designing paper routes to adulthood. The writer's fictional stories present readers with a variety of possible paths to move beyond the troubles of teenage life. *Paper Towns*, the title of his fourth novel, offers a paradigmatic model for the understanding of adolescence as a turning point in an individual's life. Green appropriated the concept of paper towns from cartographers who used to insert fictional places into their map drawings to protect their work from plagiarism;¹¹ he uses the reference to these fictional places metaphorically to prompt readers to imagine the invisible routes that lay ahead. Paper towns challenge mental cartographies by suggesting that an array of possible choices is available

⁷ Teenagers represented "the highest percentage of yearly admissions by age group, with an average of 37% between 1995 and 2011", which explains why Hollywood studios have developed generic formulas for their specific age range—including blockbusters "featuring rather simplistic characters, rapid-paced spectacular plots and special effects", permitting the studios to increase profits from the exploitation of other "multimedia forms such as computer games and theme-park rides." Nathalie DUPONT, "Young audiences in Hollywood: the end of a love affair?" in Marima Azcona and Penny Starfield (eds.), *Youth in American Film, Film Journal 2* (2013), 4. <<http://filmjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Dupont.pdf>>, accessed 17 December, 2016.

⁸ Green sold the copyrights to *Looking for Alaska* more than ten years ago, but the film has not yet gone through production – which may be due to the explicit sexual content of the narrative.

⁹ Timothy SHARY, *Teen Movies, American Youth on Screen*, London & New York: Wallflower, 2005.

¹⁰ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyQi79aYfxU>>, accessed on 20 December, 2016.

¹¹ "Copyright traps have featured in mapmaking for centuries. Cartographers create fictional landmarks, streets, and municipalities and place them obscurely into their maps. If the fictional entry is found on another cartographer's map, it becomes clear a map has been plagiarized. Copyright traps are also sometimes known as key traps, paper streets, and paper towns." JOHN GREEN, *Paper Towns, op. cit.*, 235-236.

provided one looks beyond known cultural and geographical limits. During an online TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference, Green explains that maps have a constraining impact on individuals by predefining one's journey to existing routes. Only too rarely does one venture beyond imagined map routes:

The world shapes our map of the world [...]. The manner in which we map the world changes the world because the world would be a truly different place if North were South. [...] The world is changed by our maps of the world. [...] our personal cartographic enterprise also shapes the map of our lives and that, in turn, shapes our lives. I believe that what we map changes the life we lead. [...] But I do believe that while maps don't show you where you will go in your life, they show you where you might go. You very rarely go to a place that isn't on your personal map.¹²

The ability to create paper towns highlights the agency of the subject as the designer of his/her own map; a diversity of paths exists beyond one's familiar social and educational background provided one rethinks the map of the world. *The Fault in our Stars* achieves this effect, extolling the virtues of reading by suggesting that books provide models and escape. Green's novel mentions a list of authors whose works serve as narrative prompts—including "the Emily Dickinson poem that Van Houten had used for the title,"¹³ "this long poem called *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg,"¹⁴ "*The Red Wheelbarrow* by William Carols Williams,"¹⁵ and "the Whitmanesque revelation"¹⁶ Gus ascribes to Anna in *The Imperial Affliction*. The narrative exploits reading as a source of pleasure and passion that leads to real adventures; *An Imperial Affliction* and *Counterinsurgence* are fictional titles that enable the teenagers to overcome their loneliness: Isaac and Augustus play the videogame derived from the novel whereas Augustus and Hazel embark on a journey to Amsterdam to meet with the author of their favorite book, Peter Van Houten. At the end of the novel, they overcome the constraints of their disease to find closure to a book that ends in the middle of a sentence.

John Green's novels and YouTube videos address young adult readers with the intent to broaden their horizons by opening up different paths of thinking. This educational concern undergirds his Crash Course videos, some of which have reached more than 823000 hits (at the time of writing), including the program devoted to national debt and budget deficits.¹⁷ From philosophy and history to politics and literature, the videos testify to Green's personal desire to intellectually engage with a community of teenage learners by exploring the contents of high school curricula in an innovative way. The videos portray him like a conventional teacher sitting behind his desk and addressing his virtual class by looking straight at the camera, a performance

¹² <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NgDGlcxYrhQ>>, accessed on 17 December, 2016.

