Sherlock vs. Sherlock: A Study in Visual Storytelling
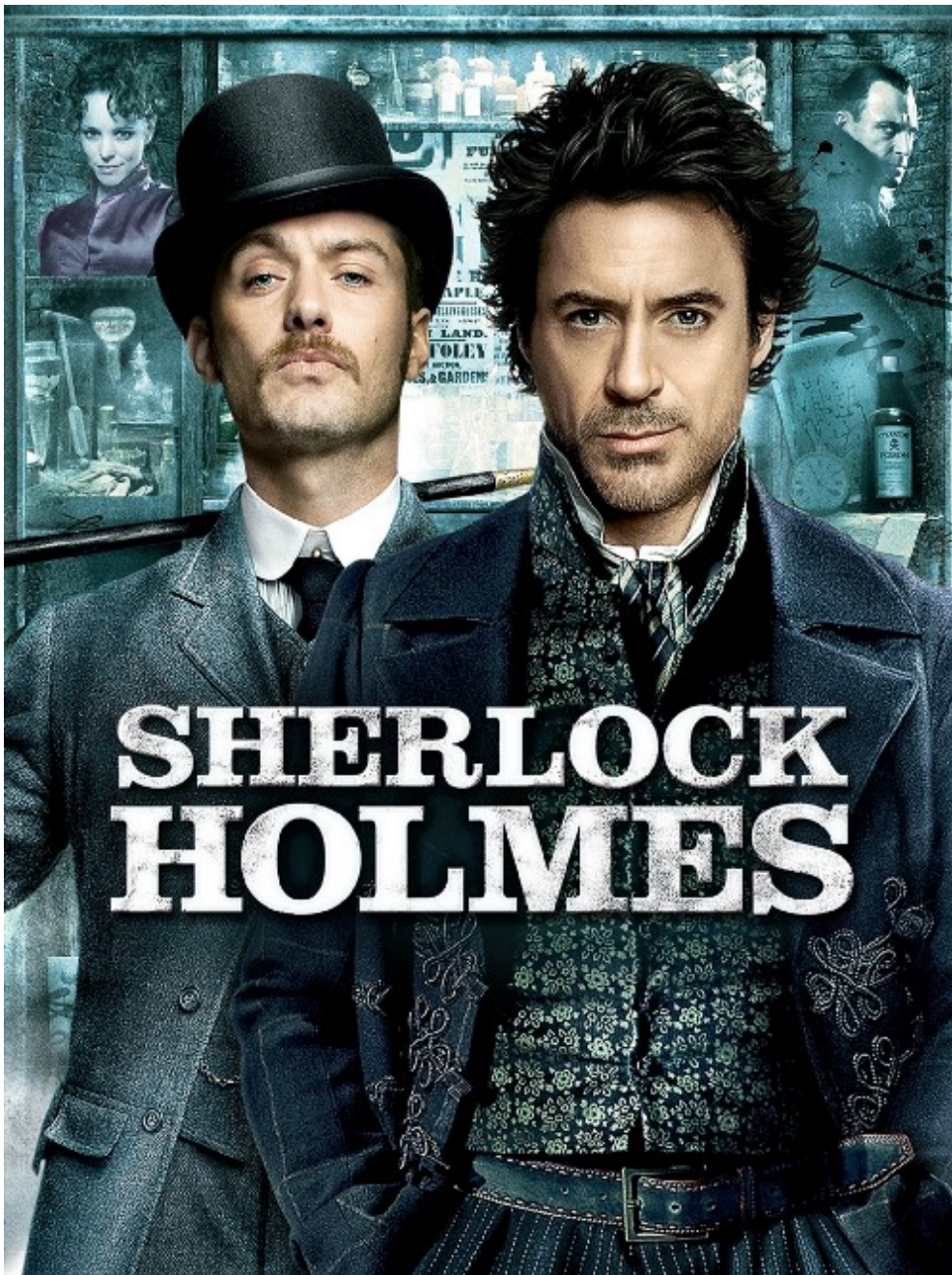
Two approaches to showing a brilliant mind's thought process

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Why are detective stories so popular? Perhaps the challenge of attempting to solve the mystery before the gifted detective is what appeals to some. Perhaps for others, it is quite the opposite: they want to witness or even experience a higher way of thinking than that of which they are capable or willing to engage in at that moment. According to one writer, it has to do with the pervasive feeling of guilt and "fear of impending disaster" in the world, for which the detective story gives us hope in an "infallible Power...who knows exactly how to fix the guilt." (x) No matter the reason, detective stories are an exceedingly popular literary genre, and no detective has been quite as prevalent as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes.

