

ME AND EARL AND THE ADAPTED GIRL:
LEARNING TO WRITE A YOUNG ADULT ADAPTATION

Michelle Zhang

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The University of Texas at Austin

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Donna Kornhaber
Department of English
Supervising Professor

Carol MacKay
Department of English
Second Reader

ABSTRACT

Author: Michelle Zhang

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Supervising Professors: Donna Kornhaber, Carol MacKay

Since the late 2000s, the movie industry has experienced a boom in Young Adult (YA) book-to-movie adaptations, from the wildly popular *Twilight* series to romantic drama *The Fault In Our Stars*. Having been an avid YA literature reader throughout my teenaged years, I found myself consistently disappointed with the quality of these adaptations in the way they portrayed their source material, often feeling that the cinematic qualities of the adaptation weren't on par with the literary. This frustration prompted me to wonder: *How would I go about writing a YA adaptation?*

With this question in mind, I went on a personal discovery of what makes up my favorite literary genre and how I would adapt it into a film. To understand the contextual and analytical background of my question, I researched the state of the YA literature and movie industries, as well as looked at film theory on adaptations. I then analyzed a case of what I consider to be a good YA adaptation — *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, a 2012 novel by Jesse Andrews and a 2015 movie directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon — to understand what qualities in particular I find important to adaptation. In my final section, I put theory into practice by writing my own adapted screenplay based on *Please Ignore Vera Dietz*, a 2010 novel by A.S. King, going on to discuss the problems I faced, choices I made, and revelations I discovered in the writing process.

PREFACE

When I think about the great loves of my life, I think of books and movies. These two art forms came into my life at very different times, coinciding with (and shaping) very different versions of myself.

My love of reading came early on, almost as soon as I could decipher letters on a page. Even in kindergarten, while the other kids were socializing and playing, I would take lessons with my teacher on Hooked on Phonics books — tucked away in the corner of the classroom, peering over stories of foxes in boxes and rats with cats. As I got older, my appetite for books only grew. Elementary school book fairs excited me to no end, even if I couldn't justify paying for the clean, fresh-smelling paperbacks to my parents when free copies sat to be rented from the library. In middle school, I visited the school library every day without fail, checking out three or four books at a time to be quickly devoured within a few days. I distinctly remember staying up until 2 or 3 a.m. every night during my childhood summers, eyes drooping but still wide as I flipped page after page of my latest library rental.

Words fascinated me. The way they could be constructed *just right* so that you could perfectly see how two characters walked along a bridge at night, *just right* so that you could feel the tight tension in the space between them. I lost myself in a new world every day, and it helped me cope with the confusion and isolation of early adolescence.

Movies are a different story. I knew that I loved books from the minute I started reading one, but I didn't realize I had fallen in love with movies until years after I had done so. I remember watching a lot when I was young, but I assumed that was what everyone did. Which was kind of true. My friends also enjoyed their occasional blockbuster theater outing. But I found myself remembering and thinking about parts of movies with such an obsessive

nature, reading up IMDb trivia facts after every new movie I saw, recognizing the feelings I had with certain scenes that left me in awe of how two actors on a screen could make me so emotional.

I started recognizing the uniqueness of my fascination when I started watching older movies. When I was in eighth grade, my dad showed me *Roman Holiday* (1953), which plunged me headfirst into an Old Hollywood obsession for the next few years. Maybe because so much of Old Hollywood felt like it was about words — and words fascinated me. These black-and-white pictures weren't about the spectacle or the mind-twisting plots so much as the snappy dialogue of screwball comedies and ominous voiceovers of noirs. The words made me really feel something, and I was fascinated with that feeling. Just as I fell into new worlds every night with my books, movies were a whole other universe.

It wasn't until I took a film class in college that I realized how interested I was in the construction of that universe. I knew I liked the deconstruction of books; that's what English classes revealed to me throughout high school. Taking a film class showed me that my favorite films weren't good just because of the aspects I noticed outright, like plot or dialogue — there were myriad other moving parts helping it along in the subtext of the work. To understand a movie, I had to consider what was under the skin, and that fascinated me.

All this fascination couldn't be satisfied with just analysis, I realized. I've always been better at learning by getting my hands wet, and what better way to deconstruct something than step into it yourself? That's why my third great love — maybe the greatest of all — is for writing, or making art myself. Seeing worlds isn't enough. I need to create them, too.

That's the motivation for how this thesis came to be. I wanted to marry my passions for books, movies, and writing in a way that showed my appreciation for the arts while also having a venue to exercise the part of me that just wants to make something out of nothing.

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INTRODUCTION

THE INFLUENCE OF YA FICTION

Young Adult (YA) literature got me through adolescence. There's no definitive how-to guide for moving states and changing schools, figuring out boys, finding your true friends, or getting along with your parents — but YA books were the closest you could get to one. I remember reading Sarah Dessen novels to satisfy my romance craving and *Percy Jackson* for the adventure. When John Green novels started gaining popularity in late middle school, I remember feeling for the first time like an author was treating his audience of teenaged readers with the same respect that an adult fiction author would for theirs. YA helped me grow up, which is why I consumed it voraciously.

And I'm not the only one. The popularity of YA fiction is evident in its notable sales growth in recent years; children's and young adult book sales from the Jan–Sept. 2013 period to the Jan–Sept. 2014 period grew by 22.4%, while adult fiction and non-fiction decreased by 3.3%.¹ Perhaps the biggest indication of YA's gargantuan force was the rise of cult followings of YA sagas such as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, two household names even for those who aren't knowledgeable in the literary sphere. The final book in the *Harry Potter* series sold a staggering 11 million copies worldwide in just the first 24 hours of its release.² These statistics are just a few that show the YA genre is a literary force to be reckoned with.

¹ Laura Stampler, “Adult Book Sales Are Down and Young Adult Soars in 2014,” *TIME*, December 16, 2014.

² Lauren Ross and Hannah Withers, “Young People Are Reading More Than You,” *McSweeney's*, February 8, 2011.

SIXTY AND BELOW: THE DRABNESS OF YA ADAPTATIONS

The genre has only been propelled further by the recent boom of adaptations of popular YA novels — to great profit. The more popular sagas have reached nine figures in lifetime box office gross, with *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013) leading the pack of commercially successful YA adaptations at \$424,668,047.³ Clearly there's an audience for these movies, and the cultural force of these adaptations is undeniable. A *Twilight* parody by YouTube channel “The Hillywood Show” racked up more than 11 million views⁴ by poking fun at the movie's most cringeworthy moments.

But why are these adaptations consistently worse than their novel counterparts?

This may seem like a nitpicky observation to make, but the sentiment is largely true. Looking at the spread of young adult adaptations since 2008, when *Twilight* came out, very rarely do these films score above a 60 on Metascore — meaning most of these productions are utterly average, if not worse.

| Name | Year | IMDb | Metascore | Goodreads | Goodreads /10 | Box Office (Lifetime Gross) |
|---|------|------|-----------|-----------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Twilight | 2008 | 5.2 | 56 | 3.58 | 7.16 | \$192,769,854 |
| Beastly | 2011 | 5.6 | 40 | 3.84 | 7.68 | \$27,865,571 |
| The Perks of Being a Wallflower | 2012 | 8 | 67 | 4.21 | 8.42 | \$17,742,948 |
| The Hunger Games | 2012 | 7.2 | 68 | 4.34 | 8.68 | \$408,010,692 |
| The Mortal Instruments | 2013 | 5.9 | 33 | 4.12 | 8.24 | \$31,165,421 |
| Beautiful Creatures | 2013 | 6.2 | 52 | 3.76 | 7.52 | \$19,452,138 |
| The Book Thief | 2013 | 7.6 | 53 | 4.36 | 8.72 | \$21,488,481 |
| Vampire Academy | 2014 | 5.5 | 31 | 4.13 | 8.26 | \$7,791,979 |
| If I Stay | 2014 | 6.8 | 46 | 3.95 | 7.9 | \$50,474,843 |
| Divergent | 2014 | 6.7 | 48 | 4.23 | 8.46 | \$150,947,895 |
| The Fault In Our Stars | 2014 | 7.8 | 69 | 4.25 | 8.5 | \$124,872,350 |
| Paper Towns | 2015 | 6.3 | 56 | 3.87 | 7.74 | \$32,000,304 |
| Me and Earl and the Dying Girl | 2015 | 7.8 | 74 | 3.57 | 7.14 | \$6,758,416 |
| The 5th Wave | 2016 | 5.2 | 33 | 4.09 | 8.18 | \$34,916,787 |
| Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children | 2016 | 6.7 | 57 | 3.9 | 7.8 | \$87,242,834 |
| Everything, Everything | 2017 | 6.4 | 52 | 4.1 | 8.2 | \$34,121,140 |
| Before I Fall | 2017 | 6.4 | 58 | 3.91 | 7.82 | \$12,241,122 |

Figure A. List of some of the YA adaptations released since 2008, with year, the movie's IMDb score, the movie's Metascore, the book's Goodreads score, the Goodreads score weighted out of 10 rather than 5, and the box office lifetime gross. Data collected from Goodreads, IMDb, and Box Office Mojo.

³ “Young-Adult Book Adaptations,” *Box Office Mojo*, accessed March 25, 2018.

Looking at the table above, it's clear that the movie's IMDb scores are consistently lower than the Goodreads weighted-score, sometimes by 1 to 2 points. This isn't to serve as a statistically significant model — of course there are contingencies to factor in, such as the scoring variations of the demographics on Goodreads vs. IMDb, and a possible natural tendency for movies to be scored less than their book counterpart for any genre — but rather to indicate a general trend to support what everyone already seems to think about most YA adaptations: “The book was better.”

Why is this so? It's not as if this trend exists as heavily for adult fiction adaptations. There's an entire category for Best Adapted Screenplay at the Academy Awards, but YA contenders are never seen in that space. Many cultural and critical cinematic successes came from adult fiction novels — films such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *The Godfather* (1972), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

It's likely that filmmakers just don't treat YA adaptations with the same levity as they do with adult adaptations. Perhaps this is because of the weakness of the source material, as many dismiss YA novels as pure fluff or cheesy adventure, but many are well-written, well-regarded works within the YA sphere. YA is often dismissed as a “secondary category of childlike storytelling — didactic in nature — and unworthy of serious literary evaluation, when, in fact, it is really an overlooked and underappreciated literary genre that has only recently begun to attract the critical attention that it deserves.”⁵

It's also possible that filmmakers see their audience as the one marketed toward in the YA genre — that is, young adults — and don't think this audience is capable of comprehending a more nuanced film. Those involved in the YA sphere vehemently disagree. John Green, whose hit YA novels *Paper Towns* and *The Fault In Our Stars* were turned into movies in

⁴ The Hillywood Show, “‘Twilight’ Parody - By ‘The Hillywood Show,’” YouTube video, 9:02, posted February 12, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MKz0gkcgAo>.

⁵ Cindy Lou Daniels, “Literary Theory and Young Adult Literature: The Open Frontier in Critical Studies,” *The Alan Review*, winter 2006.

2014 and 2015, praised *Mean Girls* (2004) and *Easy A* (2010) as smart movies about teenagers, saying, “Hollywood doesn't treat teenagers as intelligent as they are, and then when Hollywood does make a movie that kind of acknowledges the complexity and intelligence of teenagers, it does really well.”⁶

But YA readers are not simply those between the ages of 12-18. In fact, a 2015 Nielsen survey found that 80% of YA books are actually read by people over 25⁷, which means the target market for YA movies should also correspond to that trend. Especially since the themes of YA resonate strongly with many demographics, as literary agent Meredith Barnes said in 2011⁸:

“The fluid demographic barrier speaks to the emotional turmoil that makes contemporary young adult literature unique. Every decision feels life-changing, and every choice in these books can seem life-or-death. The emotions are no more or less valid than what one might experience at 30, but it's the first time, and thus very powerful.”