¹³ John GREEN, *The Fault in our Stars*, op. cit., 71.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 152.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ugDU2qNcyg>, accessed 31 January, 2016

that he self-consciously acts out by wearing a green jumper in reference to his last name.¹⁸ Green frequently injects personal views and sarcastic comments in the lectures he delivers. His video courses are also regularly interrupted by questions he recalls he could have asked as “me from the past,”¹⁹ using self-irony to connect with the teenager he used to be and to address young viewers through this proxy self whom he admonishes to listen to “learn important things about the you that does not exist.”²⁰ Edited to “infotain” or “edutain” the YouTube visitors, the videos cut to different types of visual documents (archival photographs and digital animations) that dramatize the course. The shock pen is also used as a prop that triggers an electric shock whenever he cannot identify the secret document delivered during the course. Green aims to promote critical thinking about society values in his history courses, challenging a Eurocentric view of the world through questions that point out the contradictions between the ideals of American democracy and the realities of daily life for ordinary people. Quoting from the 1769 diary written by Mary Cooper—in which the woman confesses her disarray (“I am dirty and distressed, almost wearied to death... Here have I seen little else but hard labor and sorrow”) –, Green then comments on the status of women in colonial society as follows:

History is about much more than the lives of Kings like James 2nd and rebels like Nathaniel Beacon. And while history classes and exams tend to focus on those kinds of men, and they were mostly men, the real story of history is about regular people trying to take care of their families and not die. The colonial era gets skipped because of its lack of large-scale drama, but those small-scale dramas are in abundance.²¹

In the wake of *A People's History of the United States* (Howard Zinn, 1980), Green calls attention to the experience of the common people in opposition to an elite class, focusing on those “small-scale dramas” that provide the materials of his novels.

The narratives of his novels unfold different paths for overcoming the difficulties youths may confront; Green shows he is also concerned with debunking stereotypes by urging his characters to move beyond the map initially planned for them. The heroine of *The Fault in our Stars* portrays the transformation of Hazel Grace Lancaster from a reserved teenager who refuses to be pitied for her cancer into a daring character who ventures to Amsterdam to visit her favorite author. Meanwhile, *Paper Towns* translates its narrator's Quentin Jacobson's fascination with his neighbor Margo, using first-person narration to ponder questions aroused by the rebellious, unapproachable girl who lives across the street. Margo self-deprecatingly describes herself as a “paper girl”, thereby suggesting that she is only an image reflecting what people want to see – an imaginary girl invented by the author. Her name itself, Margo Roth

¹⁸ *A Long and Difficult Journey, or The Odyssey: Crash Course Literature 201*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MS4jk5kavy4>, accessed September 30, 2016

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Terrorism, War, and Bush 43: Crash Course US History 46*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlsnnhn3VWE>, accessed September 30, 2016.

²¹ *The Quakers, the Dutch, and the Ladies: Crash Course US History #4*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p47tZLjbdag>, accessed 30 September, 2016.

Spiegelman, is built on the German word for “mirror” and suggests that her own life is a mere reflection of reality. When contemplating Orlando from the top of the SunTrust Building, she depicts a city that metonymically reverberates a deep-felt sense of emptiness inspired by the materialistic values of a capitalistic society which Margo does not find inspiring:

From here, you can't see the rust or the cracked paint or whatever, but you can tell what the place really is. You see how fake it all is. [...] It's a paper town. I mean look at it, Q: look at all those cul-de-sacs, those streets that turn in on themselves, all the houses that were built to fall apart. All those paper people living in their paper houses, burning the future to stay warm. All the paper kids drinking beer some bum bought for them at the paper convenience store. Every one demented with the mania of owning things.²²

This is a worldview that drives Margo away from the middle-class environment that her life is steeped in, articulating the critical view that Green kindles in his YouTube videos.

In the *Obamanation* episode of his Crash Course in American History for example, Green discusses the economic crisis triggered by the 2008 failure of the financial systems and the impact of the policies enforced by the Obama Administration. After examining the debates spurred by Obamacare and fed by the Tea Party around taxes that “are lower now than they have even been at any point in the last hundred years,”²³ Green ponders the meaning of freedom in a neoliberal society, which promotes individual rather than collective responsibility, libertarian ideas against bureaucratic government:

Can you be free when you live in poverty or when you're one injury away from bankruptcy? Can you be free when the government can go to a secret court to read your text messages? You can't be free if you're dead so it's the government's job to protect you not only by having a standing army but also by making you wear your seatbelt.²⁴

The visuals of the video hammer home Green's progressive views: the camera tracks along derelict urban areas when he mentions poverty; a man is seen lying down the stairs after a fall when he evokes injury; and the video cuts from the military to a man buckling his safety belt when he addresses governmental responsibilities. The quick pace of his speech and of editing however undermines the logic of his reasoning, prompting comparisons that may be counterproductive. The freedom he calls for is dependent on government's regulations that aim to balance individual and collective good. However, defining liberty in economic terms through considering the damaging impact of poverty only serves to reinforce a vision of capitalism as the only route to individual and collective happiness. While the videos convey a sense of humor that Green and his characters share with teenagers, feeding into a sense of critical irony the writer uses to impart a political message, the light tone used fails to grasp the complexities of an ideological debate.

