

# Human Degradation: A Text-to-Film Comparison of the Human Hunts in Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game" and Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

JUAN CARLOS SARA VIA VARGAS

Escuela de Lenguas Modernas  
Universidad de Costa Rica

JOSÉ ROBERTO SARA VIA VARGAS

Escuela de Lenguas Modernas  
Universidad de Costa Rica

## Abstract

Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game" and Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, published in 1924 and 1954, respectively, first introduced the metaphor of human hunts and they depict proto-dystopian societies where the idea of cultural progress is questioned, for individuals devolve after finding themselves subjected to the rules of a wild environment. Movie adaptations of these literary works face the dilemma of fidelity because, since movies are expected to generate a significant income, the changes respond to commercial considerations, which, paradoxically, affects the reception of the film.

**Key words:** human hunts, devolution, text-to-film comparison, *Lord of the Flies*, "The Most Dangerous Game", adaptation, comparative literature

## Resumen

Las obras "The Most Dangerous Game", de Connell, y *Lord of the Flies*, de Golding, publicadas en 1924 y 1954, respectivamente, fueron las primeras en introducir la metáfora de las cacerías humanas. En ellas aparecen sociedades protodistópicas, donde la idea del progreso cultural se cuestiona, ya que los individuos retroceden evolutivamente al encontrarse sujetos

a las reglas de un ambiente salvaje. Las adaptaciones cinematográficas de estos textos enfrentan el dilema de la fidelidad pues, dado que se espera que las películas generen un ingreso económico significativo, los cambios responden a consideraciones comerciales que, paradójicamente, afectan la recepción del filme.

**Palabras claves:** cacerías humanas, involución, comparación de texto a filme, *Lord of the Flies*, “The Most Dangerous Game”, adaptación, literatura comparada

As it is well known, the two World Wars fought during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century disrupted social ideals of stability and freedom. Societies witnessed how humankind had, at last, acquired the destructive capability to wipe out civilization. This bitter realization triggered moods of hopelessness, existential anguish, and spiritual emptiness, which emerged in the literary production of both the victorious and defeated countries that engaged into such devastating armed conflicts. In this context, literature formulated dystopian world-views where authoritarian governments oppressed individuals to preserve the system. These texts presented regimes that, in an attempt to keep social stability, resorted to policies that were disguised as scientific theories characterized by their most blatant lack of respect for humanity.

Human hunts clearly exemplify the ruthless gubernatorial strategies explored by dystopian literature. Since the publication of Connell’s “The Most Dangerous Game” and Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, in 1924 and 1954, respectively, several authors became part of the trend and imagined dystopian visions that elaborated on the concept of human hunts in several settings, where groups of people competed savagely to survive and often engaged into mortal combats. The two former

texts, however, first explored the idea of humans being hunted by their peers outside a civilized context and, thus, become significant: they depict proto-dystopian societies where violence becomes an acceptable resource to keep the social stability of a group.

Movie adaptations of these literary works face the dilemma of fidelity. Is the movie supposed to follow the source as closely as possible or can it diverge? Although current criticism favors the freedom to swerve from the original work, Stam argues that fidelity still retains some experiential truth, for the audience perceives a betrayal when film adaptations forget the fundamental narrative of the source (14). However, as movies are expected to generate a significant income, the changes made might not respond to aesthetic considerations, but to commercial ones, which, paradoxically, affects the reception of the film.

### **The Perception of Hunting: From primitive survival to prestige**

One must understand that, despite the generalized negative perception of hunting activities in today’s world, the killing of animals was a staple of human groups when civilization was first emerging. Hunting was a response to

satisfy two basic human needs in a savage world: food and security. Primitive societies organized hunting expeditions mainly to provide food but, in some occasions, animal predators would sneak into human villages and prey on people. When this tragedy occurred, hunters would track the animal down and kill it to keep the most vulnerable members of the group safe. It is no coincidence that, in primitive groups, hunting is associated to religious rituals that involve the celebration of virility, prosperity, and the appeasing of deities. Ethical considerations, such as the notion of fair chase, were irrelevant because the goal of killing the animal was paramount and, when it was successfully completed, the members of group would find personal honor and social recognition.

With the passing of time, however, hunting stopped being only an exercise on survival and became an activity from which humans derived a sense of gratification other than the satisfaction of hunger and their need of protection. Hunters chased animals as a sport, for recreation, or to obtain a trophy and these goals implied a regulation of time, procedure, weapons, location, and game. With the specifications of the new rules, the costs to participate in hunting increased because their participants had to own a diverse arsenal, were required to pay licenses or fees, and had to travel to places where the hunting season was open. In short, hunting became a pastime reserved for a rich elite and, therefore, acquired the prestige associated to high-class activities. In a metaphorical level, hunting manifested the power of civilization over wildlife: it was a symbol of conquest in which intelligence prevailed over animal force.

