ATLANTIS
Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies
47.2 (December 2025):
e-issn 1989-6840
DOI: http://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2025-47.2.6

A Rebel in the Trenches: Narratology and Intertextuality in Life Narratives about J. D. Salinger in World War II

Susana García Montosa
Universidad de Granada
susanagarciam@correo.ugr.es

This essay offers a narratological and intertextual analysis of the experiences lived through by J. D. Salinger in World War II as portrayed in Danny Strong's 2017 biographical film adaptation *Rebel in the Rye*, based on Kenneth Slawenski's biography *J.D. Salinger. A Life* (2010). Author of *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), a classic in American literature, J. D. Salinger was not only famous for his writing but also for his private nature and discreet life. Strong recreates Slawenski's work which claims that it was Salinger's experience in World War II that planted the seed that produced his lifelong choices and personality. Using Seymour Chatman's narratological approach (1978; 1990) to analyze the differences and similitudes between both these non-fiction sources, and then Robert Stam's intertextual dialogism theory (2000) to identify the contextual filters that affect Strong's biopic, I identify a case of multilayered adaptation where the two texts are in dialogue with one another and which offers a more extended understanding of the fluidity of the limits between fiction and reality regarding life narratives. This essay attempts to contribute to the legitimization of adaptation studies, away from the moralistic view perpetrated by fidelity criticism in order to understand how adaptation can in fact work in widely open and less constricted scenarios.

Keywords: adaptation; life narratives; narratology; intertextual dialogism; J. D. Salinger; World War II

. . .

Un rebelde en las trincheras. Narratología e intertextualidad en las narrativas biográficas sobre J. D. Salinger en la Segunda Guerra Mundial

Este ensayo ofrece un análisis narratológico e intertextual de las experiencias vividas por J. D. Salinger durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial, tal como se retratan en la adaptación cinematográfica *Rebel in the Rye* (2017) de Danny Strong, basada en la biografía *J.D. Salinger. A Life* (2010) de Kenneth Slawenski. Autor de *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), un clásico de la literatura estadounidense, J. D. Salinger no solo fue famoso por su escritura, sino también por su carácter reservado y su vida discreta. Strong recrea la obra de Slawenski, quien sostiene que fue la experiencia de Salinger en la Segunda Guerra Mundial la que sembró la semilla de sus elecciones vitales y su personalidad. Utilizando el enfoque narratológico de Seymour Chatman (1978; 1990), analizo las diferencias y similitudes entre estas dos fuentes de no ficción. Posteriormente, aplico la teoría del dialogismo intertextual de Robert Stam (2000) para identificar los filtros contextuales que afectan al *biopic* de Strong. A partir de ambos marcos teóricos, identifico un caso de adaptación en múltiples capas, en el que los dos textos entablan un diálogo que ofrece una comprensión más amplia de la fluidez de los límites entre la ficción y la realidad en las narrativas biográficas. Este ensayo busca contribuir a la legitimación de los estudios de adaptación, alejándose de la visión moralista promovida por la crítica de la fidelidad, con el fin de comprender cómo la adaptación puede, en efecto, operar en escenarios ampliamente abiertos y menos restringidos.

Palabras clave: Adaptación; narrativas de vida; narratología; dialogismo intertextual; J. D. Salinger; Segunda Guerra Mundial

1. Introduction

In 1965, Jerome David Salinger stopped publishing and disappeared from the public sphere, attempting to abandon the literary notoriety he had sought, and found, during his youth. However, the more he tried to become a commoner again, the more difficult the task turned out to be. J. D. Salinger became a literary treasure in 1951 when he published *The Catcher in the Rye*, a classic in American literature. This professional milestone established a before-and-after in his career that would severely disrupt his attempts at living an anonymous existence. Some say, however, that what really marked the before-and-after in his life were his experiences as a Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) agent in the US Army during World War II.

When Kenneth Slawenski published his biography *J.D. Salinger. A Life* in 2010, the year of the author's death, the book became a huge success. The timeliness of its publication made fans and critics rush to bookstores to get a copy of the coveted volume. In his in-memoriam introduction, Slawenski wrote: "Salinger the man may be gone […] but he will always live within the pages he created, and through his art remain[s]

as vital today and tomorrow as when he walked the boulevards of New York and strolled the woods of New Hampshire" (2010, x). In a vast account of Salinger's life and works, Slawenski pays particular attention to Salinger's time at war: he tells the story of a young soldier with great aspirations who was recruited by the CIC agency because of his fluency in French and German and tasked with identifying official members of the Nazi party and bringing them to justice. Years later, this biographical account would serve as the main source for *Rebel in the Rye*, the 2017 cinematic adaptation directed by Danny Strong. His directorial debut, this independent film premiered at Sundance Film Festival. Strong claimed to have found the biography at a random bookstore and "about half-way through the book, thought: there is an amazing movie in this story of young J. D. Salinger writing *The Catcher in the Rye*" (00:19). Glenn Kenny argued in his review for *The New York Times* that the premise of Strong's biopic was: "[I]f you can't make a movie out of *The Catcher in the Rye*, make one about the writing of it" (2017). The film covers the period from Salinger's first attempts at publication until his decision to abandon writing and pays special attention to how Salinger's experience in World War II changed his life and works completely.