²² John GREEN, *Paper Towns*, New York, Dutton Books, 2008, 57-58.

²³ *Obamanation: Crash Course US History #47*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUfh2ebjLOg>>, accessed 30 September, 2016.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

The case of the Vlog brothers

While ten years have elapsed between his first and his latest novels and vlogs, Green's fiction continues to stage teenage characters. Neither his writing nor his oral style seem to age; both ensure and restrict his commercial success to a specific age-range audience – “the teen and young adult” market targeted by publishers. Green and his brother Hank are known as the VlogBrothers on YouTube; they started using 3-minute video blogging (vlog) to communicate with each other and to share personal experiences on January 1, 2007, when Hank was living in Montana. They shaped a format that has since endured, “characterized by the brothers’ quick talking and quick wit”, “filled with hyper energy and urgency.”²⁵ The brothers’ speech delivery is extremely fast, reflecting the Internet flow of the teenage culture they target. From Green’s high school memories as a bullied student to the film adaptations of his novels, from his long waits at airports during travels across America to his visits to various cities in Europe,²⁶ the videos cover a variety of subjects and have expanded the brothers’ audience to a community of “nerdfighters” that has sprung up around their videos—counting more than 2.7 million subscribers. Daniel Smith underscores the philosophy that bonds Green and his followers, based on an idea that also runs through his novels and encompassed in the slogan “Imagining Others More Complexly”:

‘IOMC’ arose from the Nerdfighter community, specifically the novelist and one-half of the VlogBrothers, John Green. Green’s use of the phrase ‘IOMC’ comes from his own vlogs about his novels. It is an ethical mantra popularized by Green and concerns the value of literature to understanding other people’s subjectivity. As a popular philosophy, the unintended consequence is that it has become discursively utilized to promote an ethic of ‘self-other’ relations and critique YouTube celebrity culture, idol worship and the potentially damaging effects of fame.²⁷

Green warns against celebrity worship by adopting the DIY mode of creation: the videos are quickly edited from recordings made either at home or during trips and undergirded by the same educational principles as his Crash Courses. His visit to Bath offers a case in point: Green comments on the inequalities between the rich and the poor, comparing the consumer habits of the wealthy Romans who enjoyed the thermal waters of the city with the shopping habits of contemporary tourists indulging their consumer desire to purchase luxurious brands. Odd shots of a pigeon or close-ups on a coca cola bottle in the heritage city convey the ironic detachment of the writer, a second-degree humor that is expressed visually by the discrepancy between words

²⁵ Eric BRAUN, *John Green: Star Author, Vlogbrother, and Nerdfighter*, Minneapolis: Lerner Publication, 2015, 22-23.

²⁶ Green explains: “Whether the subject is American health care costs, early Islamic history, or the Higgs Boson, online video in the educational space has grown into a huge business simply by treating young people as the intelligent and critical thinkers we know them to be.” <<http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/stop-patronising-young-people-and-start-listening>>, accessed 31 January, 2016.

²⁷ Daniel R. SMITH, “Imagining others more complexly’: celebrity and the ideology of fame among YouTube’s ‘Nerdfighteria’”, *Celebrity Studies*, Vol. 7, Issue 3, 2016, 5. Smith draws a link between this mantra and his novel plots: “With Green, his male protagonist’s adolescent infatuation with certain females – such as Alaska in his first novel *Looking for Alaska* (Green 2003) or Margo in *Paper Towns* (Green 2008) – illustrates how the romanticising, pedestalling, and so on, of a beloved is a solipsistic act which encroaches on the individuality and self-definition of ‘the other’.” *Ibidem*, 6.

and images. The video both captures and reflects teenage culture, unpredictably shifting from humor to gravity in a split second; the presence of Charlie McDonnell, who has coined his own “charlieissocoollike” brand on YouTube, allows Green to increase his viewership in England by guaranteeing the authenticity of his voice.²⁸ As Daniel Smith observes, Charlie’s celebrity is linked to his authenticity and to his commitment to speak directly to “you” – his brand being himself.²⁹ Green aims for similar authenticity by recording most of his vlogs in a setting that hardly ever changes, displaying the black and white photograph of a rock band hanging on the wall which metaphorically evokes rebellious youth whereas a heap of books lies in disorder in some videos evoke a teenager’s room.³⁰

It is interesting to note that Green’s paper characters express the same sense of self-consciousness as YouTube celebrities, applying similar narrative codes to address an audience of readers. *The Fault in our Stars* is written in the form of a fictional journal and Hazel’s first person narration combines with direct address to the readers to convey a sense of intimacy that recalls the vlog practice and style. The opening sentences of the novel are blunt, shifting from “I” to “you” in an effort to connect individually with the readers, echoing the interpersonal face to face communication that characterizes the vlog:³¹

Late in the winter of my seventeenth year, my mother decided I was depressed, spent quite a lot of time in bed, read the same book over and over, ate infrequently, and devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time to thinking about death.