For both Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game" and Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, the theme of hunting becomes fundamental, but each text develops it from a different angle. While "The Most Dangerous Game" works with the idea that hunting is an exclusive aristocratic sport for civilized adults, *Lord of the Flies* portrays children in a state of devolution: after finding themselves stranded on an unknown island, they grow progressively savage until they indulge in ritualistic hunting. The points of convergence in both texts is that both literary works substitute civilization for a savage environment and that the game is not an animal, but a person.

The delusion in the idea of civilization is that human beings are seen as unrefined savages that undergo an evolutionary process of humanization, which culminates with a final stage of social development. In this ultimate stage, the individual is regarded as a being who understands his/her privileged place in nature as the dominant species, a power that is legitimized by knowledge, ethics, and morality. The civilized individual is the antithesis of the savage and, consequently, he or she rectifies barbarism with his or her influence, as it was believed in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This presumptuous notion of civilization assumes that, once civilized, a person cannot go back to a savage state because civilization is an ontological condition of the evolved individual. However, as Alan Woods argues, the flaw in this view of human history becomes evident:

A variation on this theme is the idea, now very popular in some academic

circles that there is no such thing as higher and lower forms of social development and culture. They claim that there is no such thing as “progress” which they consider to be an old fashioned idea left over from the 19th century, when it was popularised by Victorian Liberals, Fabian socialists and Karl Marx. (online)

Connell’s “The Most Dangerous Game” and Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* contradict the idea that civilization cannot reverse and depict characters involved in barbaric behaviors because the wild environment allows them to devolve.

Human hunting is one of the most notorious savage practices that the reader encounters in both texts. A human hunt is considered the complete opposite of civilization; it is barbaric, immoral in nature. If the prey of a hunt is a person, the hunter evokes the animal predator that ancient groups feared. This exchange of positions shocks the readers because it debunks the idea that the human spirit has evolved from a stage of primitiveness into one of cultivation that includes ethics and morality.

### **From the Eyes of the Human Prey: Connell’s Hunted Hunter**

“The Most Dangerous Game” begins with a conversation among several friends on a boat. There, Rainsford, a celebrated hunter of big game, expresses his passion for hunting and his complete disregard for the fear and pain that the hunted animals experience:

“The best sport in the world,” agreed Rainsford.

“For the hunter,” amended Whitney. “Not for the jaguar.”

“Don’t talk rot, Whitney,” said Rainsford. “You’re a big-game hunter, not a philosopher. Who cares how a jaguar feels?”

“Perhaps the jaguar does,” observed Whitney. (Connell 5, 6)

After a while, Rainsford finds himself stranded on an island in the Caribbean after the ship in which he traveled sank and, looking for refuge, he arrives to a castle and becomes the guest of a mysterious Russian general called Zaroff. This man is an expert hunter who, having grown bored, decided to start hunting the most challenging species: humans.

This is a story that fits the genre of adventure literature, a genre that critic Don D’Amassa, in the introduction to the *Encyclopedia of Adventure Fiction*, defines as “an event or series of events that happens outside the course of the protagonist’s ordinary life, usually accompanied by danger, often by physical action. Adventure stories almost always move quickly, and the pace of the plot is at least as important as characterization, setting and other elements of a creative work.” (vii-viii). One must note that literary elites have regarded adventure literature as commercial because of its mass appeal, which ratifies the perception that Edward Shils has about cultural product stratification: “American culture is divided into three cultural ‘classes’, each embodying different versions of the cultural: ‘superior’ or ‘refined’ culture at the top, ‘mediocre’ culture in

the middle, and 'brutal' culture at the bottom" (qt. in Storey 33). However, the fact that Connell's work appeals to the masses makes it significant for the study of the perception of violence. Shils has noted that violence is a cultural phenomenon and that the importance of analyzing this "brutal culture" is increasing: "It is an indication of the crude aesthetic awakening in classes which previously accepted was handed down to them or who had practically no aesthetic expression and reception" (qt. in Storey 209). The growing awareness of social inequality and abuse is expressed in the metaphor of human hunts, and this awareness of an unfair position can be seen in the many literary works that couple human hunting and dystopian visions of society.

Connell's work illustrates this abrupt awakening when Rainsford discovers that he is going to become the game of General Zaroff's immoral hunt. Paradoxically, Rainsford must apply all of his knowledge as a hunter to elude Zaroff and his pack of dogs for three days to win his freedom. Of course, Rainsford quickly realizes that his only hope is to refuse thinking as a defenseless prey and to become the predator. So, he goes back to the castle and ambushes Zaroff in his chamber:

The general sucked in his breath and smiled. "I congratulate you," he said. "You have won the game."

Rainsford did not smile. "I am still a beast at bay," he said, in a low, hoarse voice. "Get ready, General Zaroff."

