

## Shifting Ideologies in Fiction and Film: *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*

“If you want the same experience . . . that you had in reading the novel,” writes Brian McFarlane regarding novel-to-film adaptations, “why not simply re-read the novel?” (165). He then quips that “Fidelity is obviously very desirable in marriage; but with film adaptations I suspect playing around is more effective” (165). Director Kenny Leon’s 2013 film adaptation of Christopher Paul Curtis’s 1995 novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* maintains the spirit of the novel to a great degree. However, he has indeed played around with it, particularly regarding his deployment of race and activism, the topics of this presentation. As I illustrate, Leon brings race and the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s to the fore, which creates a radical transformation. In Curtis’s a novel activism is confined to the afterword; however, in Leon’s film, activism becomes the impetus of the film. This ideological shift is a result of several factors. Perhaps one of the most obvious changes is the inclusion of actual footage from the Civil Rights movement. However, other factors are at work including what Robyn Wiegman refers to as the “epistemology of the visual,” best explained as knowing what we know by what we see. Because we live in a culture that tends to associate who a person is by the color of her skin, the texture of his hair, and so on—visual signifiers—what might not be as noticeable in the novel becomes overt in the film. By incorporating the epistemology of the visual as well as Laura Mulvey’s conceptualization of the gaze or the look, I illustrate how the mere adaption of this particular novel into film inevitably and radically alters the plot trajectory. Of particular interest is Byron’s transformation from a 13-year-old “juvenile delinquent” to a young adult who adopts an angrier, more aggressive posture, which insists on an analysis of both the historical and contemporary racial climate that lead to ideological shifts and differences. Further, Leon’s Byron becomes sexualized and subject to the gaze, perhaps a nod to a culture wherein sex(uality) continues to sell, but which offers a potentially productive—if not troubling—occasion to discuss the problems with “sexing up” a character in the midst of the deep tragedy associated with the Birmingham church bombing.

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