Holmes first appeared in print in *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887, and became extremely popular via a series of short stories in *The Strand Magazine* running from 1891 to 1927. With a grand total of four novels and fifty-six short

stories, there is no lack of material detailing Sherlock Holmes's and Dr. John Watson's exploits. The brilliant detective's adventures have been adapted from book to screen many times, beginning with *Sherlock Holmes Baffled*, a one-reel film made in 1900. According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, Sherlock Holmes is the "most portrayed literary human character" in history, with over seventy actors portraying him in over two hundred films. ([x](#)) Each filmmaker or television creator has attempted in different ways to translate Sherlock's amazing deductive reasoning to a visual medium, to varying degrees of success. Depending on the type of audience for the particular adaptation, the visual style and formal elements that convey Sherlock's impressive skills will be given more or less importance, therefore being more or less engaging and effective as a way of shaping the audience experience. The most notable and most recent adaptations have been *Sherlock* (2010 BBC television show starring Benedict Cumberbatch) and *Sherlock Holmes* (2009 and 2011 Guy Ritchie-directed films starring Robert Downey Jr.). These adaptations differ wildly in many respects, including and especially the way in which each director chose to have the audience experience Sherlock's investigative and deductive skills. The stylistic and cinematic choices made by each director impact the perception, reception, and appreciation not only of the story, but also in particular of the process of deduction, the thinking patterns, and thus the overall character of the protagonist.

Book-to-screen adaptations are notoriously tricky. The media have such different approaches to reader/viewer experience or approaches to the presentation of the subject matter that it's nearly impossible, and probably not that desirable, for a screen adaptation to remain faithful to every aspect of a book, even beyond the obvious — the visual portrayal rendering the verbal description of the scene unnecessary. In [his analysis](#) of Zack Snyder's 2009 adaptation of *Watchmen*, YouTuber Roby D'Ottavi argues that Snyder stayed true to Alan Moore's graphic novel by adapting not just the story but the *intent*: where the graphic novel pulled apart traditional comic book superheroes and comic book tropes/aesthetics, the film pulled apart on-screen superheroes and superhero film tropes. Essentially, Snyder was translating the overall message to a new medium. This all relates back to audience experience: comic book readers who read *Watchmen* (1986) were confronted with the comic book tropes with which they were familiar and/or expected, while superhero film watchers who saw *Watchmen* (2009) were confronted with corresponding superhero film tropes. In the case of *Watchmen,* the transposition from the comic to the film necessitated, for the same message to be transmitted, an alteration of the dataset. Similarly, in the case of the adaptation of the Sherlock Holmes story from the paper to the screen, the way the material is presented will fundamentally alter the story itself as perceived by the viewer.

Adaptation becomes that much more difficult when a story relies heavily on one person's way of seeing the world, especially when that person's state of mind is unconventional or in an altered state, like a genius, someone under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or someone with a mental illness. These stories often use a buffer or an audience stand-in: in the original Doyle stories, this is Dr. John Watson. Watson was (and remains in almost every adaptation) a glorified sidekick, to whom Holmes explains his reasoning and the details of the case, as a way of relaying the information to the reader. Watson, along the way, also develops into Holmes's moral compass, in a way, providing humanity and heart where Holmes's sociopathic tendencies lead in the other direction. In the original stories, Watson was the first-person narrator, so his inner monologue described the clues that any mere mortal would notice in a case, and his dialogue with Holmes explained the rest, which only Holmes could deduce. It was mildly patronizing (especially in light of Holmes's repeated use of phrases such as "my dear Watson") and made it so that the audience uncovered the mystery not as Holmes was solving it, but as he was explaining it to Watson. This lead to an interesting reading experience, where the reader could have a small "a-ha! so *that's* how it happened!" moment at the end.

However, since this method relies so heavily on dialogue and exposition, it would lead to an extremely dry and

boring audience experience if it were rendered unaltered to the screen. Each director and cinematographer has to find a way to make Sherlock Holmes's adventures interesting to an audience experiencing it primarily visually and aurally. In comparing Guy Ritchie's movies to Stephen Moffat's and Mark Gatiss's BBC show, we can argue that an adaptation more faithful to the narrative and storytelling framework of Doyle's novels is an inferior cinematic product than one that updates and adapts it for a more engaged and rewarding audience experience. Steven Moffat himself claimed that "updating *Sherlock* and appropriating key elements from the main stories ends up making them even *more* faithful to [the spirit and heart of the original canon]."

In [his video essay](#) comparing the two adaptations, YouTuber Henry Sharpe explains that the biggest difference between the two lies in the reveal of information. He compares two scenes, both showing Sherlock investigating a crime scene. In *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), Sherlock and Watson look around a dead man's home and examine his odd experiments: while Watson does something vaguely scientific (the nature of which we are not made aware), Sherlock touches, sniffs, and "hmm"s his way around the scene, observing and occasionally remarking things like "peculiar" or "curious." We don't know exactly what he notices (unless he says out loud "hydrated rhododendron," for example), and we don't know *why* something is peculiar, curious, or of