Indeed, YA literature packs a powerful punch for all audiences. So what needs to be done to transfer that power onto the big screen?

A LOOK AT ADAPTATION THEORY

To understand what is meant by adaptation, we need to take a look at some film theory. American film theorist Dudley Andrew talks about adaptation in three distinct modes: borrowing, intersecting, and transforming sources.

Borrowing is the most frequent mode, and it relies on taking material from a famous prior text. In this mode, the audience is expected to “enjoy basking in a certain pre-established

⁶ Andy Lewis, “The New Young-Adult Emperor,” *Hollywood Reporter* 420, no. 16 (2014): 94-98.

⁷ Natasha Gilmore, “Nielsen Summit Shows the Data Behind the Children’s Book Boom,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, September 17, 2015.

⁸ David W. Brown, “How Young Adult Fiction Came of Age,” *The Atlantic*, August 1, 2011.

presence and to call up new or especially powerful aspects of a cherished work.”⁹

Adaptations of Shakespeare work especially well here due to the power and established appeal of the original text.

The opposite of borrowing is intersecting. The point of this mode is to present the film as close to the original as possible; the film *is* the novel as seen by cinema, in a way that is “intentionally left unassimilated in adaptation.”¹⁰ French film theorist André Bazin analogizes this mode to a chandelier and a flashlight. The original text is a chandelier, shining from its beautiful and artificially arranged parts. The film is a flashlight; we don’t admire the light of the flashlight itself, but rather the way it illuminates parts of the chandelier that we wouldn’t have appreciated before in its natural lighting.

Transforming is the mode that Andrew finds most “tiresome,” as it’s often lumped into the topic of fidelity to the original. In transformation, the goal is preserving the skeleton of the text by keeping the character relationships and the cultural or sociological background — or keeping the “spirit” of the text, which Andrew comments is the more difficult operation since “finding stylistic equivalents in film for these intangible aspects is the opposite of a mechanical process. The cinéaste presumably must intuit and reproduce the feeling of the original.”¹¹

It’s this “feeling” of the original that is the most interesting facet to me in the study of adaptation. Translating characters and plot is easy enough, but moving a mood? That must be accomplished through ways that aren’t so obvious on the surface, and that’s where I find most YA adaptations lack an understanding.

In trying to categorize the bulk of YA adaptations, I lean toward calling it a botched intersection. It seems the moviemakers are concerned mainly with reproducing the success of the original novels, and in that they attempt to be faithful as possible to its source material,

⁹ Dudley Andrew, “Adaptation,” *Concepts in Film Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984: 422.

¹⁰ Andrew: 422.

but oftentimes the adaptation just doesn't have the filmic consideration it needs. It's like the flashlight is pointed at the ceiling instead of the chandelier, so all we're left with is a crude and ugly yellow light.

What more YA adaptations need to do is incorporate transformation, which comes in varying levels of fidelity to the text. It's not about recopying the success of the book as a book; it's about taking the important and necessary parts and making those shine in a film in a way only a film can — like melting the chandelier into a glass vase.

EXPLANATION OF THESIS: CASE STUDY AND WRITING PROJECT

Having learned all this, I embarked on a personal passion project: I wanted to figure out how I would write my own YA adaptation. To approach this project, I used Andrew's idea of transformation as the general backbone to guide my writing. Keeping this idea of the spirit of the text in mind, I wanted to make sure my artistic choices aligned with the themes, tone, and quality of the original source material. In particular, I wanted to see if engaging in this project would affect the way I thought about adaptations overall. What insights could I gain from trying my hand at it? Would I be kinder to those before me and their disappointing adaptations? Would I only feel more fervently in my beliefs of a needed YA movie revolution?

I also closely studied an example of what I consider to be a good YA adaptation to inform my decisions when it came time to do my own creating. This example is *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, novel by Jesse Andrews and movie directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, and in the next section I'll explain how this adaptation successfully captures the spirit of the text.

¹¹ Andrew: 423-4.

ME AND EARL AND THE DYING GIRL:
A CASE STUDY IN TRANSFORMATIVE ADAPTATION

BACKGROUND OF *ME AND EARL*

Amid the flurry of YA adaptations of the 2010s, only a few broke the mold of the dystopia/supernatural trend set by the eager successors of *Twilight*. One was *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012), which found love from teens who idolized the movie for its melancholic spirit, leading to the proliferation of bedroom walls decorated with posters of “And in that moment, I swear we were infinite.” Another was the hugely commercially successful tearjerker *The Fault In Our Stars* (2014), based on the equally popular novel by beloved YA author John Green, which told a melodramatic love story between two cancer patients.

And then there was *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* (2015).

With little fanfare, *Me and Earl* came onto the scene as a small indie dramedy, based on the little-known eponymous novel by Jesse Andrews, directed by littler-known Alfonso Gomez-Rejon. Following the socially awkward Greg Gaines and his befriending of a classmate who's been diagnosed with leukemia, *Me and Earl* handles the usually melodramatic topics of cancer and friendship with a funny, lighthearted tone and features cinematography that stands out among the typical filmmaking style of YA releases.

The novel's journey to the big screen followed a rather unorthodox path: The movie rights were being sold at the same time as placing the book at a publishing house. Andrews' literary agent, Anna DeRoy, helped place the book at publisher Abrams and also encouraged Andrews to write the screenplay with help from writer-producer Dan Fogelman, whose previous works included rom-com *Crazy Stupid Love* (2011). According to Andrews, he and

Fogelman worked on an outline together at Fogelman's house for a few days, where they'd "have a few beers and then [Fogelman would] go meet with Al Pacino while [Andrews] sat in the living room and scribbled stuff."¹² With Fogelman on board, production company Indian Paintbrush bought the rights and got director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon on board as well. The script ended up on the 2012 Black List, an informal ranking of movie executives' most liked unproduced scripts, and in summer 2014, filming began in Andrews' hometown of Pittsburgh. The finished product boasted high laurels at Sundance in January 2015, winning the grand-jury prize as well as the audience award and scoring a high seven-figure deal with Fox Searchlight.¹³ The novel itself had "enthusiastic, devoted readers in-house [at Abrams] and developed a cult following outside"¹⁴ by the time the movie was released June 12, 2015. By all means, it looked like it was going to go on to become an indie crossover hit, one of those cheeky, well-crafted movies about teenagers that enters into the cultural canon, like *Juno* or *Napoleon Dynamite*.

But it wasn't. *Me and Earl* grossed a measly \$6.7 million at the box office overall, paling in comparison to its similarly themed predecessor *The Fault In Our Stars*, which raked in over \$124 million. How did it flop so badly in theaters? Box office analyst Phil Contrino suggests, "If you look back at summer indie breakout hits, they were all going after adult audiences. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* doesn't seem to have caught on in the way everyone thought it would."¹⁵

It's a shame that *Me and Earl* didn't catch on to mainstream audiences, because it's just what audiences needed to see during this period of drab, lazy adaptations of similarly flavored dystopic sagas. Part of the reason it works so well on the big screen is thanks to the

¹² Shannon Maughan, "'Me and Earl and the Dying Girl' Gets New Life," *Publishers Weekly*, April 21, 2015.

¹³ Pamela McClintock, "'Me and Earl' and the Dying Box Office: Why the Sundance Hit Fizzled," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 22, 2015.

¹⁴ Maughan, 2015.

¹⁵ McClintock, 2015.

refreshingly unique themes and structure of the novel itself, and the way they're transformed cinematically.

THE CHANDELIER OF THE NOVEL

Recalling Andrew's mode of transformation, *Me and Earl* does a great job of keeping the spirit of the text while adding its own cinematic flairs. This is because the film is able to capture the highlights of the “chandelier,” as Bazin would say, that are most essential to its spirit: tone, point of view, and stylistic embellishments. While all three are inherently interrelated — style influences tone, POV is connected to style, tone functions alongside the POV — looking at each on their own gives a better idea of what to look out for in the transformation of literary to cinematic elements.

Tone: The Voice of Greg Gaines

Perhaps the most distinctive, noticeable quality that makes *Me and Earl* feel so refreshing is the narrator's tone — dry, snarky, cynical, self-deprecatingly witty. This comes through primarily through the first-person narration of Greg, who likes to interject with meta-narrative commentary amid the past-tense storytelling.

Oftentimes, this tone is paired with Greg's self-awareness as a narrator, as on the first page of the novel:

When I first started writing this book, I tried to start it with the sentence “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” I genuinely thought that I could start this book that way. I just figured, it’s a classic book-starting sentence.¹⁶

This introductory paragraph emphasizes the novel’s meta-reality (discussed later on in POV/framing) while also introducing us to Greg's signature self-reflexive quips. Some sections are more crudely self-deprecating, such as when Greg criticizes his writing style and

¹⁶ Jesse Andrews, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, New York: Amulet Books, 2012: 1.

then gets exasperated with himself, turning to the reader to say, “If after reading this book you come to my home and brutally murder me, I truly do not blame you.”¹⁷ In another part, Greg says, “I’m not suggesting that some weird wish-granting genie would force her to make out with me in exchange for a month of my life. This entire paragraph is a moron.”¹⁸ These off-hand remarks show Greg's low self-esteem and the way he uses cynical humor to make up for it.

The tone is also influenced by scenes where Greg references a typical YA trope and then purposefully breaks from that convention. For example, in the middle of the novel, right at the peak of Rachel going through chemotherapy, Greg narrates:

*So if this were a normal book about a girl with leukemia, I would probably talk a shitload about all the meaningful things Rachel had to say as she got sicker and sicker, and also probably we would fall in love and have some incredibly fulfilling romantic thing and she would die in my arms. But I don't feel like lying to you. She didn't have meaningful things to say, and we definitely didn't fall in love.*¹⁹

In this section, the narration adds a touch of dramatic investment. Greg's brutal honesty is a cold shock to those hoping for the standard YA storyline, and the sudden switch to a more serious tone is heightened by its stark contrast against Greg's typically humorous and self-deprecating tone.

Point of View: Framing the Narrative

There's a scene in the novel where Greg is explaining to Rachel why he loves the film *Aguirre: Wrath of God* so much, and he refers to the cinematography of the movie: “See how the camera's moving around, sort of jittery, like it's handheld? OK. Do you sort of get how it makes the film feel less like fiction and more like it really happened?”²⁰

¹⁷ Andrews: 170.

¹⁸ Andrews: 118.

¹⁹ Andrews: 196.

²⁰ Andrews: 97.

For *Me and Earl*, the novel's "camera" is the complex narrative style — the way it moves from reflexive first-person to script format dialogue to past tense storytelling. The jittery nature of the shifting POV contributes to it feeling "less like fiction and more like it really happened."

Part of this has to do with the structural formatting. The physical sectioning opens with a prologue titled "A NOTE FROM GREG GAINES, AUTHOR OF THIS BOOK" before moving into the real first chapter. Since the prologue is titled "AUTHOR OF THIS BOOK," the reader must buy into the book's existence as a book. Calling out the nature of the novel should strengthen its position as solely that, but instead makes the novel even more adaptable to other formats. By releasing the reader from the unspoken contract of keeping the story within the binding, the text is able to truly speak to the reader like a diary or a close confidante.

The epilogue bookends the novel through its literal sectioning as "EPILOGUE" and the explanation of the narrator's textual presence. Starting with "So it's June and I just finished writing about all this,"²¹ the epilogue goes on to describe Greg's admission to the University of Pittsburgh and subsequent admission suspension due to poor grades. "So I wrote this book for you, Pitt admissions people," Greg explains, finally providing a context for the audience as to the source of his narration and audience.

Because of the self-referencing nature of the novel, the narration's point of view is crafted in a way that recounts past events with a present-tense narrator. Greg, the first-person narrator, never strays from his role as the writer and constructor of the storyline, oftentimes inserting himself into the very events he's describing in a realtime commentary. In one scene, Greg criticizes himself when he talks back to Earl just "to be annoying. Which was stupid

²¹ Andrews: 291.

because you shouldn't *practice* being annoying"²² In the midst of a past-tense narration, these injections of commentary make the narration feel extremely personal.