Whenever you read a cancer booklet or website or whatever, they always list depression among the side effects of cancer. Depression is a side effect of dying. (Cancer is also a side effect of dying. Almost everything is, really).³²

Confessing her intimate and sometimes embarrassing thoughts in between parentheses, Hazel betrays a self-conscious attitude that denotes a sense of humor drawn from a YouTube teenage culture. Her asides express the parodic humor encapsulated in Charlie McDonnell’s “How to be English” video; the young man plays out his Englishness when performing the art of drinking tea

²⁸ “Charlie has a considerable following and has had features written about him in the British national press on the success of his YouTube videos. Charlie’s most viewed video to date is ‘Duet with myself’ (viewed over seven million times) and he has over one million ‘subscribers’ to his channel. Charlie became a YouTube celebrity after beginning video-blogging when revising for his GCSE examinations in April 2007. After gaining something of a following, his vlogging has since become his profession. His YouTube celebrity took root when he was featured on the UK homepage of YouTube for his video ‘How to get featured on YouTube’ and gained wider media attention for his video ‘How to be English’ (2007). Around this time, YouTube granted him ‘partner’ status and started to pay Charlie for uploading his vlogs. From viewing Charlie’s videos one can follow what this investment has given him. It is a job with a salary that is able to help him share a mortgage on a house with fellow vlogger Alex Day (‘nerimon’), and a life to diarise. But as this is Charlie’s job we also realise that he is a product of his own making: he is Charlie Inc. and sells the ‘charlieissocoollike’ brand.” Daniel SMITH, “Charlie is so ‘English’-like: nationality and the branded celebrity person in the age of YouTube”, *Celebrity Studies*, Vol. 5, n° 3, 257.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 265.

³⁰ Laurent BAZIN, “Chambre claire et camera obscura : identité sociale et espace mental dans le roman français contemporain pour adolescents”, *Strenæ*, 7. <<http://strenae.revues.org/1258>>, accessed on 4 March, 2016.

³¹ Jean BURGESS and Joshua GREEN, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, Cambridge, Malden, MA: Politic Press, 2009, 48.

³² John GREEN, *TFIOS*, *op. cit.*, 3.

in an upper-class manner;³³ whereas Hazel sees a lot of “competitiveness” between the cancer-afflicted children attending the same cancer support group.³⁴ The characters engage with parody as they express self-awareness, toeing a thin line between being and acting “English” or “sick”. Charlie McDonnell’s parodic style illustrates the creative aspects of an Internet subculture which is an “expression of subculture and grassroots activity” that provokes critique, debate, and discussion.³⁵ Green’s characters convey the same type of distanced self-irony as regards their flawed body: Augustus Waters euphemistically explains that he had “a touch of osteosarcoma”³⁶ whereas Hazel calls herself a “grenade.”³⁷

The chapters of *The Fault in our Stars* could translate into a video diary, “empowering ordinary people to become media producers, not just media users.”³⁸ The success of the Project for Awesome (P4A), created by Green to encourage YouTubers to craft their own campaign videos for nonprofit charities, testifies to the connection that Green has managed to establish with his followers who model their own videos on his.³⁹ Green portrays teenagers who shape their own maps of the world by reinventing their lives through the images they produce of themselves and the language they shape to give meaning to the ordinary. In *Paper Towns*, Margo expresses her sense of creative defiance by symbolically revising the rules of capitalization to grant more importance to the words in the middle of a sentence and to the letters in the middle of a word.⁴⁰ Hazel Grace Lancaster’s mother would qualify such interventions as “being very teenager”⁴¹ – a quality that it is difficult to translate to the cinema.

The filmic detours of adaptation

John Green’s vlogs and books show that he is immersed in teenage culture, which may be key to his long-term success. Contemporary young adult novel authors renew the genre by addressing topics that widen its scope – among them sexual violence, accidents, addiction, crime, suicide, disease, heroism, etc.⁴² While some publishing houses have specialized in the genre and thereby created a reading niche, urging young adult writers to dare address such issues respectfully and seriously, few teen films are adapted from these young adult novels and most of

³³ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpWqCzru5zk>>, accessed on December 20, 2016.

³⁴ John GREEN, *TFIOS*, *op. cit.*, 5.

³⁵ Boguslaw SULKOWSKI, “Five Social Frameworks of Ludus Behaviours”, in Halina Mielicka-Pawlowska (ed.), *Contemporary Homo Ludens*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, 57.