Slawenski's biography and Strong's biopic are compilations of material and documentation about Salinger that are formed into fully-fledged adaptations based on factual information. They can be regarded separately but it is in their conjoined analysis where the different strata of the adaptations can be better appreciated. In this sense, the biopic constitutes an adaptation which takes as its main source the biography by Slawenski. The factual-fictional relationship between these two texts makes it a complex process in which several considerations are put into question, such as accuracy and legitimacy. Building on this premise, theoretical approaches in adaptation studies and life narratives shed further light on the dynamics between these two texts. The various theories that have been developed in the field of adaptation studies, as well as in the studies on life narratives, over the past few decades can help us better understand how different texts, realized in different media, can work together or be great adaptations or creative recreations of the life of a subject. This article, therefore, situates its analysis within the theoretical background of adaptation studies and life narratives, examining how Strong's biopic recreates Slawenski's biography—particularly its portrayal of Salinger's time in Europe during World War II. The aims are both to show how research on life narratives contributes greatly to the field of adaptation studies—and vice versa—and also to illustrate how adaptations can be realized in numerous ways and media, forming, most often, multilayered adaptations where different filters overlap to create intertextual stories that mingle until the line between fiction and reality becomes blurred.[1]

[1] This article is part of my doctoral research about the swings between fiction and reality in life narratives about J.D. Salinger.

2. Theories of adaptation: narratology and intertextual dialogism

American film theorist and New York University professor Robert Stam describes the general perception of the field of adaptation studies as "profoundly moralistic, awash in terms such as infidelity, betrayal, defamation, violation, vulgarization, and desecration, each accusation carrying its specific charge of outraged negativity" (2000, 54). This field of research has been developing steadily over time, always hand in hand with other ever-evolving arts. In the past few decades, adaptations have gained so much relevance that one might think that the most prominent producers such as Hollywood or streaming platforms have run out of other ideas. Because of their constant release of film adaptations, some filmmakers seem to be shying away from the dreaded original script and instead striving to remake previous texts.

One of the long-standing obstacles in the legitimation of adaptation studies is the fidelity criticism approach. Described by Thomas Leitch as "the responsibility of adaptations to communicate or evoke some essential features associated with the texts they are adapting" (2017, 8), the faithfulness critique still provokes audiences to cry *the book was better!* when leaving movie theatres. Nonetheless, the adaptation theories that have appeared over the past seventy years have progressively surmounted this sempiternal approach that Kamilla Elliott labels as "adaptation studies' fake news" (2020, 20). Through the evolution of the theories of adaptation—from George Bluestone's medium specific approach in 1957 to the latest theories on intermedia and transmedia storytelling—fidelity criticism has been superseded by other theories that do not focus so much on the alleged *damage* that adaptations can cause to their, debatably named, *original* sources. Each theory that has emerged since the fifties has become entangled in constructive discussion with its predecessor, attempting the best way of describing, analyzing and presenting an adaptation. As David L. Kranz and Nancy C. Mellerski argue, adaptation should be seen as a "plurality of perspectives [...] taking into account a plethora of relevant textual and contextual issues" (2008, 9). In fact, adaptation does not only manifest in audiovisual productions, and nor is it always a one-way, straightforward, book-to-film transformation. An adaptation is a far more complex phenomenon, which justifies its ongoing research. The theories and approaches that endure the ravages of research evolution in adaptation studies are the ones that regard both the written and the audiovisual texts as companions, not adversaries. Narratology and intertextual dialogism are some examples.

The narratological approach has been generally applied to written texts, with French theorist Gérard Genette being considered the source influence for research into the relationship between texts. However, it was Seymour Chatman who started to apply narratology to the analysis of films. Since then, as Silke Horstkotte argues, "narratology has become a widespread method of film analysis" (2009, 170). Inspired by Genette's views on narrative, Chatman proposes a distinction between story—events and existents—and discourse—"the narrative form itself—the structure of narrative transmission—and its manifestation—its appearance in a specific materializing

medium" (1978, 19-22). Narratology, however, suffered a gradual downfall in popularity and legitimacy as an approach through which to study film adaptations which has only lately started to be surmounted, according to Mieke Bal. Addressing its suitability for a myriad of different texts, she defines narratology as "the ensemble of theories of [...] cultural artefacts that tell a story. This story helps us understand, analyze, and evaluate narratives. A theory is a systematic set of generalized statements about a particular segment of reality. *That segment of reality, the corpus, about which narratology attempts to provide insight, consists of narrative texts of all kinds, made for a variety of purposes and serving different functions*" (Bal, 2017, 3; italics added).

The identification of narratological elements such as settings, characters, events, point of view, narrator, etc. is essential for the analysis of any text, and it consists, in the case of adaptations, in comparing the production of the text in each medium and finding reasons behind why certain elements may have been removed, remade or left the same. These reasons can be easier to find if the narratological analysis is complemented with intertextual dialogism theory. Influenced by Genette's five types of transtextual relationships,[2] Stam developed an approach which "refers to the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of culture, the entire matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated, which reach the text not only through recognizable influences, but also through a subtle process of dissemination" (2000, 64). From these premises, Stam proposes a theory of adaptation based on the argument that "every text forms an intersection of textual surfaces" (2000, 64). The goal is to analyze the filters that affect the adaptation in question and put the text into dialogue with other prior texts. He argues that "the source text forms a dense informational network, a series of verbal cues that the adapting film [or other] text can then take up, amplify, ignore, subvert or transform" (2000, 68). The intertextual and contextual filters that mediate the adaptation are varied with "studio style, ideological fashion, political constraints, personal permits, auteurist predilections, economic advantage and evolving technology" (2000, 69) being some examples. Linda Hutcheon adds to this media, reception, advertising, press coverage, reviews, the anticipation and the *hype* that the adaptation generates, among others (2013, 143). As María Elena Rodríguez Martín argues, conducting "an analysis which takes into account all the texts, readings, and interpretations which feed the adaptation" helps to reach more nuanced and fairer conclusions (2005,199). In this way, the focus is directed towards the how the inherent characteristics of each individual medium and text, whether written or audiovisual, work together to create a multilayered adaptation.