Some sections include Greg's interjecting narration for emotional effect. Toward the end of Rachel's sickness, the retrospective commentary begins to get more obvious as Greg's narration gets more emotionally wrought. In one scene, Rachel's curtness with Greg rubs him the wrong way and she attempts to mollify the tension with a suggestion that she'll start to feel better on his next visit. Greg's narration cuts in: "But as it turned out, she didn't."²³ A paragraph break, and then "Jesus Christ I hate writing about this," which ends the chapter. The emotional hardship isn't necessarily spelled out for the reader, but the bluntness of Greg's narration and the usage of paragraph breaks show his difficulty with coping with Rachel's sickness and death.

The framing device of putting Greg as the commentator of his own story provides the audience with a narrative guide and emphasizes that dramatic-comedy tone discussed previously.

The Form of Style: Scriptwriting, Bullet Lists, and More

Finally, the novel uses a wide variety of stylistic embellishments through formatting of font and physical structure. The purpose of these embellishments is similar to the previous two tools: to provide a jolt in the multi-narrative structure that feels fresh and unique, while also reminding the reader of the narrative's dynamic presence.

The most frequent form of stylistic formatting is the script sequences, which emphasize the novel's thematic focus on filmmaking. At the heart of the novel is the narrator's love for films; Greg and his best friend, Earl, cultivated their friendship by creating home movies remaking classical cinema together, and the crux of the climax focuses on Greg making a

²² Andrews: 135.

²³ Andrews: 194.

movie for Rachel. The script sequences reference that love of movies in a formal way, while also helping cultivate the novel's humorous tone.

The very first usage of the script format describes an interaction between a “theater kid” and the protagonist, which gives character insight in a nontraditional format through way of humorous emphasis on details and parenthetical descriptions. The action block describes the theater kid, Justin, as humming “THE THEME FROM *RENT* OR MAYBE *CATS*” and then further characterizes Justin by his parenthetical description of “clearly relieved that it is not a jock or gangbanger.”²⁴ The facetiousness of these descriptions adds to the lighthearted tone of the rest of the novel’s structure.

One of the most stylistically intriguing aspects of the script format is the way elements can interrupt each other. Characters can interrupt other characters, as when Greg’s mom unleashes a stream of chastising in dialogue blocks separated by Greg’s interjections; her dialogue chunks are split mid-sentence and sometimes even split mid-word. Other elements can also interrupt characters, which is what the movie *Aguirre: Wrath of God* does to provide a humorous touch during another Greg-mother argument scene:

MOM

Greg, you’re being a little silly about

GREG

s stuff that you know is really priv

AGUIRRE

*When I wish for the birds to fall from the trees, then shall the birds fall from the trees.*²⁵

Stylistic choices also appear in other formats. Flashbacks of Greg’s romantic failures formatted as “Failed Girl Tactic #1-5” provide background exposition of Greg’s childhood friendship (and humiliation) with Rachel. A chapter entitled “Where Are They Now?” feature

²⁴ Andrews: 12.

²⁵ Andrews: 100.

the “cast” of the previous chapter’s romantic failures, with Rachel’s introduction coming last, and with a punch: “Rachel Kushner got acute myelogenous leukemia our senior year.”²⁶

It isn’t unusual for a YA novel to employ nontraditional storytelling formats. A 2009 study by The ALAN Review found that 37% of YA novels used tense construction that involved switching between past and present tense, and 88% involve “markers that delineate the voice or time period being represented through the use of font changes” and other features.²⁷ The study attributes the growing trend of multiple narrative perspectives in YA novels to teens “used to getting fragmented snippets of information in their daily lives, [so] books are being written to reflect this phenomenon.” More so, it shows that YA readers are hungry and curious for nontraditional storytelling because they want to be stimulated by the shock value of these formats. A switch in font or a break in the fourth wall adds a jolt of energy to an otherwise straightforward narrative.

Certainly Andrews’ *Me and Earl* appeals to this growing desire for complex narratives and analysis in the teen population through its stylistic and narrative choices. To stay in line with the standards of the novel, the movie must also appeal to audiences who enjoy the nontraditional storytelling format. In other words, it must provide those jolts of energy if it is to treat its audience with the same intellectual trust as the novel writer gives to his readers.

And it does. Gomez-Rejon’s *Me and Earl* does something that not many YA movies seem to be comfortable with: Trust its audience to understand and enjoy creative leaps. In the next section, I’ll discuss how the movie adaptation takes the elements that make the YA novel so filmic and twist them into features on the big screen.

²⁶ Andrews: 29.

SCENE STUDIES OF *ME AND EARL*, THE MOVIE

Even though the narrator of the book himself jokes that a movie adaptation of *Me and Earl* would be awful,²⁸ Alfonso Gomez-Rejon's directorial direction makes good use of its source material to create a beautifully shot adaptation. This adaptation isn't trying to piggyback off the novel's every feature; rather, it uses the mode of transformation to retain the spirit of the novel's tone, point of view, and style to create a film that embodies those features cinematically.

With every transformative adaptation, fidelity is a part of the discussion. How true to the novel is the film? In the case of *Me and Earl*, since the screenplay was written by the author of the original novel, fidelity of plot is less of a concern. Andrews was able to retain what he considered to be essential, while also considering the constraints of translating book to film:

*"The space and time constraints of a screenplay are very different. Dan [Fogelman] taught me a lot about economy and I had to learn to cast off what wasn't important. ... Now I'm much less attached to any one outcome, but more attached to the process itself."*²⁹

These decision-making processes are what I tried to infer from closely studying the scenes of the movie to see how Andrews and Gomez-Rejon incorporated the original "chandelier" features. The following scenes show how Gomez-Rejon created an effective transformative adaptation through adhering to these features.

Opening Scene: Tone, Point of View, and Style

The opening scene manages to stay true to the nature of the book without clinging to narrative copying. The first few beats are nearly identical, with the same line used in the book

²⁷ Melanie D. Koss, "Young Adult Novels with Multiple Narrative Perspectives: The Changing Nature of YA Literature," *The ALAN Review* 36, no. 3.

²⁸ From page 293: "Just because I'm un-retired doesn't mean I'll be making a film out of this book. There is no way in hell that is going to happen. When you convert a *good* book to a film, stupid things happen. God only knows what would happen if you tried to convert *this* unstoppable barf-fest into a film. The FBI would probably have to get involved. There's a chance you could consider it an act of terrorism."

narration kickstarting the film narration, even with the same punchline. The book starts with the line “I have no idea how to write this stupid book,” and then makes a joke about using the classic Dickens line of “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times”; the film repeats this same introduction with the opening voiceover of “I have no idea how to tell this story” accompanied by a view of our main character at a computer, which introduces us to our protagonist while setting him up as the narrator of a literal story all at once. Then it pans over to the computer screen, an empty document except for that same Dickens line.

However, the film soon departs from the book’s text in order to establish the narrative’s tone — offbeat, hyperbolic, cynical — without relying completely on the copy. Instead of sticking with the book’s text, the film veers into an entirely different visual medium: Claymation.



Figure B. Claymation sequences of "best of times" and "worst of times."

²⁹ Maughan, 2015.

Riffing off the Dickens line, the Claymation and voiceover show the hypothetical “best of times” to be a character eating Vietnamese food coming nonstop on a conveyor belt, delivered to him by the “hot girl from Pussy Riot” who also plays the harp for him. The “worst of times” is the same character dangling over a crocodile-infested pool of acid with that “gross smell you get when they spill a bunch of milk in the school parking lot.” Hyperbolic and offbeat? Yes and yes.

Then there’s the really fun part: the shot of the harpist right before the title screen.

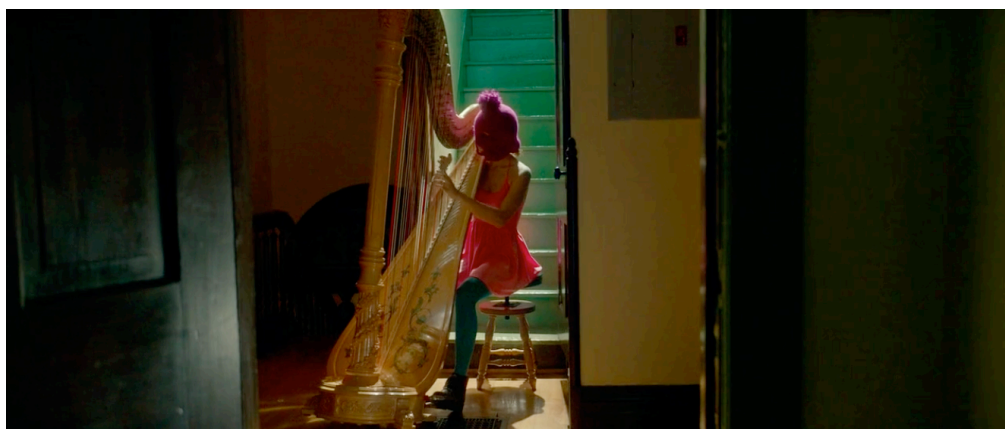


Figure C. The insertion of the "hot girl from Pussy Riot" playing harp (above), just as it appeared in the Claymation scene (below).

This is fun in two ways: as a callback to the Claymation creation, and as a source of diegetic sound, or sound that exists within the universe of the movie. Firstly, the harpist is a direct callback to the previous imagery of the Claymation “hot girl from Pussy Riot” playing harp in the “best of times” scenario, same costume of purple beanie and all. This is an interesting narrative device. Are we meant to believe that this scenario is unfolding in Greg’s

reality? Probably not. But by throwing in this kooky detail for two seconds, the film is revealing that its structure isn't all rooted in reality. The creative liberty of the harpist shot implies that some things seen from Greg's point of view are purely from the workings of his mind — we are told this explicitly by the way the shot shows Greg looking from his computer screen to off-screen, and then we follow his eyesight in a swish pan of the harpist — and perhaps his narrative isn't as grounded in reality as we ought to think. (We find out this is true later, since we're told by Greg's narration that Rachel doesn't die even though she does.)

Barely two minutes in, and the film has already established a clearly detailed tone of quirkiness and cynicism through its camera work (point of view) and the cynical humor of his voiceover (tone), emphasized by the creative liberty of a Claymation sequence and diegetic sound (stylistic choices).

The Emotional Weight of an Unreliable Narrator

One direct change between novel and film is the reliability of the narrator. The novel's Greg Gaines chooses not to give any hints about whether Rachel lives or dies, except for a brief moment in the beginning where he mentions a film so bad it “killed someone, that's how it bad it was. It caused an actual death. You'll see.”³⁰ The film's Greg Gaines directly lies to its audience about her fate through the voiceover commentary and couples these lies with visual elements that increase the dramatic weight of the scenes.

The first time it does so, Rachel has just found out about Greg and Earl's home movies, which is a breakthrough moment in the trio's friendship. As we watch Rachel walk away from Greg's house and into the suburban streets, her small red figure standing out boldly among the otherwise naturalistic colors, the voiceover begins:

³⁰ Andrews: 2.

So we're pretty far into the story now, and you're probably saying to yourself, "Hey. I like this girl Rachel, and I'm gonna be pissed if she dies in the end." So I'm telling you: Don't freak out. She survives. So hopefully that reassures you.

Although actually, why would it. (38:49)

By talking directly to the audience like this with a straightforward, honest tone of voice, the narrator gains our trust, even if we have to wait until the end of the movie to be sure of his credibility. By focusing visually on Rachel's small figure walking away alone, the film forces us to focus on her character and think, "Yeah, actually, I do like Rachel, and I *will* be pissed if she dies."