³⁶ John GREEN, *TFIOS*, *op. cit.*, 11.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 99.

³⁸ Andrew CORCORAN, Paul MARSDEN, Thomas ZORBACH, and Bernd RÖTHLINGSHÖFER, “Blog marketing”, in John Kirby and Paul Marsden (eds), *Connected Marketing, The Viral, Buzz and Word of Mouth Revolution*, Burlington MA: Butterworth-Heinemann Elsevier, 2006, 157.

³⁹ <<http://youtube-global.blogspot.fr/2011/12/project-for-awesome-5-years-of-doing.html>>, 31 January, 2016.

⁴⁰ “I’m a big believer in random capitalization. The rules of capitalization are so unfair to words in the middle.” John GREEN, *Paper Towns*, *op. cit.*, 32.

⁴¹ John GREEN, *TFIOS*, *op. cit.*, 99.

⁴² Alice TRUPE, *Thematic Guide to Young Adult Literature*, Westport, Connecticut & London: Greenwood Press, 2006.

them are produced from original scripts.⁴³ Catherine Driscoll contends that teen films define adolescence through a range of contrasting themes, which consist of “both passionate consumption and rejection of conformity, both peer-identification and anomie (aimlessness), both emotional intensity and fashion consciousness, both rebellion and gullibility.”⁴⁴ Films that deviate from the established conventions are often confined to the margins of independent cinema.⁴⁵

The films based on John Green’s novels quote abundantly from the source text, including many dialogues that are easily turned into filmed conversations. However, the scriptwriting process involves narrative changes that compromise the young adult literature material. Green expressed satisfaction after both adaptations of *The Fault in our Stars* and *Paper Town* and he even rose to the defense of the tagline included on the poster of Josh Boone’s film which derisively reads “one sick love story.”⁴⁶ Actress Shailene Woodley also celebrates *The Fault in Our Stars* for pushing “the boundaries for a female lead with its unstinting look at a terminal cancer patient.”⁴⁷ Hazel’s oxygen canula is connected to a tank that she has to carry up or down the stairs, symbolizing the disease in her lungs and the weight of the burden she must bear. Her struggle with cancer turns the young woman into a heroine of the ordinary and this is mainly achieved through the voice-over that pervades the film, conveying her adolescent look at a situation she learns to grapple with. While Green’s novel *Looking for Alaska* has sometimes been censored on account of its explicit sexual content (which explains why its film adaptation is repeatedly postponed), *The Fault in our Stars* avoids tackling such daring subjects; it is noteworthy that the two adolescents never stray way from the sightseeing places of Amsterdam, avoiding passing by its coffee shops where it is legal to purchase and smoke cannabis.

The introductory sequence of *The Fault in our Stars* typically opposes Hazel’s voice-over to short clips, embedded like wishful thinking between fade-ins, showing her without the oxygen canula that she never takes off in the rest of the film. The visuals of the prologue depict a life that could have been, which Hazel Grace evokes as a deceitful chimera:

⁴³ A few exceptions: *If I Stay* (R.J. Cutler, 2015) based on a novel by Gayle Forman (2009), *Paranoid Park* (Gus Van Sant, 2007) based on a novel by Blake Nelson (2008).

⁴⁴ Catherine DRISCOLL, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction*, Oxford & New York: Berg, 2011, 4.

⁴⁵ Among them: *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, 2007); the films by Larry Clark (*Kids* 1995 ; *Another Day in Paradise*, 1998 ; *Bully*, 2001 ; *Ken Park*, 2002), by Gus Van Sant (*Mala Noche*, 1985 ; *Drugstore Cowboy*, 1989 ; *My Own Private Idaho*, 1991 ; *Gerry*, 2002 ; *Elephant*, 2003 ; *Last Days*, 2005 ; *Paranoid Park*, 2007 ; *Restless*, 2011).

⁴⁶ <https://www.buzzfeed.com/kmallikarjuna/john-green-responds-to-the-fault-in-our-stars-poster?utm_term=.pyrWLW97j#oc9aYaONQ>, accessed on 21 December, 2016.

⁴⁷ <<https://www.yahoo.com/movies/fault-stars-shailene-woodley-oxygen-tube-define-female-200000128.html>>, accessed on 21 December, 2016.

I believe we have a choice in this world about how to tell sad stories. On the one hand, you can sugarcoat it. The way they do in movies and romance novels where beautiful people learn beautiful lessons, where nothing is too messed up that can't be fixed with an apology and a Peter Gabriel song. I like that version as much as the next girl does, believe me. It's just not the truth. This is the truth. Sorry.