The general made one of his deepest bows. "I see," he said.

"Splendid! One of us is to furnish a repast for the hounds. The other will sleep in this very excellent bed. On guard, Rainsford."

...

He had never slept in a better bed, Rainsford decided. (Connell 72, 73)

Rainsford clearly triumphs over Zaroff because the former accepted his role as a dangerous beast and embraced it to the last consequences. Zaroff, in his arrogance, underestimated the animal that he was hunting.

Connell's story questions human morality from different angles. Zaroff is presented as an inhuman aristocrat who, lost in his grandeur as a hunter, starts seeing fellow human beings merely as animals to kill because they can provide a type of excitement that he has not encountered before. The insane Russian General does not care about the feelings of his victims. This is the same position that Rainsford had at the beginning of the story and this morality-related identification undermines Wheeler's idea that adventure literature places the plot over character development: "Adventure privileges fast paced actions over character development, reflection, and many other components of the story." (Wheeler).

In this sense, the massification of Connell's work in its film version, *The Most Dangerous Game*, far from merely pleasing a plot-oriented audience, helps to spread an incipient ecological concern. To do so, however, the original proposal had to undergo two major adaptations. In the 1932 film version, directed by Schoedsack and Pichel, the most obvious disparity is

the inclusion of a romantic interest for Rainsford, which provides melodramatic undertones to the movie: Zaroff introduces the shipwreck survivor to Eve Trowbridge and her brother Martin, who have been staying with the General after surviving the sinking of their own boat. After a while, Martin disappears and, when Zaroff discloses the secret details about the hunt and Rainsford adamantly refuses to take part in it as a hunter, the marooned man and Eve become the game of the insane Russian. Rainsford, hence, must also protect the woman as they flee and try to elude the hunter. The damsel in distress factor contributes to counteract the beastifying of Rainsford: the viewers see an all-competent hero legitimized from a patriarchal perspective, a gentleman who refuses to abandon his weak companion and, by beating Zaroff, earns her love.

The second notorious difference is perceived in the characterization of General Zaroff. If Connell's literary work successfully depicts the Russian as a psychotic aristocrat, the film reconstructs his image and turns him into a real monster. To achieve this end, the movie exploits resources that were found only in horror movies. For example, the behavior of the Russian General echoes that of Count Dracula in vampire films: the viewer sees a man with impeccable manners, but that suggest an artificial attempt to conceal a dual nature. The fact that the General lives in an isolated castle and has a monstrous helper highlights the parallel with horror movies as so do the dim rooms and the environment outside the castle. However, it is in Zaroff's face where the viewers find the most remarkable change as compared

to the source text, which provides a modest description of the enigmatic host. In contrast, the movie stresses the villainous features of the man, his stare in particular, making him not only morally, but also physically monstrous. In doing so, the film adaptation deviates sharply from Connell's work to favor a cinematographic taste which is alien to the literary text, all in an attempt to reach a broader audience and thus make larger commercial margins.

### **Golding's *Savage Children***

Differently from Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game," Golding's *Lord of the Flies* has enjoyed a more positive position in the literary canon. Published in 1954, the novel centers on the gradual moral regression that a group of marooned boys experience when alone on an uninhabited island. At first, Ralph and Piggy manage to establish a sense of social order using the symbolic power of a conch, which Ralph found and used to gather all boys together. This fragile organization erodes quickly, nevertheless, as boys find responsibility and commitment tedious and prefer idleness and the emotional rush of hunting for food under the lead of Jack, a boy who challenged Ralph's authority from the beginning. The civilized Ralph and Piggy soon find themselves against all the other children, whom Jack has lured into a savage state with pig meat banquets, tribal body paint, and primitive rituals to a mythic beast that embodies all of their primordial fears.

The human hunt motif only emerges in Golding's novel after the boys lost

their morality; they murdered Simon when he was approaching the tribe and they, in a ritual frenzy, mistakenly took him for the beast that the hunters originally vowed to kill. This first murder establishes the point in which Jack's tribe becomes truly savage: they raid Ralph's camp to rob Piggy's glasses to make fire, kill Piggy and shatter the conch, torture the prisoner boys to make them join their group and, finally, organize a ritualistic hunt to kill Ralph, the only civilized boy left. The text clearly presents the human hunt as the behavioral rite of primitiveness by excellence.

Golding's *Lord of the Flies* has been adapted in two different film versions under the same title as the original. The first one was produced in 1963 and had Golding's endorsement. This film, therefore, follows the traditional school of adaptation, in which the movie product had to remain as faithful to the original text as possible. Thus, Ralph walks alone after the aircraft crashed and, after finding Piggy, they walk together to the beach and take the conch shell to summon other survivors. They meet Jack and the choir boys this way and discover that there are no adults on the island.