The second time Greg directly lies is in a scene that plays a visual trick to emphasize the lie. This scene is further along in Rachel's chemotherapy treatment — she's weaker and unhappier. Her hair is gone. She can barely speak. Greg and Rachel are on opposite halves of the frame, watching one of Greg's home movies, when they look at each other and they embrace in a cuddle. The voiceover begins as the camera zooms in on Greg's face:

So again, if this was a touching romantic story, we'd obviously fall in love, and she'd say all the wise beautiful things that can only be learned in life's twilight or whatever, and then she'd die in my arms.

Then the camera moves back out, panning to the left, and we see that Rachel isn't actually cuddling with Greg. She's still on her side of the frame, with the same somber expression.

But again: that's not what happened. She just got quieter, and unhappier. (57:04)

This scene uses the voiceover and the cinematography to challenge the viewer's perception of events. And even though we've been lied to already in this scene, we're meant to believe Greg when his voiceover assures us once more that Rachel doesn't die:

Look. I know you're really bracing for this sweet girl that you probably like a lot to die. Just please bear with me. She doesn't. She gets better. I promise. (59:18)

The camera zooms in to Rachel's face as Greg's voiceover says this, as if challenging us to look into her face — sick, unhappy, and pale — and believe that she'll make a miraculous

recovery in the end. But it's easy to believe him since he's the one guiding the story along, and because we'd rather believe him than prepare ourselves for the death of a highly likable main character.

Which is what happens. At the end of the film, Rachel dies in the hospital shortly after Greg plays her movie for her. As we alternate between shots of a distraught Greg and a stoned-faced Rachel, the voiceover states:

That was the last time I saw Rachel. She went into a coma shortly after that, and died about ten hours later. I know I told you she doesn't die. I'm sorry. Deep down, somehow, I didn't think she would. But she did. (1:29:45)

So why does the movie include these additions of a blatantly untruthful voiceover? It could have left the topic alone, as the book does, but the book also has the power of a consistently present narrator that interjects with retrospective commentary every once in a while. In order to convey the same tone, the movie had to use voiceover in a way that interacted directly with the audience — which it does, by speaking to the audience with a confident assurance. The lies also contribute to a stronger emotional impact when Rachel does die *because* it is unexpected. Just as the voiceover plainly states, we're allowed to like Rachel because we're told she doesn't die. And when she does, we've invested enough emotional energy into liking her that we feel much sadder about it.

Stylistic: Cinephilia and Claymation

The trait that stands out most in this adaptation is the inclusion of stylistic choices not usually seen in a YA adaptation. These include aesthetic choices such as the use of Claymation and thematic emphasis on cinephilia.

The Claymation, first introduced in the opening sequence with Greg's hypotheticals of "best and worst of times," continues to pop up through a recurring gag of a chipmunk and a moose. In this visual analogy, Greg is the chipmunk and resident "hot girl" Madison is the

moose, and in nearly every interaction between the two, this Claymation gag shows up briefly to show the chipmunk (Greg) being stomped on by the moose (Madison).



Figure D. Claymation scene of the moose stomping the chipmunk.

It seems the decision to use the animation style was influenced by director Gomez-Rejon, in an attempt to visually illustrate the lighthearted tone of Greg's narration. In an interview with IndieWire, Andrews says: “Once Alfonso came on board I had to be willing to make changes and really focus on making myself useful. He filled in the animation, like the image of a moose stomping a chipmunk—a stop motion set piece that recurs, it captures the tone of what I wrote.”³¹

Another prominent stylistic feature is the emphasis on the cinephilia in the novel, translated to the screen through audio clues and aesthetic sequences. In the novel, Greg and Earl make their own home movies based on classic cinema. The film shows this through a montage of brief clips of their mini-movies placed next to its shoddily designed DVD cover.

³¹ Anne Thompson, “Jesse Andrews Learned How to Write Screenplays with ‘Me and Earl and the Dying Girl,’” *Indiewire*, June 10, 2015.



Figure E. An example of a Gaines/Jackson mini-movie: *Grumpy Cul-de-Sacs*, based on Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets*. Gomez-Rejon previously worked on Scorsese's *Casino* as a production assistant, so including this particular parody is a light homage his mentor.

The mini-movies were made by a separate production crew, led by directors and animators Edward Bursch and Nathan O. Marsh and created in the span of 25 days.³² Bursch and Marsh created 21 mini-movies in total, not all of them making the cut into the montage or otherwise in the film, but Gomez-Rejon had an even larger list for them to work from³³:

1. "Anatomy of a Burger," based on 1959's "Anatomy of a Murder," directed by Otto Preminger.
2. "Ate 1/2 (Of My Lunch)," based on "8 1/2," directed by Federico Fellini.
3. "A Box O' Lips, Wow," based on Francis Ford Coppola's "Apocalypse Now."
4. "The Battle of All Deer," based on "The Battle of Algiers," by Gillo Pontecorvo.
5. "Breathe Less," based on Jean-Luc Godard's "Breathless."
6. "Burden of Screams," based on Les Blank's "Burden of Dreams."
7. "Can't Tempt," based on Godard's "Contempt."
8. "Crouching Housecat Hidden Housecat," based on Ang Lee's "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon."
9. "Death in Tennis," based on Luchino Visconti's "Death in Venice."
10. "My Dinner With Andre the Giant," based on Louis Malle's "My Dinner With Andre."

³² Angela Watercutter, "How They Made Me and Earl and the Dying Girl's Mini-Movies," *Wired*, June 9, 2015.

³³ Charles Ealy, "A guide to fun movie references in 'Me and Earl and the Dying Girl,'" *Austin360*, June 25, 2015.

11. "Don't Look Now Because a Creepy Ass Dwarf Is About to Kill You!! Damn!!!" based on Nicolas Roeg's "Don't Look Now."
12. "Eyes Wide Butt," based on Stanley Kubrick's "Eyes Wide Shut."
13. "Hairy, Old and Mod," based on Hal Ashby's "Harold and Maude."
14. "La Gelee," based on Chris Marker's "La Jetée."
15. "Gone With My Wind," based on Victor Fleming's "Gone With the Wind."
16. "Grumpy Cul-de-Sacs," based on Scorsese's "Mean Streets."
17. "It's a Punderful Life," based on Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life."
18. "The Janitor of Oz," based on Fleming's "The Wizard of Oz."
19. "The Lady Manishness," based on Alfred Hitchcock's "The Lady Vanishes."
20. "Monorash," based on Akira Kurosawa's "Rashomon."
21. "My Best Actor Is Also a Dangerous Lunatic," based on Werner Herzog's "My Best Fiend."
22. "Nose Ferret 2," based on F.W. Murnau's "Nosferatu."
23. "Pittsburghasqatsi," based on Godfrey Reggio's "Koyaanisqatsi."
24. "Pooping Tom," based on Powell's "Peeping Tom."
25. "Rear Wind," based on Hitchcock's "Rear Window."
26. "Rosemary Baby Carrots," based on Roman Polanski's "Rosemary's Baby."
27. "Senior Citizen Cane," based on Orson Welles' "Citizen Kane."
28. "The Seven Seals," based on Ingmar Bergman's "The Seventh Seal."
29. "A Sockwork Orange," based on Kubrick's "A Clockwork Orange."
30. "Vere'd He Go?" based on Hitchcock's "Vertigo."
31. "2:48 p.m. Cowboy," based on John Schlesinger's "Midnight Cowboy."

Stylistically, these mini-movies are just fun to watch in their little montage, but they're also fun because of how cinephiliac they are. These aren't parodies of well-known blockbusters, but of canonical cinema classics like *The 400 Blows* and *Citizen Kane*. In this way, the director isn't trying to dumb down the content to make it more appealing for a mass audience; the film stays true to the cinephiliac tone and style of its text.

Another example of cinephilia is the scoring. The film's score is meant for a deep cinephiliac, with references to the scores of films such as Francois Truffaut's *Day for Night* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. In one scene, the mysterious theme from Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* plays while Greg's eccentric father rambles about being quarantined in the Amazon, which makes his seriousness all the more funny. According to

Gomez-Rejon, "Secretly it's an homage for the fans, who know the music, but for people who don't know the music it is just the perfect score."³⁴

These insertions are important not just for their cinematic appeal, but also in the process of transformation to keep the spirit — which, in the case of *Me and Earl*, is heavily influenced by the novel's cinephilia. In translating that cinephilia to the screen, the director must make decisions that are essentially filmic to capture the non-filmic. Every choice mentioned in this section contributes to that translation, in keeping with the thematic guides of the novel's spirit, and helps make a better adaptation.

³⁴ Shipra Harbola Gupta, "This Mixtape By The 'Me and Earl and the Dying Girl' Director Is a Cinephile Indulgence," *IndieWire*, July 19, 2015.

PLEASE IGNORE VERA DIETZ:
WRITING MY OWN ADAPTATION

After studying *Me and Earl* and Gomez-Rejon's direction for the adaptation, I came away prepared to embark on my own adaptation adventure. The study of *Me and Earl* gave me the theoretical tools to understand YA adaptation, but engaging with a text in transformation to cinema myself would give me a valuable firsthand experience and hopefully help me understand the nuances of screenplay writing and thinking about adaptation from a creator's perspective.

In choosing a text to adapt, I wanted to choose a YA novel that had similar themes and quirks, but not so alike that I'd be prone to copying the *Me and Earl* style. I decided on *Please Ignore Vera Dietz* by A.S. King, a 2010 Printz Award honor book about a teenage girl dealing with her best friend's death.

The main similarity between the two novels is their primary themes of friendship and death. However, while *Me and Earl* is much more humorous and cynical in its tone, *Vera Dietz* relies on stoic and reflective narration to carry us through the events of the novel. By choosing a novel that was vastly different in tone than *Me and Earl* despite topical similarities, I was able to demonstrate creative control over how I conveyed that tone in the screenplay writing. This was something important I noticed in the screenplay of *Me and Earl*, which very much echoed the dry, witty humor of the novel even in the action blocks of the screenplay.

On top of similar thematic motifs to *Me and Earl*, *Vera Dietz* also contains atypical stylistic choices. Just as *Me and Earl* is full of script sequences and bulleted lists, *Vera Dietz* has atypical narration via formal structures like flow chart diagrams and unique points of

view like short chapters from the unexpected perspectives of the pagoda in the heart of town and the dead best friend. These stylistic choices influence the tone of the novel to be less melodramatic and more quirky, which feels similar to the approach of *Me and Earl* in using stylistic embellishments.

Knowing these features of the novel, I kept in mind the spirit of the text by way of the same three qualities I mentioned for *Me and Earl*: tone, point of view, and stylistic embellishments. I wrote the following screenplay based on the first of five parts that the novel is sectioned into.

BLACK:

"Before I died, I hid my secrets in the Master Oak.

This story is about my best friend, Vera Dietz, who eventually found them."

- Charlie Kahn

(the pickle on Vera's Big Mac)

CUT TO:

INT. CHURCH - THE DAY OF CHARLIE'S FUNERAL. SEPTEMBER 1.

A pastor is speaking at the head of the altar, standing next to a white coffin and a framed picture of CHARLIE KAHN, a teenaged boy of 18 with dark eyes and floppy hair.

The focus is on VERA DIETZ, a sharp-looking teenaged girl of 17 sitting in the third row. Her long dark hair is neatly tucked behind her ears. She betrays no emotion.

PASTOR

... and his vivacious and intense personality. Those who knew Charlie knew him as a free spirit
...

VERA (V.O.)

Charlie would have hated this.
"Those who knew Charlie"? How many of the people here actually knew him?

VERA looks to the right, where MR. AND MRS. KAHN sit in the first row, crying quietly. A spackling of various relatives surround the neighboring seats.

VERA (V.O.)

His parents ... A little, maybe. Recently? Not at all.

Behind the family section, the community corner. Neighbors, teachers, kids from class. People here for the moral catharsis of paying their respects.

VERA (V.O.)

Kids from class ... Definitely not.

In the very back: a group of ragtag teens, looking bored. A BLONDE GIRL with sunken eyes, heavily lined with black eyeliner, is the clear ringleader.