The voice-over continues after the prologue as a close shot captures the oxygen bag lying beside her legs and the camera pans up to her silent face. The aural elements create a metadiegetic level in the film, opening up space for the girl to gain a voice that adults would neither hear nor heed. Hazel is characterized as “depressed” by those around her whereas she views her sadness as “a side-effect of dying”—a phrase that points out the relationship between the film and its source through verbatim quotes.⁴⁸ The film conveys the detachment and even the estrangement that Hazel feels from her environment by filming the objects or the people around her with a moving camera that visually captures the time passing by Hazel who watches how other teenagers live from a still standpoint [00:02:00].

The world Hazel inhabits is filled with words that signify the medical environment she lives in, separating her from the ordinary world of other teenagers enjoying a taste of freedom at the shopping mall where they hang out. Words enclose her existence into a disease which adults aim to contain through the prescription of “Zoloft” or “Lexapro”, antidepressants which sound like medical translations of her psychological malaise, whereas the “support group” offers an emotional response to her crisis. Adults shy away from referring to the suffering caused by the disease, preferring the euphemistic phrase “journey” [00:02:30] to designate the terminal stage of her cancer. Hazel’s sense of defiance permeates her use of language, eschewing metaphorical formulas in her blunt retorts – which she rarely speaks out loud. Her voice-over functions like balloons in a comic book, giving thoughts that she refrains from expressing overtly. When the support group leader Patrick asks her how she is doing, she answers “all right” but the voice-over replies “You mean besides the terminal cancer?” This is the type of narrative strategy that allows Hazel to resist the victimizing narrative of a life regulated by the intake of drugs and the doctors’ appointments. The film underlines Hazel’s straining for autonomy through verbal cues that allow her to transgress into the adult world; when her mother asks whether her boyfriend Gus gave her the book she is reading, Hazel provocatively retorts “by it, you mean herpes?” The film shares in the quirky humor of teenage culture, as the characters speak in metaphors of a disease that steals their bodies from them by constraining their freedom of action. Gus introduces himself as “part-cyborg” because he has lost his leg due to Osteosarcoma and says his body lit up like a “Christmas tree” on a PET-scan to mention his relapse. Different types of cancer are embodied by the teenagers attending the support group meetings; their stories are signified by the scientific term designating the disease; the teenagers pronounce such words as “acute

⁴⁸ “Depression is a side effect of dying. (Cancer is also a side effect of dying. Almost everything is, really.)” John GREEN, *TFIOS*, *op. cit.*, 3.

lymphoblastic leukaemia”, “neuroblastoma” as if they were their last names. Some associations, however, undermine the dramatic impact of the individual drama (“I’m Patrick... testicular”). Patrick’s particular form of cancer is told in an embedded sequence with an upbeat music that contrasts with his gloomy experience as a man with a disease that has left him “divorced and friendless,” emasculated and confined to an adolescent life of videogames [03:00]. The upbeat music does not allow pathos to arouse sympathy and uses irony to defuse the dramatic tension of his life; the gap between Patrick’s dramatic narrative of disease and the light tone of Hazel’s voice-over commentary echoes the ironic humor that pervades the Green brothers’ Vlog episodes.

Traveling changes one’s world maps, which Hazel and Augustus discover when visiting Anne Frank’s house. The words read from Anne Frank’s diary, transmitted through loud speakers in every room, strike a chord with Hazel:

It’s difficult in times like these. It’s a wonder I have abandoned all my ideals. They seem so absurd and impractical... yet I cling to them because I still believe in spite of everything that people are truly good at heart. [01:08:00]

We’re much too young to deal with these problems but they keep thrusting themselves on us until, finally, we’re forced to think up a solution. [01:09:00]

And yet, when I look up at the sky I somehow feel that everything will change for the better. That this cruelty, too, will end. [01:10:00]

All is as it should be. God wishes to see people happy. Where there is hope, there is life. [01:11:00]

At such moments I can’t think about the misery but about the beauty that still remains. Try to recapture the happiness within yourself. Think of all the beauty in everything around you and be happy. [01:12:00]

The film draws parallels between Hazel and the girl who hid behind a bookshelf during the war, imprisoned in a historical narrative that granted her no rights as a Jewish person. Anne Frank represents an inspiring role model for Hazel, whose struggle against disease resonates with Frank’s resistance; her stolid words haunt the museum and suggest how she used writing to counter her lack of agency over her own reclusive life. Hazel musters her courage and overcomes her physical pain to walk upstairs, making a journey that broadens her horizon as a teenager on the path to adulthood. The last part of the film turns to melodrama as Hazel’s first kiss with Gus signifies her womanhood and her physical pain becomes emotional.