3. Life narratives as adaptations: biography and biopic

Life narrative can be a very inclusive term if defined accordingly. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson navigate theories involving life narratives and define the term as "acts of

[2] Intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality (1997, 1-5).

self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital" (2010, 4). Although they seem to make a point in defense of life narratives in general and life writing in particular as being "written forms of the autobiographical" (4), they do not really ascribe to any universal tenet in their book. Consequently, for the purposes of this paper, *life narrative* will refer to any kind of text, in any form or medium, that deals with someone's life. From this perspective, life narratives such as biography and biopic can be considered non-fiction adaptations since they are concerned with real events and people that are reproduced in different forms and media. Smith and Watson argue that life narratives "incorporate usable facts into subjective truth" (2010,13), which contributes to the fiction/reality debate. As such, adapting the life of a particular figure into a written biography or biopic poses additional difficulties to the adaptation of fictional works. In turn, Carolyn G. Heilbrun argues that interpretation is the most powerful tool when facing biographical analysis. She claims that "the 'fiction' that we now accept as biography has to do not with the creation of 'facts' or conversations or events for which there is no evidence [...]. The 'fiction' of biography consists entirely in the *interpretation* put upon a life. Each biography is fiction created by the biographer and the way in which she or he sees the world" (1993, 298; italics added).

The form of adaptation in which a life narrative is shaped swings back and forth between fiction and reality, creating a product that is ultimately composed of both. The reception of this product provokes different reactions, though, which range from a gullible audience and readership believing the story verbatim to skeptical individuals and scholars deeming the whole rendering of the subject as inaccurate. My take is that a coexistence of fluctuating degrees of both fiction and reality in an adaptation can, not only exist, but also be an asset in that it can contribute to the piece being more complex and creative as a result. That said, both biography and biopic have actually enjoyed great popularity over the years.

As life writing adaptations, biographies are constituted out of a palimpsest of different texts and documentation about the life of the subject, which are then shaped in accordance with how the biographer interprets the information. Michael Benton describes biography as a "hybrid", that is, "the verifiable facts of history crossed with the conventions of narrative" (2009, 35). He claims that the biographer must find a way to "present the available facts of the life, yet shape their arbitrariness, untidiness and incompleteness into an engaging whole" so that readers can experience both the "documentary information, scrupulously researched and plausibly interpreted" and "the aesthetic pleasure of reading a well-made work of art with a continuous life story and a satisfying closure" (2009, 35). Something similar happens in the case of the biopic: the film that audiences watch in movie theaters or at home is also a conglomeration of previous biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, oral and written testimonies, commonly accepted assumptions about the subject's reputation, other artistic representations, etc. In fact, Tom Brown and Belén Vidal argue that "the biopic can be considered a fully-fledged

form of modern biography" (2014, 7), while Ellen Cheshire insists that the perpetual fascination for the private lives of celebrities and other relevant figures in history has driven the growing popularity of biographical films (2015, 6).

In fact, taking as example a number of the films nominated in various categories in recent editions of the Academy Awards—including nominations for best picture, best director, best original score, best adapted screenplay, best actor and actress in both leading and supporting role, amongst others—there is clear evidence of the interest taken by filmmakers and audiences of, respectively, making and watching adaptations in general and biopics in particular. Adaptations from previous sources have been prominently present at the Oscars in recent years, as can be seen in the following table:

FILM TITLE	DIRECTOR	RELEASE YEAR	TYPE OF SOURCE
Dunkirk	Christopher Nolan	2017	historical adaptation
Black Panther	Ryan Coogler	2018	comic
A Star is Born	Bradley Cooper	2018	previous film(s)
Little Women	Greta Gerwig	2019	novel
The Father	Florian Zeller	2020	play
Nomadland	Chloé Zhao	2020	non-fiction book

Likewise, films about important deeds carried out by real life people—biopics—have also been prominent on nominee lists for recent Oscars, as can be seen below:

FILM TITLE	DIRECTOR	RELEASE YEAR	BIOPIC FIGURE
Darkest Hour	Joe Wright	2017	Winston Churchill
Green Book	Peter Farrelly	2018	Nick 'Lip' Vallelonga
Judy	Rupert Goold	2019	Judy Garland
Mank	David Fincher	2020	Herman J. Mankiewicz
Judas & the Black Messiah	Shaka King	2021	Fred Hampton
Elvis	Baz Luhrmann	2022	Elvis Presley
Oppenheimer	Christopher Nolan	2023	J. Robert Oppenheimer
I'm Still Here	Walter Salles	2024	M. Rubens Paiva

By considering biographies and biopics as adaptations, audiences, readers and scholars will be able to better appreciate how the content and form of the storytelling in each text is reworked and recreated in different media. Similar to adaptations of

fictional sources, the adaptation of life narratives can be refracted through several contextual and intertextual lenses in order to convey stories whose meaning and impact change over time. In this way, the mechanics and malleability of narrative become easier to understand, as does the way a text can be shaped and reshaped across different creative contexts—whether by a screenwriter working alone in a quiet room with a laptop and a cup of coffee, or by a director collaborating with a crew in a bustling studio filled with lights, noise, and cameras.