VERA (V.O.)
The Detentionheads ...
(less resolutely)
I don't know. Maybe they did. Maybe
more than me.

VERA shifts her gaze back to the front of the church. Soon her attention drifts from the pastor to the white coffin.

VERA (V.O.)
If Charlie were here, he'd be
smirking at this guy. He'd make a
joke about the wart on his nose.
No, he'd do what he always did -

Now the coffin has a new guest sitting on its shiny white surface - a CHARLIE, dressed in a ratty band tee and Levi's 501's, writing on a napkin: "TELL THAT GUY TO KISS MY WHITE VIVACIOUS ASS. HE NEVER MET ME." When he's done writing, he looks at the note for a second, and then - he eats it. Puts it in his mouth and chews.

The CHARLIE looks at VERA. She looks back. He smiles.

She doesn't smile back. When we look back at the coffin, there's no CHARLIE on it anymore.

EXT. CEMETERY - SAME DAY

The coffin is being lowered into the grave. VERA and VERA'S DAD are standing next to each other.

VERA (V.O.)
I can't believe he's dead. Mainly
because I still see him
everywhere.

Another CHARLIE has appeared - same outfit and all - sitting on his coffin as the winch lowers it down. He's got an amused expression on his face; his legs are swinging over the edge of the coffin playfully.

CHARLIE
Hey, Veer - it's not every day you
get lowered into a hole by a guy
with a wart on his nose, right?

When the coffin hits the ground with a soft THUMP, VERA'S DAD suddenly grabs VERA'S hand. She's surprised, but she accepts it. Grips it back.

CUT TO:

The body has been buried, respects have been given. The crowd is dispersing. VERA and VERA'S DAD walk up next to MR. AND MRS. KAHN.

VERA'S DAD
I'm so sorry.

MRS. KAHN
Thanks, Ken.
(turning to VERA)
Oh, Vera.

MRS. KAHN opens her arms to VERA – the simple gesture is enough to cause VERA to break down to tears, desperately welcoming MRS. KAHN's embrace.

When VERA breaks away from the embrace, VERA'S DAD hands her a tissue from his blazer pocket. She takes it sheepishly.

VERA
Sorry.

MRS. KAHN
It's fine, Vera. You were his best friend.

VERA
(nodding)
Yeah. His best friend.

VERA (V.O.)
A lie.

MR. KAHN
Well, we'll see you both at the reception, okay?

VERA and VERA'S DAD nod to this. MR. KAHN grips MRS. KAHN's arm just a little bit too tight as they walk away, but everyone keeps their eyes down.

As they walk out of the cemetery, VERA catches a glimpse of the DETENTIONHEADS loitering around a tree, smoking cigarettes. The BLONDE GIRL looks up, sees VERA staring – and stares back. The animosity is palpable.

INT. VERA'S DAD'S CAR – SAME DAY

A comfortable silence has fallen between the two. VERA'S DAD occasionally sneaks glances at VERA from the driver's seat. VERA is staring despondently out the passenger window.

VERA'S DAD
Do you need anything? You hungry?

VERA
No, Dad.

VERA'S DAD
We can stop at Burger Shack if you
want.

VERA
I'm fine.

Silence again.

VERA'S DAD
(warily)
Do you know anything about what
happened Sunday night?

A pause.

VERA
Nope.

VERA (V.O.)
Another lie.

VERA'S DAD
Because if you do, you need to say
something.

VERA
Yeah. I would if I did, but I
don't.

She leans her head against the cold window. Closes her eyes.
Allows herself to drift away, just a little.

EXT. VERA'S HOUSE — SAME DAY

The car is pulling into the driveway of VERA'S HOUSE, a
home fitting the paradigm of suburbia. VERA exits the car
and looks over to the house next door — Charlie's. She's
staring at the window on the second floor, peering,
wishing, hoping that he'll appear.

VERA (V.O.)
Is it okay to hate a dead kid? Even
if I loved him once? Even if he
was my best friend? Is it okay to
hate him for being dead?

No Charlie appears. VERA turns away and walks out of frame
toward her house.

BLACKOUT TO TITLE: "PLEASE IGNORE VERA DIETZ"

EXT. PAGODA PIZZA — AFTERNOON

VERA'S CAR, a clean and well-kept Prius with a bumper sticker that says "PRACTICE RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS," pulls up to PAGODA PIZZA, a fluorescent-lighted local pizza delivery shop. The engine shuts off, cutting off the soft pop rock playing through the tinny stereo.

Super: Three and a half months later — A Thursday in December

INT. VERA'S CAR — AFTERNOON

After turning the car off, VERA reaches in the backseat for her red Pagoda Pizza employee shirt, pulls it over her head. In the same swift movement, she reaches under her seat and pulls out a handle of cheap vodka, places it between her legs, twists the cap off, and takes two gulps. Back the cap goes, back the bottle goes, and into her mouth go three pieces of gum.

Ready for work.

INT. PAGODA PIZZA — AFTERNOON

MARIE, a biker lady with crooked yellow teeth (and also Vera's boss), is talking with JILL, an ex-cheerleader-turned-food-service-worker. When VERA walks in, MARIE smiles and hands her her change envelope and Pagoda Phone.

VERA (V.O.)

I like Marie. She's nice to me — and all the other employees, even the stoners who refuse to look at her because her teeth freak them out.

A MONTAGE of Vera's typical pizza delivery night begins as the voiceover plays over it. Fast glimpses of phones ringing, cash registers clinging, car doors shutting and opening, hands knocking on doors. Various kinds of customers opening their door.

VERA (V.O.)

Pizza delivery is an easy and predictable business. 5:15, dinner rush starts. Phone #2 rings while Marie takes an order on phone #1. While Jill's on phone #2, phone #3 rings. Then it's all a blur until seven. I'm a natural. A driving, knocking, smiling, change-making machine.

It's all the same routine. Even
the customers: soccer moms, stoned
20-somethings, the creepy guys at
Fred's Bar.

VERA nearly collides into JAMES, an attractive 20-something
Pagoda employee, as she heads to her car with armfuls of
pizza boxes.

JAMES
Whoa. Steady there.

VERA (V.O.)
James is 23. Which means I should
not have the crush that I do on
him. But he's nice and cute and
listens to the same kind of music
as me. And there's his scent: that
familiar smoker smell. Same as
Charlie.
But again. 23. Off limits.

VERA is driving through suburbs now. Flash after flash of
houses lit up head-to-toe for Christmas.

VERA (V.O.)
I take as many suburbia runs as I
can. Better tips. Also better
safety. And it's familiar — I know
the roads. I know the people who
live here.

EXT. MCDONALD'S — SAME NIGHT

VERA'S CAR pulls into a McDonald's drive-thru. VERA is
parked in the lot, eating a chicken wrap. It's dark out,
the end of her delivery runs.

As she eats, a grape jumps out of her wrap and onto her
lap. She picks it up and puts it in her mouth, but it slips
through her fingers and back onto her lap.

VERA
(giggling)
Cut it out, Charlie.

She finishes the wrap and grabs a napkin from the takeout
bag to wipe her hands and mouth. She puts the rest of the
napkins in her glove compartment — where there appear to be
hundreds of napkins sitting idly.

She takes one out. Grabs a Sharpie from the cupholder.
Writes "I MISS YOU, CHARLIE" and hovers over the last word.

Then she rips off the message and places it on her tongue,
washes it down with a gulp of vodka from the handle under

her seat. Takes a sip of chocolate shake to get rid of the taste.

She starts the car and drives out of the lot.

INT. PAGODA PIZZA – SAME NIGHT

It's just the closing crew now. JAMES and VERA are sitting in a back room folding pizza boxes. The radio is quietly playing the classic rock station.

JILL passes by them, raising an eyebrow as she walks by. Both notice – VERA just keeps her head down, but JAMES scoots closer to her and wraps an arm around her. VERA's breath tightens.

When JILL walks by again, JAMES gives a loud, exaggerated kiss on VERA's cheek and smirks at JILL, who rolls her eyes.

Soon they finish folding boxes.

JAMES
You want cooler or dishes?

VERA
Ugh. I can't face the dishes again tonight.

JAMES
Alright, I'll take one for the team.

JAMES ruffles VERA's hair as he leaves the room. She heads to the front of the store, trying to ignore the act of affection. She's only just started stocking the cooler with soda cans when the front door opens and –

A thousand CHARLIES walk in. They permeate the entirety of the store, surrounding VERA without speaking. Calmly. Purposefully.

She feels like she can't breathe.

VERA
You're not Charlie.

They stare at her. If she looks closely, the CHARLIES are shimmery, slightly translucent.

VERA
Charlie is dead.

JILL pokes her head out from around the corner.

JILL
Did you say something?

VERA
(looking over)
No. Nothing.

When VERA looks back, the CHARLIES are gone.

VERA (V.O.)
I know what they want. The same
thing they wanted the first night
they appeared.

A brief FLASH to months before – VERA in the parking lot of
a strip mall, surrounded by CHARLIES. They're solemnly
walking toward ZIMMERMAN'S PET STORE.

Back to PRESENT. VERA shuts the cooler door.

VERA (V.O.)
But I can't do that yet.

INT. VERA'S HOUSE – SAME NIGHT

VERA walks in through the front door. VERA'S DAD is reading
a book on the living room couch, with the TV on but muted.

VERA'S DAD
(looking up from his
book)
Hey. How was work?

VERA
Fine.

VERA'S DAD
Hungry?

VERA
No. What are you reading?

VERA'S DAD
(flips to the cover)
Oh, I don't know. Just some
bestseller I picked up at Half
Price Books.

VERA
Mm. Well. I'm kinda tired.

VERA'S DAD
Alright. Goodnight.

As she walks upstairs, VERA watches her DAD go back to
reading his book in front of the muted TV.

VERA (V.O.)
Just like Dad, to be apathetic
about two things at once. The TV is

always muted. I asked him once why he doesn't just turn it off. He said, "Something about it makes me feel like I'm not alone." I bet there are a million people who would agree with him. But I'd rather feel something for real than pretend it's not what it is. Didn't some Zen guy say, "If you want to drown, do not torture yourself with shallow water"?

INT. VERA'S ROOM — SAME NIGHT

VERA drops her keys and bag on her desk and flops onto her bed, exhausted.

VERA (V.O.)
It's hard not to feel bad for Dad. Especially since Mom left him six years ago for their podiatrist.

A brief FLASH to a red Corvette zooming off into the horizon. We see the backs of heads: A man and a woman, her dark hair tussling in the wind.

Back to VERA —

VERA (V.O.)
It took him a year after she left to tell me the truth about Mom.

FLASHBACK to VERA AGE 13 and VERA'S DAD, sitting in the same bedroom. He's shifty. She's confused.

VERA'S DAD
Uh. So. I'm sure this will never come up. But. In case it does. I want you to know the truth.

VERA
... Okay.

VERA'S DAD
When your mother was — Well, when you were a baby, your mother took a job at Joe's.

VERA
What's Joe's?

VERA'S DAD
A strip club.

VERA
A strip club?!

He nods.

VERA
(incredulously)
Mom was a stripper.

He nods.

VERA
And people *know* this?

VERA'S DAD
I mean, just people who were
around back then – whoever knew
her.

(noticing VERA'S disgust)
It was only for a few months. She
wanted her freedom from dropping
out of high school and, uh, having
a baby, you know, so young.

VERA
Great. Mom was a stripper because
of me.

VERA'S DAD
(ignoring her)
And I was still drinking back then.
We were young. I think she... wanted
something she never got back.

VERA (V.O.)
Something she didn't get back
until Marty.

A FLASH of Corvette.

VERA
Okay. Well. Thanks for telling me.

VERA'S DAD
Yeah. 'Course. I just wanted to
tell you before you – well, if you
ever heard from someone else. You
don't have to be worried.

VERA
Why would I be worried?

VERA'S DAD
Nothing. You – Never mind.

VERA (V.O.)
I know what he meant now. He was
worried about destiny.