While *The Fault in our Stars* is supposedly addressed to teenage viewers, the film eschews some of their preoccupations. Green dwells on the bodily sensations Hazel awakens to

as a young woman who realizes that “[she] didn’t know that guys *could* turn [her] on”⁴⁹ when first meeting with Gus. She feels transformed by the amorous kiss exchanged with him and she suddenly feels attractive and attracted: “For a weird moment I really liked my body; this cancer-ruined thing I’d spent years dragging around suddenly seemed worth the struggle.”⁵⁰ Her first sexual experience is elliptically repressed in the film whereas she admits that “[t]here were a lot of condomy problems that I did not get a particularly good look at.”⁵¹ *The Fault in our Stars* therefore adapts the novel into a mainstream film that avoids the use of such words as “hamartia”⁵² and the references to literary works that might alienate an audience of non-readers. The adaptation of *Paper Town* further points out the limits of a Hollywood interpretation of a John Green novel.⁵³

The mysteries of Margo Roth Spiegelman—an enigmatic character played by British fashion model Cara Delevingne in the screen adaptation—dissolve into an object of fascination. The film uses numerous subjective shots to convey the male narrator’s entranced gaze at the teenage girl and his obsession with her. Margo becomes an elusive character that the camera and Quentin’s voice-over narrative cannot approach without adopting a reifying perspective. Plot changes and narrative shifts affect the meaning of the novel and undermine its political critique. The film anchors the narrative in the teenagers’ life by making the prom dance a main concern whereas the students skip graduation in order to drive to Agloe where Margo has fled in the novel. Representation further entrenches gender binaries through archetypal behaviors: the boys’ conversations focus on how to get a date to go to a prom, an event depicted as the climax of a teen’s life in the final sequence.

While the novel posits a subtle critique of the archetypal image of teenage girls through Margo’s non-conformist character, the photogenic actress interpreting her part confers stereotypical traits on her femininity: Margo embodies what the feminine arts and media

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵³ On his Tumblr account, Green responded to many questions about *Paper Towns*, originally expressing his belief that the film would never make it to the screen: “The people who worked at the studio that optioned *Paper Towns* and paid me to write the screenplay were not particularly pleased with my first draft, and they really hated my revision. They felt the first draft was “literary,” which is an insult in the world of filmmaking, I guess, and my attempts to address their concern watered down everything they’d initially liked about the script, and after that, I was pretty pissed off at the head of the studio and it’s safe to say that he was very pissed off at me. He then refused to pay me the last little pittance of what was owed to me, claiming I hadn’t done work I’d clearly done. I don’t have any particular desire to throw this guy under the bus by naming him, but it was a petulant and childish response to not being happy with the work done by a first-time screenwriter they were paying very (very very) little. There are a lot of petulant children in Hollywood, in my experience. Anyway, I very happily went back to writing books, which is what I should’ve been doing all along. Is it possible that someone will improve upon my script—or that a new script will be created from scratch—and there will eventually be a movie? Yes. But it’s very unlikely. **Edit:** I am editing this 2012 post from the *Paper Towns* movie set in 2014. (Fox 2000 bought the rights, Michael Weber and Scott Neustadter wrote an amazing screenplay, Jake Schreier is directing and the movie stars Nat Wolff, Cara Delevingne, Justice Smith, Jaz Sinclair, and Halston Sage among others. So. Yay!!!!).”

<<http://onlyifyoufinishedpapertowns.tumblr.com/post/29906740422/is-there-going-to-be-a-movie-or-not>>, accessed on 11 March, 2016.

collective Guerrilla Girls dubs the “rock starlet stereotype: a thin, young long-haired (usually blond) woman with her shirt way down to there to show her cleavage and way up there to bare her midriff.”⁵⁴ The film fails to grasp the rebellious streak in Margo, who is portrayed as an image to be looked at; no subjective camera allows the viewer to share her understanding of the city as a paper town. The camera is always placed at a distance from her body, emphasizing her power of attraction through filming Quentin’s attempts at physical proximity and espousing his fascinated gaze. She appears in the frame of her bedroom window early in the film, which symbolizes the imaginary portrait the boy is drawing of her as he follows her whereabouts like a spectator. Quentin’s voice-over makes her the heroine of a narrative in which he plays no part, lamenting his own insignificance in her life:

Her life has become a series of unbelievably epic adventures. Each one too insane to be true. Like the time she spent three weeks traveling with the circus. Or the time she toured with the Millionnaires up and down the East coast. And wherever she went she always left clues behind for her little sister, Ruthie. Or anyone else she deemed worthy. I was never one of those people. [00:05:00]

Entertaining idealized childhood memories of her, Quentin turns Margo into an object of fantasy without realizing that she plays a character in her own life, staging every social encounter as a spectacle. The novel lingers on the clues that Quentin collects in his quest for Margo, leading to self-discovery and self-knowledge.