4. Analysis: recreating *private* Salinger in Europe

The period between the late thirties and mid-forties in Europe had a great impact on Salinger's relationship with the old continent. His European experience would become life-changing and would affect his writing, personality and lifestyle. Both Slawenski and Strong, in their biography and biopic, respectively, coincide on the importance of Salinger's early visits to the continent and portray them as such in their works.[3] Jerome David Salinger was first in Europe from 1937 to 1938, aged 18, in a visit orchestrated by his father to inject his son with enthusiasm for the business in which he worked, a meat and cheese trade company. Solomon Salinger's ultimate goal was to squash his son's emerging literary aspirations. Young Jerry—as his family used to call him—arrived in Vienna, Austria, in the spring of 1937, where he stayed with a Jewish family. He later travelled on to Bydgoszcz, Poland, where he worked in a slaughterhouse, as part of his training for his father's meat and cheese trade. However, to his father's dismay, Salinger failed to start leaning towards a working life in the meat trade. By the time he sailed back to New York in March 1938, Salinger's gifts from his first stay in the old continent were a broken heart and a handy fluency in French and German.

It was his second stay in Europe, however, that marked him forever. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Salinger joined the army to fight in World War II as many other patriotic US citizens did. The war halted his then prospective literary career; however, inspired by one of his favorite authors, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, who worked on his first novel while in the army, Salinger also used this time to work on what would later become *The Catcher in the Rye* while in the trenches. After over two years of training at various US bases, Salinger was shipped off to war-weary Europe in January 1944, a few days after his 25th birthday. His experiences in World War II would affect him severely in the years to come. He was part of the second wave of U.S. troops to land on Utah Beach in Normandy, one of the sectors of the D-Day landings. He was subjected to extreme weather conditions and heavy fire and assault from enemy troops during the battles for Hürtgen Forest. He was one of the first to enter the Kaufering IV concentration

[3] Most of the biographical information about J. D. Salinger's life described in this article is drawn from the accounts which comprise the study: the biography by Kenneth Slawenski, *J.D. Salinger. A Life* (2010) and the biopic by Danny Strong, *Rebel in the Rye* (2017).

camp complex in Dachau, Germany, as part of the US army liberation teams. Having served with the Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) for most of his service during the war, Salinger continued to question and investigate suspected members of the Nazi Party after the conflict ended. Even though he also lived through some less gruesome moments of the conflict, such as the liberation of Paris, Salinger's overall World War II experiences were nightmarish. After the cease fire and the following months of striving for a normalcy that was extremely difficult to recover, Europe started to rebuild, and soldiers started to return home. Salinger stayed, though. In the summer of 1945, unable to handle the experiences he had endured, he checked himself into a hospital in Nuremberg, Germany, where he was treated for battle fatigue for several weeks. After being discharged from the hospital at the end of the summer, Salinger continued his work as a CIC agent and met Sylvia Welter. Salinger and Sylvia got married in October of the same year and went to live together in Nuremberg. They moved to the States in the spring of 1946. Never really accepted by the Salingers, however, the marriage ended soon after. The impact of these years abroad became central to later interpretations of his work and psychological development. Kenneth Slawenski and Danny Strong pay special attention in their works to Salinger's time in Europe, considering it to be the catalyst of the trauma that shaped the author's life and works. This analysis will, then, be focused on how the biopic *Rebel in the Rye* (2017) adapts Slawenski's portrayal of Salinger's experiences in Europe in his biography *J.D. Salinger. A Life* (2010). Aided by approaches such as narratology and intertextual dialogism applied to adaptation, and used here to examine non-fictional narratives, the analysis will reveal how the story, discourse and context have each been adapted from the written biography to the audiovisual one.

5. A REBEL NARRATIVE: RECREATING STORY AND DISCOURSE

Seymour Chatman's narratological approach distinguishes between story and discourse. He includes the events—actions and happenings—and the existents—characters and settings—as elements of the story. The discourse, in turn, is identified as the medium through which the story is transmitted and includes elements such as order of events, narrator, point of view, etc. (1978, 9). Salinger's time in Europe during World War II barely occupies one chapter in Slawenski's book. However, it is an essential part of the plot in Strong's biopic which translates into half of the film and focuses on the author's experiences in the old continent. Strong thus makes sure in his adaptation of Slawenski's text that audiences understand the extraordinary relevance of the European ordeal in Salinger's later life. This approach helps reveal how narrative form transforms across media.

Salinger's first visit to Europe at the end of the 1930s is completely absent from Danny Strong's narrative in *Rebel in the Rye*. The film starts in 1939, roughly a year after Salinger had come back from Austria and Poland and covers virtually the entirety of Salinger's publishing career (1939-1965). After 1965, even though he is known to have

continued writing,[4] he never published again. This seeming disregard for Salinger's experiences prior to his active pursuit of a writing career are somewhat legitimized though since Strong's main objective is to focus on the time Salinger was an actively published author and how this aspect of his life shaped and influenced both his writing and personal life. Even though there are no explicit references in the biopic to Salinger's trip to pre-World War II Europe, Strong does introduce a scene in which Salinger's father Solomon—played by actor Victor Garber—tries to enthuse his son about working in the meat trade. It is however Solomon's wife, Miriam—played by actress Hope Davis—who defends their son's desire to become a writer and forces her husband to support Jerry's aspirations:

> [Solomon to Jerry]
> Listen to me. Meat and cheese distribution has been very good to this family. Six years ago, Buddy Richman was practically broke. He buys a slaughterhouse and now he's king of the bacon. That could be you, Sonny boy!
>
> [Miriam, exasperated, to her husband]
> Jerry is not going to sell cheese or pigs, or cows, or milk. He is not going to be the king of the bacon. He is going to go to Columbia. He is going to study writing. That's what Jerry is going to do and you are going to pay for it.[5]
>
> (07:05–07:37)