The movie struggles to recreate the novel on the screen, which, somehow, impacts the cohesion of the film: the limited omniscient point of view that works well in the novel becomes a fragmentary point of view in the movie and, to remedy this problem, the director included music as a symbolic element that is not present in the literary text. Thus, the movie starts with some still images of school children while a radio message is heard, which is replaced immediately by still pictures of a boy choir and their singing.

This same song "Kylie Eleison" ("Lord Have Mercy") is used when the choir first joins the other boys after listening to the sound of the conch. The song becomes the main soundtrack of the film and is last heard when the movie ends, which gives a sense of unity to the different visual fragments. In addition, the religious background of the song balances the progressive immorality of the children and counteracts the allegorical demonic association of the title of the work: Lord of the Flies is the English translation of the word Beelzebub.

The second adaptation, also entitled *Lord of the Flies*, was produced in 1990 and follows the idea that film adaptations do not need to remain faithful to the original. In an attempt to avoid the fragmented filmic narrative of the 1963 movie, this adaptation reformulates the point of view and focuses exclusively on Ralph. Therefore, this film shows significant differences with both the novel and the 1963 movie. First, the group of boys are all military school cadets of several ages, who know each other and initially respect Ralph's highest rank. This detail is significant because it bonds all the boys in comradeship and fastens the pace of the action at the beginning, removing the need of waiting for the others to come. However, the unity of the cadets erodes the symbolic power of the conch. In fact, the most notorious difference that this version shows is that it introduces the presence of an adult, the delusional and seriously injured Captain Benson, who receives assistance from the boys until, in a delirious state, he escapes to a cave and the boys later mistakenly believe his groans of pain are the sounds of a large animal or a monster.

Second, the killing of Simon does not occur after he finds a dead pilot tangled on a tree with his parachute, as it happens in both the novel and the 1963 film, but when the independent boy ventures into the cave of the alleged monster, finds the corpse of Captain Benson, and runs to inform the others about his discovery. After this death, the only boy feeling remorse is Ralph. While Piggy tries to comfort Ralph by stressing that the killing was accidental because of the circumstances, Jack manipulates the others by telling them that they are dealing with a shape-shifting beast, which dissipates the moral burden.

Another difference in this movie has to do with the accidental breaking of Piggy's glasses. Both the novel and the 1963 adaptation depict Piggy's glasses as a pragmatical instrument, for they were the only means that the marooned boys had to start a fire and, thus, acquired a symbolic status of power, equivalent to that of the conch for Jack's tribe. On the other hand, the 1990 movie changes the motivation of Jack's tribe to raid the camp: Jack wants a survival knife that Ralph had. Jack's allies raid the tents looking for this knife because they need it to make more spears and damage the glasses when they escape. Consequently, this movie shows two different attacks on Ralph's camp. After Jack divides the camp, both groups work together; Jack gives meat and Ralph shares fire. This cooperation stops until Jack, probably because of arrogance, raids Ralph's camp a second time and steals the glasses not to ask for fire anymore. Piggy cries a lot and suggests they should give up and join Jack, which places the attention on their despair and not on

the lost glasses and their functionality. The knife, on the other hand, stands as a symbolic good among the cadets: for the hunters, it is a combat instrument that gives the idea of rank. Thus, the stealing of the glasses, a significant event in both the novel and the first adaptation, is basically kept on this version for melodramatic purposes.

### Conclusions

For both Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game" and Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, the human hunting theme becomes the central resource to develop the idea of degradation. Although Connell's text uses adults subjected to the violence of an insane man for its social criticism and Golding's focuses on the moral degradation of children, the fundamental concern is how those in a power position eventually discard their humanity when they start underestimating the lives of others. In other words, the more people oppress others and decide to see them merely as beasts, the more immoral those oppressors become, going back from a civilized state to a primitive one.

In hopes to reach a larger audience, the movie adaptations of the texts reformulate the original proposals to make them more digestible and, hence, more commercial. However, this massification does not necessarily imply that the proposals are watered down to a tasteless product, as Van de Haag observes:

The mass produced article need not aim low, but it must aim at an average of tastes. In satisfying all (or at least many) individual tastes in some respects, it violates each

in other respects. For there are so far no average persons having average tastes. Averages are but statistical composites. A mass produced article, while reflecting nearly everybody's taste to some extent, is unlikely to embody anybody's taste fully. This is one source of the sense of violation which is rationalized vaguely in theories about deliberate debasement of taste. (512)

Film adaptations often correspond to fresher readings of the original works and, therefore, respond to a set of values that changed since the publication of the literary texts that serve as source material for them. The movies, then, may not please the same audience that enjoys the novels, but they help propel critical visions that were not part of the original works, such as ecological concerns, the advantage of collaborative work instead of hierarchical authority, and the comparison of human rights and animal rights.

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