‘The Discovery of Heaven’: a translation into film

‘A movie based on a literary source is often seen as a secondary work and, consequently, of secondary value.’¹ The phrase which is stated here is absolutely true. Often, literature occupies have a more privileged position in the cultural hierarchy than movies. Hence, if you take a closer look at all the movies that have been made, the conclusion can be drawn that almost all of them indeed are based on a book. A surprise? Not really. For a good film, you need a good tale and that’s something that is not so easy to just make. Filmmakers can’t do it, as it’s not their profession. Writing an original tale costs at least one year, not even to think about the fact that it afterwards generally must be rewritten once more. So an investment in a scenario writer can be quite a large risk, as you don’t know whether it will end up as a good story to make a film out of. The preference of using a book as a base for the scenario is, then, something a lot of filmmakers have. A book is already an end product, which bears less financial risks for the producer than an original scenario: the reception has already been confessed from the reviews, the popularity is known by the sales figures and so on. This together, gives potential financers of the movie something to hold on to and more hope for investing in a successful movie.

Yet, this all said, a good story isn’t always an easy gateway to a good film. There are a lot of things which must be thought about, adjusted or even changed. A good example of this is the translation (into film) of the Dutch book ‘De ontdekking van de hemel’/‘The discovery of heaven’², which I will discuss in this paper.

How can you translate a 917 paged ‘all in one novel’ into a movie that will keep the essence of the story, without making it a dreadful 6 hours lasting film? That’s the first question that came to my mind when I heard they were going to make a movie of this absolutely fascinating but complicated story. ‘The discovery of heaven’ is, namely, not just a regular story, but it’s more like an architectural project in which philosophy, mathematics, physics, theory of numbers, cosmology and politics are joined with the general history of mankind. The book consists of four parts (‘The Beginning of the Beginning’, ‘The End of the Beginning’, ‘The Beginning of the End’, and ‘The End of the End’). In between these four parts, an angel-like being discusses "The Plan" with his superior (supposedly an archangel), which would in short be the following:

God is disappointed with the human race and therefore, wants his stone tablets back. An angel is given the assignment and, with Gabriëls help, tries to manipulate several humans on earth to get his job done. He as a divine being, however, cannot himself travel to Earth, and therefore, resorts on several occasions in the book to influence events, being in effect a deliberate personification of deus ex machina. He affects the personal lives of three people (two men: Max and Onno, one woman: Ada), so that a child – Quinten - will be conceived. This child would then have an innate desire to seek out and return the Tablets.

Of course this is just a very brief summary. As I said, the real story is far more complex than the one that has been stated above. Yet, only this small summary of the book, would almost completely cover the main point of the film that has been made out of it. It might sound strange – as I said, the book is very complex and has a lot of layers -, but at the same time, I think it’s something that can be very easily explained. ‘De ontdekking van hemel’ is a Dutch book, with a story set in the Dutch life of the seventies and eighties. Very interesting for
Dutch people who know something about that time (there are parts which really discuss the political environment around that time), but not for the international audience for which they wanted to make the movie. So in order to make the story into a scenario that would fit in a 2 hour movie and to attract the international audience to come and watch it, the 917 paged story has been reduced to ‘the religious complot theory of God wanting his stone tablets back’.

Yet, this all may sound like ‘a good book, turning into a bad and superficial movie’, it is actually not. A book is a book, and a film is a film. They’re both very different types of media. So in order to be able to turn a book into a movie, one must see the movie as a translation of the source material and move that entity into a different environment. And that’s exactly what the scenario writer (Edwin de Vries) did with this story. He read the original story over and over again and after that, decided what he wanted to do with it: to make a traditional translation, with quest for the stone tablets as central theme (just as in the book).

So how did De Vries translate this novel into a movie? Looking at the film, you can see, that with the original story in mind, he at the same time decided to make some changes in order to make the project more fitting. The first thing he did in this case, is leaving out the intermission parts in which the angels look down at the earth and tell their story. What more boring would it be to see two men talking about things that have already happened? Furthermore, some chapters which in the book stand on their own – like Quinten’s education on the castle - have also been removed. This probably, because they do give a nice view on the historical/cultural environment, but at the same time don’t really lend themselves to an exciting story, as not many things happen in those chapters. This also counts for another important part from the book that has been left out: the political part. This other layer is just a masterly piece of literary work, but at the same time also a part that wouldn’t really blend in

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with the main idea. As said before, it would be a nice extra touch for the Dutch viewers, but it won’t add anything important either to the main story or the international audience.

Another aspect outstanding part I saw that has been changed while translating the story into a movie, is the division of the book into two separate parts: a part before the birth of Quinten and a part afterwards. In Mulisch novel that literary breakpoint separates the book in a type of Old and New Testament, but I guess on film such a division just would be really hard to translate into moving images. What might look logical on paper, would in this case look ridiculous in film.

Furthermore, another two things that occurred to me while comparing the book with the movie, is the focus on Onno as leading character and Quinten talking to his mom while she is in a coma. In the book, the story really evolves around the two men and Ada (part one) and around Quinten (part two). Yet, it is Onno we follow the entire movie through from the beginning until the end. A striking change, but it seems to turn out well. It makes the movie more centered and easier to follow; what of course, is an important thing to think about while making a movie for a big audience. This then, would also have been the reason to let Ada, as a kind of ghostly appearance, talk to her son Quinten. A character that doesn’t say anything isn’t fun to watch, but to let unexpected things happen, will keep the audience focused.

All in all, as you can read, a lot of things have been changed in order to fit the book into a film. Yet, even with those (some of them major) changes, the movie still manages to capture the overall traits of the book (its main plot, setting and stylistic convention). Indeed, some pieces have been left out, but while watching the movie, those missing parts didn’t really seem to be missing that much. A movie just can’t impossibly capture every single aspect of a multi-layered book, but in my opinion the makers of the movie have really tried to stay as

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close as possible to the original story, without cutting out the most important narrative aspects. While watching the movie, I really felt like I was seeing the words of the original story turning into moving images: the quest around the stone tablets (because this is what the story is all about), the special friendship between the two men and Ada, the philosophical/funny dialogues between Max and Onno and the special gift of Quinten. All those events were there and made the story come alive. I must then admit that the actors who played the different characters were perfect for their role. As I saw Stephen Fry playing the part of Onno, I couldn’t imagine anyone else playing that role. Same with the sphere of the movie. Watching the setting, you could really find yourself back in The Netherlands of the seventies and eighties. No misplaced action shots or overuse of special effects. The entire movie was as sober as the story in the book and only where certain interventions were necessary (the back to heaven sending of the stone tablets), those interventions were done in a proper way. So, while turning the paper into film, the main essence didn’t get lost, and that’s what made ‘The Discovery of Heaven’ for me a very good and close translation of the original text.

**Used Literary sources:**


**Movie credits:**
The discovery of heaven, The Netherlands, 2001

**Production:** Ate de Jong

**Director:** Jeroen Krabbé

**Scenario:** Edwin de Vries, after the novel 'De ontdekking van de hemel' by Harry Mulisch

**Camera:** Theo Bierkens

**Montage:** Nigel Galt

**Art direction:** Benedict Schillemans

**Music:** Henny Vrienten

**Cast:** Stephen Fry, Greg Wise, Flora Montgomery, Diana Quick, Neil Newbon, Jeroen Krabbé

Color, 134 minutes

**Distribution:** RCV