Strong does, however, adapt and highlight several key events from Salinger's experience in World War II. The film starts with the consequences of his participation in the conflict: his self-admission at a hospital in Nuremberg with what we would now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Actually, Slawenski's depiction of Salinger's participation in World War II starts with a sententious statement: "Tuesday, June 6, 1944, was the turning point of Salinger's life" (2010, 90). The fifth chapter of Slawenski's biography, titled "Hell", places Private Jerry Salinger on the Normandy beaches on D-Day following on from a quote from William Blake's poem "The Tyger". Blake's verses appeal to Salinger's idyllic relationship to innocence and foresee its imminent annihilation because of the gruesome conflict ahead. Slawenski claims: "[T]he war [...] would brand itself upon every aspect of Salinger's personality and reverberate through his writings" (2010, 90). Slawenski's chapter on Salinger's experiences during World War II is long and detailed, thoroughly researched to show

[4] Matthew Salinger, J.D. Salinger's son, said in an interview for Penguin Books UK on the 100th anniversary of his father's birth in 2019 that Salinger senior had in fact continued writing prolifically after he stopped publishing in the 1960s: *"Celebrating J.D. Salinger—An Interview with Matt Salinger", YouTube*, Penguin Books UK, January 1, 2019, interview. [Accessed November 3, 2020].

[5] The dialogues from the film that appear in this article are my own transcription of the script.

the distress he went through during this time of his life.[6] At the end of the chapter, he reveals the aftermath of what would be a lifelong trauma for the author: "[I]n the summer of 1945, Jerry Salinger's war experiences, extended service, sudden loneliness, and reluctance to express his pain converged upon him with disastrous effect. […] He had seen many cases of battle fatigue on the front […] and recognized the potential menace of his current state of mind. In July, he voluntarily checked himself into a general hospital in Nuremberg for treatment" (2010, 135).

This idea is replicated within the first minute of *Rebel in the Rye*, where Strong recreates the emotional consequences of Salinger's participation in World War II. Set in 1945, the film starts with a shaky hand holding a pencil above a notebook. Next, British actor Nicholas Hoult, characterized as J.D. Salinger, is shown, a lost look on his face, a drawn expression and anxious breathing. Seemingly unable to write, Salinger's voice-over begins and we are suddenly inside his head:

> Dear Whit, I regret to inform you that Holden Caulfield is dead. I know you thought he could protect me or at the very least give me refuge from my sarcasm. But Holden is gone forever. And I don't know if anything could save me now.[7]
>
> (01:02-01:33)

One of the most elaborately described events in Slawenski's biography is the battle of the Hürtgen Forest. Located in the Belgian-German frontier, the weather conditions, vegetation, fortifications and bombs placed by the Nazis made the location barely penetrable. Slawenski claims that "in this eerie place, death could come with every footfall, every brush against a stone or touch of a branch" (2010, 107). Even though Strong never specifies Salinger's locations during the war, there is a sequence of a battle scene in the middle of a forest where mines are detonated by soldiers walking over them, injuring, maiming and killing men without respite, while their shaking and terrified comrades, among them Private Salinger, take cover and shoot back at a skillful invisible enemy (45:03-45:45).

According to Slawenski, though, Salinger's participation in the liberation of Dachau concentration camp in Germany is arguably what affected him the most—a view also shared and reflected in Strong's biopic. Several sources coincide in asserting that this was the moment Salinger's trauma formed and later impacted his lifelong decisions regarding privacy and social relations. Eberhard Alsen argues that "it is […] safe to say that […] Salinger's nervous breakdown was not due to the stress of combat. It is more likely that it was due to what he witnessed at the concentration camp" (2002, 381). Slawenski claims that "it was Salinger's intelligence duties that delivered the

[6] Other sources, though, dispute this. For example, Shields and Salerno write that "there has been a lot of misinformation about what J.D. Salinger actually did in the war […]. The most recent offender is Kenneth Slawenski's *J.D. Salinger. A Life* (2010), which has dozens of errors about Salinger's war record" (2013, 25).

[7] Whit Burnett (1900-1972) was Salinger's mentor at Columbia University and editor of *Story* magazine.

final horrors of the war" (2010, 131). By spring 1945, brushing victory with their fingertips, the allies proceeded to the inspection and liberation of concentration camps. Slawenski argues that "CIC officers were instructed that upon entering an area suspected of containing one of these camps, it was their duty to make straightaway for its location, [...] assess the situation, interrogate the inmates, and file a report with headquarters" (2010, 132). What Salinger and his comrades encountered were a few hundred survivors—although their emaciated appearance might have claimed otherwise—most of them Jewish, in striped clothing, more resigned to finding death than salvation. Salinger's daughter wrote in her memoir about her father, *Dream Catcher*, that, although not very vocal about his experiences in the army, he did use to say that "you could live a lifetime [...] and never really get the smell of burning flesh out of your nose" (2000, 156). Strong offers one of the most powerful scenes of the biopic in his recreation of this idea. The director is able to capture, with no scripted dialogue whatsoever, the seed of trauma being planted in Salinger. After the noise and chaos of battle, the sound comes to a halt and there is a series of skinny arms extended through a wire fence, eagerly reaching for the food that is being handed out by soldiers. The image overlaps with shots of individual people, relating disturbing details: bony complexions, disoriented looks, hairless heads full of wounds. The camera focus becomes blurry but not so much that rows and rows of people that look like living dead cannot be seen. The change of shot progressively redefines the image towards a close-up of Salinger, paralyzed by horror and disbelief, slowly becoming aware of the reality of the place. At some point, his teary eyes close and he looks away, as if unwilling to witness any more destruction and tragedy (47:44-48:47). This brilliant shot establishes the before-and-after of Salinger's psychological affliction.