EXT. THE NEIGHBORHOOD — ONE SUMMER AT AGE 12

CHARLIE races into VERA'S HOUSE.

CHARLIE
Vera! I found it!

The two run through the neighborhood to a trail leading into the woods, until they get to a big oak tree.

CHARLIE
The Great Hunter picked this tree.
What do you think?

She's floored.

CHARLIE
Here, look —

He pulls out a diagram on lined notebook paper.

CHARLIE
The bed goes here, and the couch
over here, and ...

VERA
Are you planning on living here?

CHARLIE
Yeah.

VERA
Over winter?

He loses his bounce a little.

CHARLIE
Why are you always trying to make
me feel stupid?

VERA
I wasn't.

He stares at her. Testing. Then he writes something on the bottom of the diagram, tears it off, and eats it.

CHARLIE
Let's start working on the ladder
first.

MONTAGE of them carrying plywood to the tree, cutting pieces, and nailing things together with some sequences of dialogue.

VERA
... and then the fact that she gets
on the plane instead of staying

with Rick! Like who would possibly choose that.

CHARLIE

I don't know. Maybe she doesn't wanna stay with a drunkard.

VERA

He's not a drunkard. And he LOVES her.

CHARLIE

He owns a bar. He's gotta be a little bit of a drunkard.

Another scene:

VERA

I think my dad thinks I'm going to become a stripper.

CHARLIE

(laughing)

What?

VERA

I'm serious! You know he's, like, obsessed with destiny. His father was an alcoholic —

CHARLIE

— and his father before him, and now he's one, yada yada.

VERA

Was one.

CHARLIE

He still goes to AA meetings.

VERA

Only sometimes.

CHARLIE

Okay.

A pause.

CHARLIE

Well, if destiny is contagious by blood relative, then you're due to be a drunk, pregnant, dropout stripper any day now.

VERA

(pushing him playfully)

Shut up.

Another moment. They're sawing pieces of plywood.

VERA

I'm serious, Charlie, it's so fun.
You should come do it with me.

CHARLIE

Dogs aren't really my thing.

VERA

It's not just dogs. Zimmerman's
has, like, exotic fish and
parrots. And your volunteer hours
can count for school credit.

CHARLIE

Mmm.

They hear the halt of a CAR pull up on the road next to the woods.

CHARLIE

Hold on, I've gotta give something
to this guy for my dad.

He runs off and comes back 10 minutes later, looking red and out of breath.

VERA

Are you okay? You didn't have to
run.

CHARLIE

Yeah, I'm just excited about the
treehouse, you know?

VERA isn't convinced. CHARLIE starts scribbling something on a wrinkled napkin, and the more intensely he scribbles the more VERA gets agitated. She reaches over and grabs it from his knee.

CHARLIE

GIVE IT BACK! It's mine!

VERA

I just want to know what—

CHARLIE grabs VERA'S arm and twists it behind her. She cries out and drops the napkin. He lets go.

VERA is stunned.

VERA

Holy shit, Charlie.

CHARLIE

Don't do that again. Some stuff is
private.

VERA
Sure. Yeah. Me too.

CHARLIE
Everyone is allowed to have
secrets.

VERA.
I know.

CHARLIE
(softly)
Just don't do it again.

Looking at his hunched over embarrassment, VERA walks over
and wraps him in her arms.

VERA
It's okay. I forgive you.

CUT TO:

It's sunset now, and they sit in the finished tree house
with legs dangling off the side.

CHARLIE takes out a pack of CIGARETTES and lights one. He
looks over and offers one to VERA.

VERA
What? No.

He shrugs, like "suit yourself."

VERA
You know —

CHARLIE
Veer.

VERA
(ignoring him)
A pack-a-day smoker spends fifteen
hundred dollars a year on
cigarettes. That's literally the
price of a car.

CHARLIE
What's fifteen hundred bucks?
People spend that in a month on
shit they don't even need. Like
lawn ornaments. Who the fuck needs
lawn ornaments.

VERA opens her mouth to protest, but pauses, and instead —

VERA
(to no one in
particular)

Great Hunter, will this be a good year?

The wind whistles through the trees. The sunset is turning the sky into blazing colors of pink and purple.

CHARLIE
I think I heard a yes.

VERA
Yeah. Me too.
(not looking at Charlie)
Do you think we'll get married one day?

CHARLIE
To each other?

VERA
No, dumbass. I mean to other people.

She means to each other.

CHARLIE
I don't want to get married. Too much ...
(struggling to find the words)
... yelling.

VERA understands what he's trying to say. And she wants to say something back, but she also doesn't have the words.

CHARLIE
I think I'm gonna sleep here tonight. Wanna stay?

VERA
We should get sleeping bags.

CHARLIE
Yeah I guess.

VERA
And I have to ask Dad.

CHARLIE
Uh huh.

She looks over at him.

VERA
But yes, I'll stay.

They keep watching the sunset.

INT. PAGODA PIZZA — PRESENT DAY, AFTERNOON

MARIE is talking with the owner, GREG, at the front of the store when VERA walks in, adjusting her Pagoda shirt.

GREG

(like a huge douchebag)
You need to stock the cooler whenever it gets half empty so there's always cold soda. And make sure when they cut the six-packs into fours that they don't cut the cans with the knife. Okay?

VERA walks toward the backroom. DYLAN and TOMMY, two apathetic potheads, are using the pizza boxes as Frisbees.

VERA

Greg's here.

TOMMY

And.

VERA

And you might want to stop fucking around.

DYLAN

Greg's an asshole.

TOMMY

(simultaneously with
DYLAN)
Greg can suck my dick.

They high-five each other.

JAMES

(lightly knocking TOMMY's
head)
Hey. Don't talk to Vera that way,
dude.

TOMMY

Sorry, Vera. I meant Greg can place his delicate BMW-driving mouth around the throbbing head of my member.

VERA is more upset with JAMES than either of the potheads now.

VERA

Whatever.
(to JAMES)
What am I, your little sister? You don't have to defend me. I'm okay on my—

JAMES
Aw, chill out, Veer.

He tucks her under his arm and gives her a light noogie as he says this. She mollifies under his touch. But his lack of an answer bothers her.

MARIE walks in the backroom.

MARIE
Hey, did I miss the memo? Are we having a social hour over here? I would've brought hor d'oeuvres.

Everyone starts to shift back to their positions.

MARIE
Also, if anyone's down to work New Year's Eve, let me know. Double pay.

A general grumbling.

MARIE
Dylan?

DYLAN
Are you joking?

MARIE
You're right, don't know why I asked.

VERA
(suddenly)
I'll do it.

MARIE
Great. One volunteer. The dedication is tearjerking. Now get off your lazy asses and go deliver some pizzas.

VERA (V.O.)
It'll be good to work New Year's Eve. Because what else am I going to do now that Charlie's gone?

INT./EXT. SHELLEY HELLER'S NEW YEAR'S PARTY — AGE 14

SHELLEY'S BASEMENT is filled with slightly buzzed, hormonal teens. SHELLEY herself is making out with her DOOFUS OF A BOYFRIEND on the couch. Everyone else is milling around uncomfortably. Including CHARLIE AND VERA.

CHARLIE
(pointing at SHELLEY and
DOOFUS)
Wanna try that?

VERA
(without reaction)
No.

She knows he's only kidding, but part of her wishes he weren't.

CHARLIE
(to NEARBY GIRL)
How about you?

NEARBY GIRL briefly considers the option.

NEARBY GIRL
Nah, I've got a cold.

Back to watching the spectacle. After a moment, CHARLIE nudges VERA and nods toward the door. She wordlessly leads the way out.

EXT. SUBURBIA SIDEWALK — THAT NIGHT

Time passes as VERA AND CHARLIE walk the mile from Shelley's house back home, talking and laughing and doing cartwheels and, in Charlie's case, smoking.

CHARLIE
Veer?

VERA is twirling in the middle of the street.

VERA
(giggling)
Yes, Charlie?

CHARLIE
I say we never go to a fucking New Year's Eve party again.

VERA
(still twirling)
Oh I'm soooOooOO down.

CHARLIE
It's always a letdown.

VERA
(stifling a laugh)
Not for Sherry's boyfriend.

CHARLIE

Oh yeah. They're probably Doing It
on the recliner right now.
Squeaking it up.

VERA stops spinning and stumbles to the ground. She's
suddenly thinking of her own mother, pregnant at age 17.

VERA

(from the ground)
Ew. That's gross.

CHARLIE

Aren't you curious, though?

She looks up at CHARLIE, who's smoking another cigarette
and looking up at the moon.

VERA

I don't know. My dad says boys are
only after one thing.

CHARLIE

(chuckling)
Right.

VERA

He says I shouldn't even think
about boys until after college.

CHARLIE

Hmm.

VERA doesn't know what else to say, so she gets up from the
ground. CHARLIE reaches out to help her.

CHARLIE

But what do you think?

He's holding her gravel-covered hands.

VERA

I think —

— but he interrupts her by kissing her. She enjoys it.

Then she snaps out of it and pulls herself away.

VERA

What was that?

CHARLIE isn't offended. He keeps walking as if nothing
happened.

CHARLIE

Just figured we could both use the
practice.

INT./EXT. VERA'S CAR — PRESENT DAY, NIGHT

It's the final delivery of the night. The old suburbs, single-story brick buildings smushed together. Christmas lights everywhere.

The house in question has cars lined down the street for it. You can hear the bass of blaring music all down the block.

VERA knocks on the door, and who answers it but the BLONDE GIRL from the funeral. JENNY FLICK. From inside —

BILL
Jenny, who is it?

BILL, semi-illiterate high school quarterback, appears behind her.

VERA
That's thirty four ninety-nine.

BILL takes the pizzas, but JENNY doesn't move. She's amused, watching VERA with mean-spirited interest.

VERA
(sharply)
Thirty four ninety-nine. Please.

JENNY takes out her wallet and lets a couple bills fall to the ground. Shuts the door in her face.

VERA bends down to pick up the bills. As she's getting up, the door opens again. JENNY and BILL, now with a slingshot.

JENNY
And here's your fucking tip.

BILL shoots a penny to VERA's shoulder. It stings. JENNY AND BILL giggle and shut the door again.

VERA goes back to her car, rubbing her shoulder. She slams the door and reaches under her seat for the bottle. Takes a few gulps. Fuck Jenny Flick.

EXT. THE PAGODA — AGE 17, DAY

The PAGODA is a tourist attraction in the heart of town, and also VERA'S favorite spot to fly paper airplanes. CHARLIE walks up to her, fuming.

VERA
Hey. What's up?

CHARLIE
(livid)
I heard you were talking about me.

VERA

What?

CHARLIE

Well? Were you?

VERA

You're my best friend. I don't even know what I would say about you to other people.

CHARLIE

So you haven't been telling the whole school that my dad hits my mom?

VERA

(stunned)

Charlie.

CHARLIE

You're acting dumb but I know you know.

VERA

Of course I fucking know. I've been your best friend and NEIGHBOR for seventeen YEARS. But I would never say a word to anyone. Ever.

CHARLIE

So how does the whole school know?

VERA

Who says they do?

CHARLIE

Jenny.

VERA

Jenny? Jenny Flick? She's a mythomaniac. She told everyone she had leukemia freshman year.

CHARLIE

Stop using big words, you sound like a fucking geek.

VERA

Maybe I am a fucking geek.

CHARLIE

Maybe you're more than just a geek.

That hits hard.

VERA
(holding back tears)
What does THAT mean?

CHARLIE
I don't know. What goes around
comes around, I guess.

The last blow of a dying friendship.

VERA
If that's really what you think of
me, I don't want to talk to you
ever again.

CHARLIE
Okay. Fine by me.

He walks away.

She didn't think he actually would.

