



One of the complaints that seems to be universal among Edgar Rice Burroughs fans is that the films just don't hold up to the books. While many fans seem to be ok with the recent John Carter movie, I could sense this question, apprehension, in everyone's mind leading up to their first viewing.

Tarzan is a bit more problematic, his status as one of the best known fictional characters certainly puts him in our collective imagination. I'm sure if you are reading this, he was one of your gateway characters into the worlds of wonder and imagination which gives him a special spot in your thoughts.

Translating books into movies is always problematic. Rarely, if ever, are movies "better" than the book. I'm not quite sure how one quantifies the merits of one over the other. I suspect it is along the lines of better engagement and more enjoyment. The basic problem is that you can do things in books that you really can't do in movies. Try filming this:

"The Jungle Lord moved through the trees"

Right from the get go you are in trouble. Once you put the Jungle Lord on screen, you are

fighting with the sort of plastic image of your imagination against the actor chosen to be photographed. Nothing against Elmo Lincoln, but his beefy portrayal is not exactly what I have in mind when I conjure up Tarzan. I'm more in the Herman Brix camp when it comes to picturing him, but even he doesn't really fit my bill.

These issues are relatively minor compared with the "moving" through trees part. Human beings just don't have the skill sets to look like they move through trees in a natural way, or like they have done it all their lives. I've never seen a reasonable approximation on film. The flying trapeze artists and especially the Disney "skateboard" version just don't work for me. As readers we all know about Tarzan's feelings towards vines, not to mention the logic of them being laid out along his route. Parkour shows a great deal of promise in this regard. With luck they will give it a shot in the next movie. Hopefully there will be a next movie.

Books allow you to be very vague about details allowing the reader to participate by filling them in. Movies on the other hand confront you with fleshed out ideas that confront your pre-conceived notions and fill in blanks that you

really hadn't bothered to. It is this challenge to our ideas that is the core of the problem in my opinion.

Another part of this rubric is that we tend to think that the person sitting next to us in the theatre or reading a book is interpreting it the exact same way we are. Nothing could be further from the truth. We all take unique paths to that theatre seat or book which shape the experience and make it unique to us. For example, an author can use the word "car" and convey the idea without coloring it too vividly. The motion picture maker does not have that luxury. If they talk about a car, it is a specific car, and that has different meanings to each of us. A '57 Chevy may be as vague to some folks as the word car, it may conjure up a first automobile, or in my case a magical afternoon. This is the challenge in making a movie, sticking your neck out and putting your specific vision in front of an audience.

This is something we rarely do when sharing a book. When we do, we find that our visions are very different. If you follow Internet lists, one of the things that points this out to us are the discussions of which actor would work as which character. Folks are very opinionated on this subject, quite divided and this is just the tip of the iceberg.

So what is the key to a good film adaptation? First of all one must understand the difference between a book and a movie and what each is good at. One must take a book and find its core, its essence if you will. Then take that and find a way to make it work cinematically. This route may not be the most obvious course, consider "Apocalypse Now" and Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" or Shakespeare's "Tempest" and "Forbidden Planet".

I confess that the Johnny Weissmuller movies led me to the books and that when I read the books I went "holy bag o~ doughnuts" this is way more interesting. Yet I loved those movies. What to do? Van Dyke and Hume distilled Burroughs down to something they found workable. Considering when they made it, I think they did a

remarkable job. Yet it is so distant from my image of Tarzan it set me on a life long quest to find a movie that does him justice. I don't think any of the Tarzan movies really come close. I got excited at the beginning of "Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes" but as the movie progressed it moved further and further off target.

Looking outside the box, I think the closest I've ever come to my vision was in a Paul Newman movie based on an Elmore Leonard novel and directed by Martin Ritt. Newman plays John Russell, raised by a tribe not of Mangani but Apache, which sets him apart and ahead of the "civilized" men he must deal with. Don't get me wrong "Hombre" is not a Tarzan movie, but the ability of the character to navigate his environment, combined with his skills honed by survival in a hostile world and his nature as a man, drew someone very similar to my image of the Jungle Lord.

Going even further afield Oliver Dahan's "Crimson Rivers II: Angels of the Apocalypse", which has absolutely nothing to do with Tarzan or Burroughs, really made me sit up and take notice. What it did have was my first encounter with Parkour, which is an intensely physical movement through space, over and around obstacles. The ability of the Traceurs is breath taking in their ability to travel in seemingly impossible ways. While all the examples I have seen take place in urban environments, I couldn't stop thinking about a properly laid out arboreal set with a talented Traceur speeding through it. Finally an image of Tarzan moving through the trees like I have long imagined it.

I still take great pleasure in the Lincoln, Windrow, Pollar, Crabbe, Miller, Scott, Ely, Henry, Kyriakou, Weismuller depictions and all the others that have taken Burroughs to the screen and savor each little piece they bring to the puzzle. I also look for little pieces in any movie I watch to add to that Tarzan movie that someday will be made and is currently playing in my head.

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