While the novel builds the character of Margo through the comments made upon her, thus demonstrating that the girl is objectified by the stereotypes crafted by parents and friends, she is empowered by those acts of creative disobedience that she plans on her own, symbolized by the so-called clues which she leaves behind. Her rebellious instinct translates into acts of defiance that bespeak her desire to overcome social and gender boundaries. Not only does she wear “designer jeans to break into SeaWorld,” but her rampage campaign is aimed at debunking the myth of security that lures Orlando residents into believing that material comfort insulates them from external events.⁵⁵ By intruding into Chuck Parson’s home to shave his right eyebrow⁵⁶ and performing other pranks, Margo disrupts the sense of order that prevails in the suburb that she once toilet papered.⁵⁷ Repeatedly running away from home, Margo flees the false sense of security provided by parents who rely on their social class background to create a sense of comfort.

⁵⁴ Guerrilla Girls, *Bitches, Bimbos and Ballbreakers: the Guerrilla Girls’ Illustrated Guide to Female Stereotypes*, New York: Penguin Books, 2003, 108.

⁵⁵ She declares: “If I ever end up being the kind of person who has one kid and seven bedrooms, do me a favour and shoot me.” *Ibidem*, 47.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

By the final chapter of the novel, Quentin understands that Margo does not fit “the girl who was an idea that [he] loved”⁵⁸ whereas he comes back in time for the prom dance in the film and blends in the group by joining in the dance. The road trip to the paper town where Margo has gone to turns into a race against the clock in the film, as the teens want to be back in time for the prom; the twenty-one-hour trip includes many anecdotal incidents that offer few of the unpredictable detours that characterize road movie sequences,⁵⁹ displaying “driving for the sake of driving and lead[ing] contemplation of the road as spectacle”⁶⁰ instead. The road trip allows the boys, seen as a marginalized group of “faggots” in the words of Chuck Parson in the novel,⁶¹ to become men as they bond with popular high school “honeybunnies”⁶² like Lacey. Such politically incorrect words do not crop up in the film, which resorts to visual gender stereotypes to characterize the boys’ marginalized status in the high school’s social hierarchy. Their ordinary clothing styles do not exhibit developed muscles; Ben’s fifteen-year-old Buick wagon denotes lower-social-class status compared to the trendy convertibles of other students, whereas Radar’s parents’ Guinness collection of Black Santas is a source of shame and embarrassment.

Conclusion

Comparing Green’s videos with the films based on his novels shows that the Internet guarantees more freedom of speech to the writer whereas the social media grant him more accessibility. Green is no longer a writer of the margins; his novels have been absorbed in the mainstream through film adaptations that place limits on their interpretation. His videos have enabled him to develop his celebrity status as a young adult writer, helping increase his audience of readers by maintaining the proximity he has achieved with a large number of followers, whereas his commitment to film projects bespeaks his interest in commercial projects that may not pursue the political objectives of his educational and personal videos. Green has tapped into a moneymaking vein through writing young adult fiction he can promote on YouTube and one may question the philosophical ethics he endorses. His middle-class values pervade his work and offer his characters the sense of security he aims for. *Paper Towns* does not portray Margo Roth Spiegelman as a model to be followed as she strays away from the mainstream. The two protagonists of *The Fault in our Stars* are wise youths who hardly challenge the rules around them and accommodate their fate.

When addressing the film adaptations on his vlogs, Green expresses self-satisfaction

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁵⁹ *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945) is based on a road trip with twist and turns, progressively shattering all the dreams that prompted Al Roberts (Tom Neal) to hitchhike to Los Angeles.

⁶⁰ Anne HURAUPT-PAUPE, « The paradoxes of cinematic movement: is the road movie a static genre? », *Miranda* 10, 2014. <<http://miranda.revues.org/6257>>, accessed on March 15, 2016.

⁶¹ John GREEN, *PT*, 17.

⁶² *Ibidem*, 87.

along with the stars who feature in them; his vlog with Cara Delevingne is a tool for promotion,⁶³ showing that the writer targets his fan base as possible viewers for *Paper Towns* (and vice versa). He simultaneously voices his fear that his work might be corrupted by the influence of Hollywood: “I hope that I’m not developing a Hollywood brain, to be honest with you. I love books. I love writing books. I love movies, too, but I am a book writer and if I’m lucky enough to be able to work with people who are great at making movies then I feel very fortunate, but I have no desire to become a movie person.”⁶⁴ The writer obviously capitalizes on his reputation as a young adult novelist too, relying on video and cinema screens to increase his readership.

⁶³ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOWTeQiaFv0>>, accessed on 22 December, 2016.

⁶⁴ <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/10871770/John-Green-The-Fault-in-our-Stars-film-is-true-to-the-book.html>>, accessed on 22 December, 2016.

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