PLEASE IGNORE VERA DIETZ:

ANALYSIS OF ADAPTATION

Immediately after finishing the screenplay, I thought two things:

1. *This all makes so much more sense now, and*
2. *Damn, that was fun.*

Per the first observation, the mechanisms of adaptation didn't feel so cold and rational anymore. Looking between novel and empty screenplay document to attempt to put words down that felt right, I had to make decisions to add, cut, and merge scenes in a way that couldn't be decided by formula so much as intuition.

But I also wanted to follow my tenets, so to say, of adhering to the spirit of tone, point of view, and stylistic choices. Throughout the adaptation process, I was constantly double-checking myself to ensure that the scenes felt true to the emotions of the scene. An interesting observation was the way that literary scenes could feel stilted on script, thus forcing me to make choices on how to adapt the pacing or description to make it work cinematically. It was much harder to “stick to script,” so to say, in terms of narrative fidelity to plot or dialogue of the book, instead of just rewriting every scene to match the necessary pacing and exposition of a visual medium.

The following sections will describe the choices and problems I faced while pushing words from book to screenplay. It should be noted that the screenplay is only one aspect of a movie adaptation, and other features such as soundtrack, cinematography, editing, and mise en scène play vital roles in communicating the subtext of the narrative; however, for this project, the screenplay is the main focus of adaptation, which means any creative decisions are purely surrounding exposition via dialogue and textual background.

THE OPENING SEQUENCE

Narratively, the opening sequence — which I consider to be everything before the title screen — is most important because it sets up everything going forward. Since this is the set-up for the rest of the film, I felt it was important to establish the three traits (tone, point of view, and style) right off the bat. In doing so, I had to add new features not present in the novel, as well as merge and edit scenes to better suit the narrative progression best fit for film pacing.

Epigraph

The epigraph mirrors the one found at the beginning of the novel, and I decided to include it to serve two purposes: to briefly introduce the main characters, and to provide a hint of stylistic intrigue.

Contextually, the epigraph functions the same way in the novel as it does here at the beginning of the film, but since film is a primarily audio-visual format, the inclusion of simple white text on a black screen does feel more serious or formal than on the pages of the book. To prevent the epigraph from feeling too serious, I imagine the lines appearing with comedic purposeful timing; the quote from Charlie appears first, followed by the attribution to Charlie Kahn, and after a beat, we see "(the pickle on Vera's Big Mac)" — an intriguing and lighthearted punch to end out the introductory epigraph. The audience is now prepared to learn more about three important figures in the story (Master Oak, Vera Dietz, and Charlie Kahn) and to expect some potentially fantastical elements like the personified pickle.

Character Introductions and Fantastical Elements

With that, the scene opens in on Charlie's funeral. Narratively, this is the same as the opening to the novel, but with a few tweaks for a faster introduction to context and character.

Whereas the novel has plenty of space to explore Vera's inner monologue, the film must establish her feelings and thoughts simply from dialogue and voiceover. A heavy voiceover gets tiring, so I cut together monologue sections that were most revealing toward character-building and relationship-building without feeling redundant.

To do so, I came up with the idea to make Vera's voiceover during the funeral ceremony a commentary on the attendees and Charlie's relationship with each group, which also subtly reveals Vera's opinion of them. "How many of the people here actually knew him?" Vera wonders. His parents — no. Peers — no. A curious group called The Detentionheads — this is where Vera falters slightly, with the admittance that maybe they knew him more than she did. This provides insight on the crowd Charlie ran with before his death, and also hints at his and Vera's weakened friendship pre-death. At this point, we're still not sure what Vera's relationship with Charlie is, but her internal anger at the pastor's fake, cheesy description of Charlie shows that she must have been someone close to him. Close enough to want to defend his true personality.

The next part involves narrative fidelity mixed with creative liberty. Rather than stick to the novel's hypothetical imagining of Charlie writing the note and eating it, I take the fantastical element of Ghost Charlies that appear later on in the novel and insert one in this introductory scene. The scene functions similarly to the novel's — showing Charlie's rebellious personality and his strange habit of eating his napkin notes — but in a way that also incorporates the fantastical element that comes later. When Charlie appears again at the cemetery, it's an emphasis of this stylistic element as a recurring item.

Introducing the Kahns

The scene where the Kahns and Vera interact at the cemetery is important for the establishment of Vera's relationship with them. This is the first time we see Vera show an

emotional response to Charlie's death, and her embrace in Mrs. Kahn's arms show a close relationship with Charlie's mother that indicates a close relationship with Charlie himself. There's also a revealing bit of voiceover when Mrs. Kahn refers to Vera as Charlie's best friend and Vera's voiceover says, "A lie." Building off of the brief voiceover when talking about The Detentionhads, this part is a more obvious way of showing that Vera's friendship with Charlie wasn't as strong as it may have externally appeared.

Another important feature of this exchange is in the action block: "MR. KAHN grips MRS. KAHN's arm just a little bit too tight as they walk away, but everyone keeps their eyes down." Mr. Kahn's abuse of his wife is a plot point that heavily influences Charlie's character in the novel, so I felt it was a crucial point to keep in the adaptation. However, I struggled with finding an appropriate way of telling the audience without being too obvious, since I wanted to parallel the novel's POV in slowly revealing information rather than dumping it all upfront. I ended up circling back around to this opening sequence to insert this brief moment, which is recalled in a future scene between Charlie and Vera that includes verbal exposition to support this background plot point.

Closing Out the Scene

In the two final scenes of the opener, the focus is on Vera and her dad. The "comfortable silence" in the car indicates a solid understanding and relationship with each other, but when Vera's voiceover reveals that she's lying when she tells her dad she doesn't know anything about Charlie's death, there's an added layer of mystery — Why is she lying to her dad? What happened Saturday night?

The final scene before the title credits was created to close out the opening sequence. Since the novel doesn't have a pre-title scene, this had to be something created specifically for the atmosphere of the movie. A paragraph from the first page of the novel stood out to

me, and I felt that it would work really well to bookend this section of the movie: “Is it okay to hate a dead kid? Even if I loved him once? Even if he was my best friend? Is it okay to hate him for being dead?” Inserting this as a voiceover gives a brief moment of insight into what Vera is thinking after spending the entire opener not knowing what her relationship with Charlie really was. The visual aspect of seeing Vera peer into Charlie's bedroom — which also tells us that they were neighbors — provides even more insight on her state of mind.

CONVEYING TIME

One aspect of the novel I needed to figure out how to convey cinematically was the passage of time, which is slightly unorthodox in the novel's set-up. The novel accomplishes this through chapter headings that indicate a setting, time period, or switching of point of view to a new character, which creates the feeling of rapid cutting between days in flashbacks and perspectives.

For example, several short chapters pass in succession to show Vera's long hours working at Pagoda Pizza, where we also learn about her workplace crush, casual drinking habit, and hallucinations of Ghost Charlie. In order to convey the monotony and frequency of her work nights, I wrote in a montage scene showing Vera's routine of pizza deliveries. There's also a heavy reliance on voiceover in this section because it's such an expository scene; we learn about Marie, her boss, and James, the aforementioned crush, through her inner monologue, which pairs well with the fast pace of the montage. If it were just a long voiceover without the dynamic visual movement on screen, her musings could get tiresome very quickly for the viewer.

Another time-specific issue I had to transpose was dealing with flashback chapters. Some were easy enough to insert, a simple CUT TO a scene where young versions of Charlie and

Vera interacted. The distinction between present day and past could be further emphasized in the post-production editing through color grading flashback scenes differently.

Other scenes I specifically created as a flashback for easier storytelling purposes. One such scene was the exposition surrounding Vera's mother. In the novel, Vera's father has a chapter from his point of view that explains the entire situation, but I couldn't figure out a way that would make switching the point of view feel organic and comfortable within the tone of the movie, so I opted for a flashback where he's explaining it to 13-year-old Vera instead.

In writing flashback scenes, I wanted to ensure as much of a flow between present and past scenes as possible, usually through verbally hinted transitions. In one flashback scene, I wanted to include a discussion of destiny because of its thematic importance in the novel, so I wrote it in as a brief conversation topic during the treehouse montage. To foreshadow that discussion, the present-day scene directly before that flashback ended with Vera's voiceover noting: "I know what he meant now. He was worried about destiny." In another, I wanted to include a flashback sequence of New Year's Eve — the first time Vera and Charlie kiss, which is a turning point for Vera's feelings for him. To introduce this flashback, I included Vera picking up the New Year's shift at Pagoda Pizza, and then Vera's voiceover saying, "It'll be good to work New Year's Eve. Because what else am I going to do now that Charlie's gone?" These mini-introductory voiceovers help make the flashbacks not feel so stilted, so that past and present feel more like seamless memories in Vera's mind than artificial jumps between periods.

LEFT ON THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR

In the process of transforming scenes from novel to film, the hardest part was deciding what to leave out. It's difficult to bridge the gap between wanting to adhere to the narrative

fidelity of the novel, while also being cognizant of the product's medium as a film. That is to say, there is only so much that can be transformed from medium to medium, and one has to play off the qualities and strengths of the medium they're transforming to. For film, that's this combination of audio and visual components that allows ample space for subtext — which is why some scenes from the novel felt redundant or difficult to transpose.

Point of View Chapters

One such decision involved the novel's point of view switching to chapters from the perspective of the pagoda, or Charlie, or Vera's dad. These chapters function for different reasons: the pagoda adds quirkiness, Charlie adds relationship insight from a character we would never normally be able to hear from, and Vera's dad provides a few exposition chapters. The problem was figuring out how to incorporate point of view switches in a medium that typically only has room for one narrator. Even if a movie has multiple narrators, it's usually only effective if those narrators are equally important to propelling the plot forward. In the case of *Vera Dietz*, these multi-narrator switches are mostly just quirks.

With that in mind, I decided not to incorporate the point of view switches, and instead tried to move the necessary elements of those chapters elsewhere. For the pagoda's quirkiness, that can be added through visual elements in the editing and cinematography. For Charlie's reflections, this was a tougher element to add without being stilted and obvious. Plus, Charlie's feelings toward Vera can be communicated visually in future scenes — in long glances when she's not looking, or other little moments that Vera doesn't see but the viewer does. The expository chapters from Vera's dad were briefly touched upon above in the flashback section, which functions as a more visually appealing method of telling that story than straight narration.

Redundant Scenes

Another cutting room decision involved scenes that didn't further narrative or character progression. Cutting these scenes came around in revising the first draft and noticing how certain scenes didn't flow as easily with the rest of the narrative arc, or in realizing how two or three scenes could be combined together for the same effect.

One scene had to do with the pedophile who approaches Vera and Charlie when they're young (Appendix A), and who Charlie eventually starts selling his underwear to and hanging around with. In the round of revision edits, I decided to scrap the scene and instead insert it in hints in the flashbacks, such as when Charlie and Vera are building the tree house and he leaves to "give something to to this guy for my dad." This way, the reveal (which occurs in the second act) is more unexpected when we do find out he's being taken advantage of.

CONCLUSION

I started this project with a singular frustration propelling me forward: *Why are YA adaptations so bad?* I thought maybe I'd find the golden key to fix YA, to make sure my favorite novels weren't butchered on the big screen like I'd seen so many times in the past.

Somewhere along the way this turned into a creative project exploring how I wanted to make my own adaptations from what I've learned through study and observation. Writing this adaptation taught me many new things about the creative process — especially since I'd never attempted screenwriting before, which was an entirely different creative experience than prose writing — but also concerning the theory of adaptation. I thought maybe I would understand the theory behind Andrew's adaptation modes better by practicing it and honing down the steps, but instead I discovered how little the novel and film have to do with each other at all.

The key is that adaptation isn't about morphing something from one medium into another, like some kind of artistic bratwurst machine. Rather, I found that the act of adaptation starts off with the original material and then becomes something else entirely. To follow Bazin's analogy, the chandelier isn't being shined on by the flashlight. In fact, it's not a chandelier at all — it's been melted and reformed into a beautiful glass vase. Molecularly, it's the same piece, that same "spirit," but it's no use trying to compare it to the original item. And why should we? Each piece shines on their own for different reasons.

