Christopher Priest’s novel, *The Prestige* and Christopher Nolan’s film adaptation of the same title is a prime example of what Linda Costanza Cahir claims is essential to a successful film translation of the literary work. Cahir states that, “…the most successful films based on literary works translate the words into images by both interpreting and exploiting the source text” (Cahir, page 97). Priest’s novel is “…strip-mined for the riches…” (Chair, pg. 97), by Nolan as he takes the story of two young rival magicians in turn of the century London, England and made a critically acclaimed film this past year.

While Nolan’s film does not stray too far from Priest’s story of rival magicians, he put the story in a much different context. Priest’s novel looks at the story of magicians Alfred Borden and Robert Angier through journals discovered and read by their great-grandchildren. What Nolan does is make a period piece that does away with the grandchildren’s story all together and focuses on the rivalry between the two magicians, while keeping the relevance of the journals by having Angier and Borden read each other’s at different points in the film. This is an example of what Cahir says is a vital step in literature based films, in that the text should have something “…so worthy, distinctive
and inherent in the source text that it fires a need to reshape that particular work of
literature into film” (Chair, page 97).

Cahir claims that four fundamental qualities are responsible for the success of a
literature-based film. She feels that first off, “…the film should communicate definite
ideas concerning the integral meaning and value of the literary text as the filmmakers
interpret it”. The film should also “…exhibit a collaboration of filmmaking
skills…and…demonstrate an audacity to create a work that stands as a world apart, that
exploits the literature in such a way that self-reliant, but aesthetic offspring is born”
(Cahir, pg. 99). Nolan manipulates the novel’s theme and contorts it to have a similar
plot line, but at the same time almost make a brand new story. An example is how Nolan
changes the deaths of Borden and Angier in the film. In the novel Angier’s teleporting
device creates a clone of Angier while the original becomes a dead shell of a body. In the
film when Angier clones himself in the machine, both versions live so Angier sets up a
water tank below the stage for the original to drown in. In the film Borden is on trial after
being set up by Angier to look like he killed Angier in the tank during the trick, and one
of the Borden twins is hung in the gallows while the other exacts revenge by finding and
killing Angier. This greatly differs from the novel where Borden simply dies of natural
causes, and Angier has two forms of himself roaming around after Borden disrupts
Angier’s trick leaving both the original and the clone alive. Nolan adds the element of
murder and deception not only between the characters but deception of the audience,
much like his film Memento. But by keeping the main characters and the theme of the
story, Nolan’s completes Cahir’s fourth fundamental quality of successful literature-based films, that is that, “…the film cannot be so self-governing as to be completely independent of or antithetical to the source material” (Cahir, pg 99).

A major reason for any film to digress from its literary origin is in the time constraints that a film has to fit into to maintain an audience’s attention. Likewise for The Prestige, had Christopher Nolan translated the novel directly to film, it would greatly exceed the common two hour window a feature film encompasses. The reason for the time limit is that as Cahir says, “…movies are viewed from beginning to end in one sitting, while novels are not limited by the same durational constraints…” (Cahir, pg. 101). The first major cut Nolan makes from the novel is the back story that begins the novel with the magician’s great-grandchildren coming across their ancestor’s journals. Nolan also tweaks the story to follow a more direct storyline that he uses to mirror the three acts of a magic act, the pledge the turn and the prestige. When you look at the criticism that films based on literary works don’t measure up to the book version, these time constraints should prove wrong the judgment, as Chair says, “…that there is a core novel that can be “faithfully” brought to the screen rather than its contrary position” (Cahir, pg 100).

Through Cahir’s definition of a successful conversion of a novel into a film, The Prestige proves worthy of being considered such a case. Nolan sticks to the novel’s theme while doing an excellent job of the characters and events left in, added in or omitted.