interest at all. In *Sherlock* "A Study in Pink" (2010), Sherlock examines the body of a woman recently found deceased. He notices small details such as her wedding ring and the fact that it is clean on the inside and dirty on the outside, indicating that she does not care for it and it is removed often. The key difference between the two scenes is that in the show, we see exactly what Sherlock sees, including the image being magnified when he is looking through a magnifying lens, as well as explaining what he is noticing by the words ("dirty," "clean," etc) flashing on the screen. As Sharpe states in his video, "a great detective story involves the viewer and invites them to solve the mystery alongside the detective." The movie shows us Sherlock reacting to the clues, but does not let the viewers be a part of his discoveries. It's more invested in creating suspense and developing the mystique and other-worldliness of Sherlock than in engaging the audience; in fact, it deliberately misleads the audience on several occasions. For example, in Sherlock's peroration at the end, it is revealed that a character who earlier burst into flames, seemingly by magic, was in fact doused in gasoline, which had been portrayed, misleadingly, as rain. The show, on the other hand, allows the viewers to learn the new information alongside Sherlock, so we are impressed when he figures it out, but it does not feel like a *deus ex machina*.

Not only does the show adequately provide us the clues Sherlock observes, it also provides us with an insight into

his thought process. This is crucial to our experience: we feel far more involved in the mystery if we follow along in his deductive reasoning. Author Lynnette Porter explains that "because, like Watson, audiences tend to believe in the unique power of Sherlock Holmes's mind, every filmic adaptation must find a way to make Holmes's internal thought process not only external but technologically innovative and visually interesting." The movie does briefly attempt to do this, but only during the fight scenes and in a wholly unoriginal way: in true Guy Ritchie fashion, the footage is speed ramped when Sherlock gains the upper hand in a fistfight, and Robert Downey Jr.'s voiceover explains the precise way of beating the character whom Sherlock is fighting, including their hidden weak spots, such as "partial deafness" or "floating rib" (while we have no way of knowing *how* Sherlock knows these things). Porter dubs this effect "Holmesvision." The show, on the other hand, not only explicitly tells us what clues Sherlock is picking up (as discussed previously) but also shows his deductive reasoning upon learning these clues. For example, in the clip discussed from "A Study in Pink," upon seeing the state of the dead woman's wedding ring, Sherlock concludes that she has been unhappily married for at least ten years. The show flashes the clues on the screen ("dirty," "clean," etc) and then flashes his reasoning, including words fading in and out as he interprets new information. As the show goes on, it becomes more and more experimental and creative with its cinematic

depiction of thought. In his video essay on this subject, YouTuber Evan Puschak analyzes the use of inventive cinematography and film editing as a function of the character's mind in a sequence from "The Lying Detective," the second episode of the fourth series in 2017. He explains that a revelation only works when it arises from information already known: what changes is the detective's perspective. The BBC show "stages these perspective shifts in its camera work and editing." The sequence uses different camera lenses, angles, and set manipulations to guide the audience through Sherlock's realization and make us experience his temporary confusion and ensuing deductions as they happen, instead of learning about them after the fact.

In his "Sherlock vs Sherlock" video, Sharpe compares the two adaptations by equating them to reading a book: with the way the BBC show reveals the information to us as Sherlock learns it, we feel like "we are always on the same page of the book as the detective," whereas the film makes it "feel like the detective is always a few chapters ahead." I think this is a perfect, albeit simple, metaphor for the differences between the two. The show provides the audience with clues and logic as they develop for Sherlock himself, so it always feels like we are reading the exact same page of the exact same book: if he arrives at a conclusion first, we don't feel cheated because there was no information withheld from us for the purposes of suspense or mystery. The movie, on the

other hand, withholds practically everything until Sherlock's inevitable monologue where he exposits for five minutes, explaining exactly what really went down to Watson, or Blackwood, or any other audience stand-in, using information we didn't have (because they didn't show us), or making huge leaps in logic which are not warranted with the information given. The movie makes us feel like we are reading a picture book version of a story for which Sherlock has an unabridged copy and a significant head-start: by the end, we are asking ourselves why even bother trying to piece the puzzle together if Sherlock is holding half the pieces behind his back.

The difference between these two adaptations ultimately comes down to filmmaker intent and ensuing audience experience. The show provides audience members with an *active* viewing experience: its reveal of information and innovative filmmaking techniques allow us to run alongside the detective the entire way (even when he's hallucinating from drugs or withdrawal), racing to see who can get to the end first. It is a participatory experience, where the filmmakers do not talk down to the audience or withhold vital information. The movies, on the other hand, offer a *passive* viewing experience: we are told to be amazed as this near super-human individual solves seemingly unsolvable mysteries, while being denied crucial plot information. It is patronization masquerading as mystery. As we have seen, in their

adaptations of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's classic detective stories, Guy Ritchie and Moffatt/Gatiss take fundamentally different approaches: the former chooses to retain the story and narrative framework, thereby providing the viewer material that is almost dogmatic in its refusal to provide intelligible clues. The latter, instead, choose to adapt it and translate it to their new medium, taking full advantage of its aesthetic and dynamic possibilities to retain the "heart" of the original stories, and thus allowing the audience to feel in dialogue with the story in a much more satisfactory way. In other words, though the plot may have been the same, the method chosen to present the story in its new environment impacts enormously the perception of the story itself, and thus the experience of the viewer.

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