Yet it seems that the YA industry doesn't value this artistic process. From a commercial standpoint, it's an unnecessary conversation. Why think so hard when you can just hire Shailene Woodley (who starred in three YA adaptations from 2013-2014: *Divergent*, *The Fault In Our Stars*, and *The Spectacular Now*)? After all, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*

only made \$6.7 million at the box office while *Divergent* cashed in on over \$150 million. So why should we care?

I think of a quote from one of my favorite speeches: Charlie Kaufman, award-winning writer of works such as *Being John Malkovich* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, at the BAFTA Screenwriters' Lecture in 2011. In it, he says:

"The way movies work now, and I'm talking about mainstream industry, the only goal is to get you to buy a product. The only goal. The only goal. The only goal. The only goal. And this intention creates the movies that we sit through, and the movies that we sit through create us."

If we become what we watch, is that what we want to be? Pre-packaged, market-ready versions of something better? I believe in a greater version of the art we consume, because at the core of art should be vulnerability and honesty. That honesty can be a message, or a vision, or just a passion for the act of art itself — but in all facets, it should be honest.

APPENDIX A:
DELETED SCENE

EXT. SUBURB — DAY

As they approach the entrance to the TRAIL, a car slowly rolls up next to them.

STRANGER
Hey. What are you two doing?

CHARLIE
None of your business.

STRANGER
Wanna make ten dollars?

CHARLIE
(moving in front of
Vera)
For what?

STRANGER
I take pictures. For — the
newspaper.

CHARLIE
And?

STRANGER
(looking past Charlie)
Your friend's real pretty.

CHARLIE
Fuck off. You fucking pervert.

STRANGER
Oh, come on, I wasn't —

CHARLIE
Run, Vera!

VERA takes off into the trail, following it all the way to the great oak with the tree house. A few moments later, CHARLIE appears behind her.

CHARLIE

Holy shit. That guy was *actually* a
pervert. I thought those only
existed in, like, books. And
creepy neighborhoods.

VERA

Maybe this is a creepy
neighborhood.

CHARLIE

Yeah. Wow. Shit.

(pause)

He offered me a twenty after you
left.

VERA

Ew! We should tell our parents.
Did you get his license plate
number?

CHARLIE

No. Don't worry about it. Let's
climb Master Oak.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andrew, Dudley. "Adaptation." *Concepts in Film Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.

This essay by film scholar Dudley Andrew explores the meaning behind adaptation theory and what it means to adapt a text into the moving pictures of film. His theory involves the ideas of borrowing, intersection, and fidelity of transformation. He also discusses the importance of narrative codes, or the idea that adaptation involves connotation and implication, and to understand film adaptation is to study the narrative coding involved in the process. I will be using this text to frame my arguments when it comes to the analytical sections of my thesis and how I compare novel and movie.

Andrews, Jesse. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*. New York: Amulet Books, 2012.

This book will be the first and primary YA novel I study in my thesis. I will conduct deep reading and comparisons between scenes in the novel with scenes in the movie adaptation.

Brown, David W. "How Young Adult Fiction Came of Age." *The Atlantic*. August 1, 2011. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/08/how-young-adult-fiction-came-of-age/242671/>

This article from *The Atlantic* discusses the "explosive growth" of the YA fiction industry, which exceeded \$3 billion in sales in 2009. Brown's cites literary agent Meredith Barnes in talking about how YA increased so rapidly and why so many adults read YA.

Cheney, Alexandra, and Dave McNary. "Is Lionsgate's Latest YA Pic 'Divergent' Enough?." *Variety* 323, no. 4 (2014): 19-20.

This article from leading entertainment industry magazine *Variety* looks at the success of recent YA movie blockbusters, with a specific focus on dystopian trilogy *Divergent* by Veronica Roth. The article offers statistics on gross profits on blockbusters such as *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*. This will serve as a foundation for the introductory parts of my thesis, which talk about the context of the YA book-to-movie industry and the process of acquiring movie rights for these titles.

Daniels, Cindy Lou. "Literary Theory and Young Adult Literature: The Open Frontier in Critical Studies." *The ALAN Review*, Winter 2006.

This essay in the *The ALAN Review*, a peer-reviewed journal on literature for adolescents, discusses a key question when it comes to YA literature: Why are scholars so wary to take the field seriously? The arguments and sources cited in this essay provide insight into the YA literary world as a scholarly entity, discussing how critical theory is needed to fully understand YA literature.

Ealy, Charles. "A guide to fun movie references in 'Me and Earl and the Dying Girl.'" *Austin360*. June 25, 2015. <http://movies.blog.austin360.com/2015/06/25/a-guide-to-fun-movie-references-in-me-and-earl-and-the-dying-girl/>.

This article from lifestyle magazine *Austin360* lists intertextual film references from the movie *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, providing a long list of movie parodies for the Bursch/Marsh team to use for the creation of the main characters' mini-movies. This guide is useful for me to look into references I might have missed, and to provide a jumping-off point for further research of my own.

Foundas, Scott. "Earning a Place at the Table." *Variety* 328, no. 3 (2015): 40-43.

This article from *Variety*, one of the leading U.S. magazines on entertainment news and film reviews, provides a look at the filmmaking process and background of director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon — which includes how legendary filmmaker Martin Scorsese influenced him after working as production assistant on *Casino* (1995). The text also describes how specific scenes were thought of and created, such as the final movie reel scene.

Gilmore, Natasha. "Nielsen Summit Shows the Data Behind the Children's Book Boom." *Publisher's Weekly*. September 17, 2015.

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/68083-nielsen-summit-shows-the-data-behind-the-children-s-book-boom.html>

This article is an overview of the findings covered at the Nielsen Children's Book Summit in fall 2015, which discusses the state of the industry, highest value consumers, and other data. This information supports my arguments in the first part of the thesis, where I discuss the state of the YA industry and how, contrary to popular belief, many adults read YA literature.

Gupta, Shipra Harbola. "This Mixtape By The 'Me and Earl and the Dying Girl' Director Is a Cinephile Indulgence." *IndieWire*. July 19, 2015.

<http://www.indiewire.com/2015/07/this-mixtape-by-the-me-and-earl-and-the-dying-girl-director-is-a-cinephile-indulgence-60367/>

This article breaks down the cinematic references in *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* that appear through the scoring, including tracks from classical films by auteurs like Francois Truffaut, Francis Ford Coppola, and Alfred Hitchcock. It also includes quotes from director

Alfonso Gomez-Rejon on how he chose certain songs for the soundtrack to be placed at certain scenes.

King, A.S. *Please Ignore Vera Dietz*. New York: Ember, 2012.

This will be the second YA novel I study. With this novel, I'll look at the thematic elements that run through the text and compare characteristics of King's with Andrews' book to lay the groundwork of the second part of my thesis: a personal foray into implementing the adaptation techniques I analyze from the first part by writing some scenes into screenplay.

Lewis, Andy. "The New Young-Adult Emperor." *Hollywood Reporter* 420, no. 16 (2014): 94-98.

This article from *Hollywood Reporter*, an entertainment news magazine, offers a small look at how John Green, a YA author whose books have become NYT bestsellers, and his work signify a crossover from YA publishing into Hollywood. It also discusses the trends of Hollywood and the treatment of YA-centered movies, and how the entertainment industry "doesn't treat teenagers as intelligent as they are."

Maughan, Shannon. "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl' Gets New Life." *Publishers Weekly*. Apr. 21, 2015. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-book-news/article/66349-me-and-earl-and-the-dying-girl-gets-new-life.html>.

This article from *Publishers Weekly*, a magazine for book-related news, talks about the journey from book to distributed movie, providing behind-the-scenes insight on the process of how book rights are optioned into movie rights. Andrews talks about the connection between writing a book and writing a screenplay (he wrote the screenplay for his own book).

The article also mentions the downfall of riding on the coattails of a much bigger YA phenomenon, *The Fault In Our Stars*.

McClintock, Pamela. "'Me and Earl' and the Dying Box Office: Why the Sundance Hit Fizzled." *The Hollywood Reporter*. July 22, 2015.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/me-earl-dying-box-office-810219>

This article talks about why *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* wasn't a hit at the box office despite winning awards at Sundance. The author names reasons such as a crowded box office line-up that summer, which included *Jurassic World*, and the turn-off of the film's title, since "the word 'dying' in the title made it a tough sell."

***Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*. Directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon. 2015. Fox Searchlight Pictures. Film.**

This movie adaptation of Jesse Andrews' YA book will be studied in comparison with the novel in order to gain understanding of the translation of a narrative from text to screen.

Ross, Lauren and Hannah Withers. "Young People Are Reading More Than You."

***McSweeney's*. February 8, 2011. <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/young-people-are-reading-more-than-you>**

This article discusses the market for young adult literature and how it's boosted sales significantly in the past decade, naming popular titles such as *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* as the most widely read and bought sagas of the 2000s.

Silberg, Jon. "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl: Conveying the Complexity of the Adolescent Experience." *Digital Video* 23, no. 7 (2015): 12-14.

This article from online magazine *Digital Video* looks at the cinematography of *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, getting direct quotes from the director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon and cinematographer Chung-hoon Chung. It contains information on the type of camera and lens used to shoot the film and the directorial decision to use wide-angle lens in order to make the protagonist look and feel smaller in the scenes in the high school. There are also explanations of the color grading from the finishing colorist, Tim Stipan.

Stampler, Laura. "Adult Books Sales Are Down and Young Adult Soars in 2014."

***TIME*. December 16, 2014. <http://time.com/3636601/young-adult-book-sales-2014/>**

This *TIME* article discusses the rise of YA book sales in comparison to general book industry trends in 2014. It also discusses the prevalence of adults reading YA, contrary to common belief that YA's audience is just for teens.

The Hillywood Show. "'Twilight' Parody - By 'The Hillywood Show.'" YouTube video, 9:02. Posted February 12, 2009.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MKz0gkcgAo>

This YouTube video is a parody of the first *Twilight* movie, gaining more than 11 million views. This serves as an example of the cultural popularity of the *Twilight* series and its legacy on YA.

Thompson, Anne. "Jesse Andrews Learned How to Write Screenplays with 'Me and Earl and the Dying Girl.'" *IndieWire*, 2015.

This *IndieWire* article is a Q&A with author Jesse Andrews that covers the process of how he adapted his own novel into the screenplay for the film. Andrews talks specifically about a

certain scene (the moose-stomping claymation) that reoccurs, and how that was created and fit into the tone of the movie.

Valby, Karen. "The Twilight Effect." *Entertainment Weekly* no. 1234 (2012): 44-47.

This article from entertainment news magazine *Entertainment Weekly* examines the lasting influence and implications of YA blockbuster novel and movie series *Twilight* and what it's meant for YA movies and adaptations since then. It also discusses the influence of YA book bloggers, and their monumental impact on the future of YA.

Watercutter, Angela. "How They Made Me and Earl and the Dying Girl's Mini-Movies." *Wired*. June 9, 2015. <https://www.wired.com/2015/06/me-and-earl-mini-movies/>.

This article from *Wired*, a leading science, tech and culture magazine, details the way the mini-movies within the film *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* were made, providing information on the directors and animators of the movies as well as the background for the decision-making process on which movies were to be parodied. This information will be useful for the analysis of the mini-movies as a crucial part of the film's quirky and offbeat tone.

"Young-Adult Book Adaptations." *Box Office Mojo*. Accessed March 25, 2018.

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=yaadaptations.htm>

These statistics from Box Office Mojo include numbers on box office lifetime gross for major YA releases. I used these numbers to evaluate the highest grossing movies in this category to show how profitable recent YA book-to-movie adaptations have been.

Michelle Zhang is a senior at the University of Texas at Austin in the Plan II Honors and Business Honors programs. While at UT, she served as the managing editor of The Daily Texan and on the executive board of Texas Spirits. She is a firm believer in the magic of movies, books, and art.