It can be assumed that the casting of Salinger in Strong's biopic was not an easy task. The choice of Nicholas Hoult as Salinger definitely affects the narrative as well. Strong himself claimed that "the story is the performance" (2017, n.p.) and after an exhaustive search for the perfect leading actor for the role, Hoult fulfilled Strong's requirements: he needed someone who could transmit to the audience the emotional journey Salinger went through, particularly his time in Europe during the war. However, making Hoult's appearance similar to that of the author had to be worked on through rehearsals and his characterization, eventually making him a believable J. D. Salinger for the audience. Beyond the protagonist, Strong's approach to secondary characters further demonstrates his effort to translate Slawenski's biographical material into cinematic discourse. One such figure is Sylvia Welter, an important presence in this period of Salinger's life. Through her inclusion, the film reinforces its focus on Salinger's postwar fragility rather than on his romantic life. Salinger's first wife was suspected of being a member of the Nazi Party. Against this backdrop, Salinger told his family "he had met a Frenchwoman named Sylvia and she had spellbound him", much to his parents' shock (2010, 141). In his account, Slawenski claims that "with a milky-light complexion and brown hair and eyes, Sylvia was vibrant and attractive"

(2010,149). In the film, Sylvia only appears briefly, when Salinger returns to the States, bringing his young new wife with him as a surprise. Played by German actress Anna Bullard, Sylvia barely talks during her scenes, giving a mysterious and timid air to the character, in tune with what Slawenski describes in the biography. Whereas Slawenski expands on Salinger's broader European experience—including his encounter with Ernest Hemingway—Strong deliberately omits this episode, choosing instead to emphasize the writer's internal struggles. Earlier in the book, Slawenski recounts how Salinger met Hemingway in Paris, shortly after the liberation of the French capital in August 1944. According to Slawenski, "Salinger perceived his time with Hemingway as a generational passing of the torch" (2010, 101). In Strong's biopic, however, the novelist is nowhere to be seen, which is especially notable considering his notoriety. One of the possible reasons why Hemingway is missing in Strong's storytelling is that *Rebel in the Rye* (2017) is the first Salinger-focused biopic. The casting of Hemingway would have added the movie to the filmography featuring the Illinoisan author, as well as deflecting attention from Salinger and lessening the trauma that World War II produced in the New Yorker. This deliberate omission underscores Strong's adaptation strategy: rather than reproducing every historical element of Slawenski's narrative, the film reshapes it into a more intimate psychological portrait, keeping Salinger's trauma at the emotional core of the story.

One of the most surprising changes in the narrative structure of the biopic compared with the biography concerns the order of events. Challenging the cradle-to-grave linear convention followed by Slawenski in his biography, Strong begins his film with a media-res opening. The movie, as already mentioned, starts in 1945 and then flashes backward to 1939 to tell the story behind Salinger's gaunt appearance. By altering the chronological tale composed by Slawenski, Strong provokes interest and curiosity in the audience. The story is then told from J. D. Salinger's perspective. Strong makes the author's point of view take over the entire narrative, as opposed to the narrator that Slawenski uses, a customary resource of biographies. Different from recreations of novels or other fictional accounts, life narratives offer a new dimension to Chatman's narratological approach to written and audiovisual storytelling. Strong's cinematic narrator can, therefore, be applied to this analysis as well. Chatman claimed that the discourse of a narrative text is a combination of mimesis—visual representation—and diegesis—verbal narration (1978, 32). Although some scholars have challenged this concept,[8] Chatman argued that it is the cinematographic narrator who, through the ensemble of aural, verbal and visual codes, is in charge of transmitting the message that the scene is trying to deliver (1990, 2).

Salinger's perspective can be appreciated through resources such as the voice-over. For instance, the first half of the film is presented as a memory relived by Salinger

[8] David Bordwell defined the communication between the scene and the viewer as "film narration" which, according to him, is the result of an act of construction by the viewer (1985, xvi/xviii).

from his situation at the German hospital. Salinger's voice-over helps the audience understand that the story is being narrated from another point in time, after a series of traumatic events have taken place. However, the development of the storytelling is also realized through other cinematographic techniques including mise-en-scène, lighting, characterization and performance. To this end, Strong's adaptation of Salinger's state of mind during this period, stemming from Slawenski's biographical account of the author, is represented by the expressions on Hoult/Salinger's face, the ambience of the sequence—mostly the gloomy lighting, shadowy figures, dramatic instrumental music—and the editing of the scenes and takes. For instance, approximately one hour into the film, the story catches up with the present. Salinger is at a hospital after the cease fire and is lined up with other shell-shocked soldiers who are being checked by doctors. The blurry frame turns into one where a doctor is directing a flashlight towards Salinger's/the viewer's eyes. This shot makes the audience feel inserted in the narrative and experience the protagonist's reality. By the time Salinger appears on scene again, seated at the same table at which he was seen at the beginning of the movie, unable to write and with trembling hands, audiences already know what brought him there. He looks up from the page to see other men abstracted in their own thoughts or memories, shaking or completely still. He then looks through the window, in a vain attempt at distracting his mind, but he cannot help but coming back to the horrors he has lived through. The quick carrousel of horrific images is accompanied by an extradiegetic eerie melody that implies the enormous disturbance in Salinger's mind (48:50-50:00). Right after this moment, the voice-over enters the scene, as it did at the beginning of the film, with the main purpose of finishing and signing off the letter to Whit Burnett that Salinger has been writing throughout:

> I'm truly sorry you wasted all that time on me. But you gotta believe me when I tell you I have nothing left to say. About Holden Caulfield or anything else for that matter. Sincerely yours, Jerry Salinger.
>
> (50:00–50:16)

The epistolary form of the first half of the film seems like a nod to Slawenski's biography. Some of the sources Slawenski used as documentation were letters sent to Salinger or by him to family and friends such as Hemingway and Burnett. Strong's adaptation is, then, influenced by other Salingeresque material as well as by several filters that create an intertextual web of sources, as will be explored in the next section.

