

If Beale Street Could Talk: Adaptation Gone Right

Adaptation of a novel is always a tricky slope to go down in film, as there are always two things that instantly present themselves as obstacles: there is a world in which the essence of the story lives (and it is not, yet, where the adaptation lives) and there is a limit to which films can showcase all the content from the original novel.

Barry Jenkins deeply understands this, as it is not his first rodeo in the world of adapting other works of literature into screenplays. *Moonlight* (2016) was his last, and quite successful, attempt at this world of translation; though, we know, adapting a play into a screenplay is a lot easier of a transition than the world of complete prose illuminated in James Baldwin's 1974 novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

However, *Moonlight* was an attempt at much larger of a task than his adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, as, to me, it seems like the film adaptation of Baldwin's beloved story served more as an ode or memorial for James Baldwin himself. It follows the story pretty well, only leaving out certain aspects to make up for timing issues, as most novel adaptations are well too familiar to this process. What I think might be the most telling impressions as to what real angle Jenkins was attempting to use through this film is in not what he deleted but in what he added.

One of the major changes happens at the very beginning of the film. We are introduced into the world through the words of James Baldwin himself, though these words are not from the book, but from a quote Baldwin makes about the book. It establishes a direction that the audience is going in, and more importantly, it establishes a place within each audience member's head in terms of how to dissect what is presented. This seems like a very smart choice due to the fact that much of Baldwin's prose and analysis in his books don't directly come from plot points or dialogue. So, naturally, much of the artistic connection between Baldwin and the plot

or characters comes from his writing, so attempting to jump from this into a film provided Jenkins with a very large task. However, this early addition and initial set-off of the film also indicated that this film would be a lot less about trying to replicate the magic of James Baldwin, but more about gathering or remembering some of his points.

This is paired very distinctly with the other addition to the book that comes at the very end through montage and hope. The end of the book comes with the suicide of Fonny's father, Frank, after Fonny's trial was postponed. However, in the film, we get an additional look into the lives of Fonny and Tish's life five years later, emphasizing the need for change due to the reality that the child was born and is still there. After the child is born, we get a montage put together showcasing a vague history, through pictures, of black men being oppressed through mass incarceration for things they didn't do. Through this, it seems like Jenkins wanted to revitalize Baldwin's vague ending by attaching his own answer to it. The untethered thread throughout the film and emphasis of Jenkins that wasn't the only emphasis in the novel is the love that Fonny and Tish have for each other and how that translates, or moreso how it fails to translate, into the reality of our world.

One of the scenes that does this best is the scene where Tish gives birth, both referencing the importance of water in the book through the rain in the preceding scene as well as through the camera moving inside the bathtub water and up with the baby as she is put into Tish's arms. This comes directly before we see a flashback to the joy in which Tish and Fonny felt when they were on the street when they got word of a new apartment together, centering both the montage and the live birth as consistent in their lack of sound, as we can hear only the words of Fonny in her flashback. With the live birth, we can only hear the drops of water and the breathless squeals of Tish as she attempts to make clear her affection for the child. These scenes, with their emphasis on

noise, or the lack of it, signify this attempt to align these powerful scenes to as close to a reaction that one could get only through Baldwin's prose.

With this, however, we also get a glimpse into the second, and major, point that I think Jenkins successfully pushes through: the focus of these important scenes not as unrelated to the ending of the novel. Some might want to say that Jenkins, like mentioned earlier, merely adding his own ending to the story, but in reality, through pairing the images and sounds of these scenes together as the transition into his answer, he puts his answer in conversation with the true essence of Baldwin's novel; a celebration of love. So, by adding this final scene in which we get comfortable and look that child in the eye, it becomes clear that the importance of Baldwin's story was not that his ending left on a sour note but that it was not an ending.