6. Texts in dialogue: influences and filters

Many biographers have written about Salinger's life and works, despite his determined efforts to live in anonymity. There were even legal battles between Salinger and big publishing houses who released unauthorized biographies ("Salinger v. Random House, Inc.," H2O Harvard Law). Although Slawenski reworks information from other

biographical accounts, most of the reviews of his biography (2010) have generally praised his rendition of the author. Michiko Kakutani, in her review for *The New York Times*, argues that Slawenski's biography "retraces a lot of ground covered in earlier books by Ian Hamilton and Paul Alexander" (2011, n.p.). However, she also claims that "it does so without the sort of condescending and at times voyeuristic speculation that hobbled those earlier biographies, and it does an evocative job of tracing the evolution of Salinger's work and thinking" (2011, n.p.).

The biopic is, however, the first full-feature whose plot is solely focused on Salinger, a bold move by director Strong considering the problems that adapting any Salinger-related piece have always entailed. The film was released, albeit seven years after Salinger's death, although this probably helped to ameliorate the circumstances behind the production of the movie. After the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951, Salinger became increasingly private, a tendency that extended from his personal to his professional life. Determined to keep his work separate from his public persona, he consistently rejected adaptations of his stories and avoided any media exposure that could interfere with the intimate relationship between his texts and their readers. In 2008, he even established a literary trust to protect his writings from unauthorized use, ensuring control over his legacy even after his death (Slawenski, 2008, 401). The increasing permissibility of working with Salingeresque documentation that seemed to open up after the author's passing gave way to an assumed freedom for several artists, filmmakers, writers, etc., who had been dreaming for decades of producing material related to both Salinger and his literary works. Attempts had been made, nevertheless, to adapt the author's material over the years: filmmakers never hesitated to look for the legal loopholes that Salinger's protectionist measures had overlooked. Several such films seem to draw their theme from the distinctive traits of Salinger's most famous characters: *Rebel without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967) and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) are argued to represent social outcasts such as Salinger's protagonist from *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield ("Phonies: Movies Inspired by J. D. Salinger." *TIME Magazine*), and *The Royal Tenenbaums* (Wes Anderson, 2001) has been assumed to be a recreation of Salinger's Glass family (Brody, 2010, n.p.). Other films portray the obsessive nature of certain fans who were fascinated by the author's genius: *Good Girl* (Miguel Arteta, 2002) and *Chapter 27* (Jarrett Schaefer, 2007) being just two examples. After Salinger's death, the cinema industry felt freer to portray the author's life and works without so many restrictions. This is exemplified by films such as *Coming through the Rye* (James Steven Sadwith, 2015) and *My Salinger Year* (Philippe Falardeau, 2020) explicitly attempt to recreate Salinger's most famous novel, as well as unexplored events occurring after the author retiring from the publishing business.

Another new possibility that opened up because of this increasing permissibility is the fact that lines, scenes, references and characters from *The Catcher in the Rye* can be somehow inserted in adaptations of Salinger's life. In spite of being legally prohibited

from being adapted in its entirety (O'Neill, 2013, p. 26), Salinger's most famous novel is at times integrated into both Slawenski's biography and Strong's biopic, likely aimed at provoking the interpretation that Holden Caulfield is, in a way, Salinger's alter ego. In his biography, Slawenski argues that there is indeed a connection between the author and his character. The biographer claims that one of the stories Salinger published while in the army, "Once a Week Won't Kill You" (1944) is "a placid, humorous self-account" which draws a "correlation between Salinger and the character of Holden Caulfield" (2010, 115). In the biopic, Strong creates several scenes where Salinger is writing as if he was Holden at the different camps he is stationed at during his time at the military. One such instance occurs after Salinger learns from the newspapers that Oona O'Neill, whom he still believed to be his girlfriend, since no official break up had been discussed, has married Charlie Chaplin. Strong shows Salinger writing about Sally Hayes—a character allegedly based on Oona—in a quotation directly drawn from the novel (Salinger 1951, 138):

> [Salinger's voice over]
> "Holden!" she said. "It's marvelous to see you! It's been ages." She had one of these very loud, embarrassing voices when you met her somewhere. She got away with it because she was so damn good-looking, but it always gave me a pain in the ass.
>
> (43:15-43:35)

Strong's adaptation is also influenced by a series of filters that affect the resulting material. Some of the filters that Stam mentions in his intertextual dialogism approach are personal permits, charismatic stars and economic advantage (2000, 68-69). Hutcheon, in turn, also mentions media and reception as contextual lenses to consider when analyzing an adaptation (2013, 143). They all converge in this current analysis in order to examine the way in which these filters affect the adaptation of the story in the film. Slawenski's biography was originally published as *J.D. Salinger. A Life Raised High* in 2010 by Pomona Books in England and in the United States as *J.D. Salinger. A Life* in 2011 (hardcover) and 2012 (paperback) by Random House, a publisher whose legal disputes with Salinger in the past could, at least in part, explain the later release of the book in the US. The different publication dates do not look like a simple case of bureaucratic delays and paperwork. Slawenski's biography was published shortly after Salinger's death when a potentially sensitive period opened: would the constraints and restrictions be strengthened or relaxed now? The answer was still uncertain. Slawenski had been working for years on a book that aimed at delivering "a true and fair and unsentimental account of Salinger's life justly infused with appreciation for his works" (2010, ix). The fact that he decided to publish the book the same year Salinger died is significant, not only because of the subpoena risks but also because of the boost in sales and publicity that this period offered. After all, *J.D. Salinger. A Life* was the first official biographical account that surfaced right after the author's passing on January 27, 2010.

The biopic *Rebel in the Rye*, however, came about in a different way. Strong makes his directorial debut with this life filming account of Salinger. By the time he produced and released his biopic about the author, Salinger was long gone and the restrictions about recreations of his life and works had somewhat relaxed. In order to create a biographical account that was attractive to audiences and also respectful towards its subject, Strong turned to selecting a stellar cast: he counted on award-winning and well-known stars such as Sarah Paulson and Kevin Spacey—Dorothy Olding and Whit Burnett, respectively. But also, he relied on popular stars such as Nicholas Hoult as J.D. Salinger and promising newcomers like Zoey Deutch and Lucy Boynton—Oona O'Neill and Claire Douglas, respectively. The film's ensemble is both classic and experienced as well as trendy and fresh, adjectives which could also describe the movie itself: attractive to young audiences but with a classy and rigorous style.[9] This film is considered an independent movie, which inherently establishes a contrast with studio films. Ortner argues with respect to the characteristics of *indie* films and their relationship to blockbusters: "an independent film is defined [...] as the antithesis of a Hollywood film" (2013, 4). She claims that there is a variety of divergences between these two types of film such as high vs. low budgets, entertaining vs. challenging topics, illusion vs. realism, etc. (Ortner, 2013, p. 4) *Rebel in the Rye* was released and promoted as part of the 2017 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, arguably the most important showcase of independent films in the United States. Following Ortner's take on *indies*, Strong's biopic about Salinger had a modest budget and focuses on realistic and difficult topics—World War II, PTSD and depression, among others ("Rebel in the Rye." *The Numbers*).

All these features turn the film into a biographical account that, although based on a widely known writer, is a long way from having the far-reaching impact and commercialization that a studio or Hollywood film would have. This may sound like a negative outcome, but it seems like an appropriate scenario for a Salinger movie: a discreetly released film, as respectful to Salinger's memory and privacy as possible, only available and consumed by a limited audience in a cozy and familiar setting. As John Defore argues in his film review for *The Hollywood Reporter* "given the public's undying curiosity about the literary star who rejected fame, it's surprising he hasn't been the subject of more films" (2017, n.p.). However, Defore claims, "*Rebel in the Rye* shows how hard it is to satisfyingly pull that enigmatic man out of his hiding place" (2017, n.p.).

When dealing with life narratives in adaptation, research faces the same issues that fictional recreations do. The intertextual dialogism approach examines the adapted texts—and their sources—as conversations which influence one another. As Stam argues, by applying this theory of adaptation, we are "less concerned with inchoate notions of 'fidelity' and [...] give more attention to dialogical responses—to readings, critiques, interpretations, and rewritings of prior material" (2000, 75). The resulting

[9] Danny Strong is a novice director; therefore, we cannot compare this movie with his previous directorial projects, nor establish a noticeably characteristic film style as a filmmaker.

investigation of this process will, then, Stam says, "produce a criticism that not only takes into account, but also welcomes, the differences among media" (2000, 76).

7. Conclusion

Strong's adaptation of Slawenski's biography about J.D. Salinger squeezes its limited budget to the maximum to convey an important message to the audience: Salinger's time in Europe during World War II had a tremendous effect on the author's psyche and, consequently, on his famous works and peculiar character. From the perspective of narratology and intertextual dialogism, the biopic *Rebel in the Rye* (2017)—and its main source, the biography *J.D. Salinger. A Life* (2010)—can be regarded and analyzed as an adaptation based on factual events and people. The recreation of the events, characters, locations and discourse follows a tendency whereby the image takes precedence over the text and dialogue, becoming so powerful in its narration of the story that the mise-en-scène, sound and lighting become characters as valuable for the storytelling as J.D. Salinger, Whit Burnett and Oona O'Neill. In turn, the contextual and intertextual filters such as economic advantage, personal permits and reception of the film influence the biopic in a meaningful way, producing an adaptation that is, thus far, the only biographical movie about the New Yorker author.

In the never-ending quest to make the field of adaptation studies more open and fluid, the combination of narratological approaches and intertextuality offers an alternative to moralistic methods of analysis which create rigid limits between written and audiovisual texts. The case of Salinger may be a particularly curious one, since he seemed to abhor even the mere idea of his works being adapted. However, the constant revisitation of Salingeresque material, as well as the change in circumstances when he passed away, provoked the resurging of accounts such as Slawenski's and Strong's. At the end of the day, J.D. Salinger is, still, a mystery to solve, a truth to uncover. He himself wrote of it in his novel *The Catcher in the Rye*: "[W]hat really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn't happen much, though" (Salinger, 1951, 22).

Works Cited

Alsen, Eberhard. 2002. "New Light on the Nervous Breakdowns of Salinger's Sergeant X and Seymour Glass." *CLA Journal* 45 (3): 379-387.

Bal, Mieke. 2017. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Benton, Michael. 2009. *Literary Biography: An Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Bluestone, George. 1957. *Novels into Film*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press.

Brody, Richard. 2010. "Wes Anderson on J. D. Salinger." *The New Yorker,* January 29. [Accessed May 8, 2025].

BROWN, Tom, and Belén Vidal. 2014. *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*. New York: Routledge.

CHATMAN, Seymour. 1990. *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP.

—. 1978. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP.

CHESHIRE, Ellen. 2015. *Bio-Pics: A Life in Pictures*. New York: Wallflower.

ELLIOT, Kamilla. 2020. *Theorizing Adaptation*. New York: Oxford UP.

GENETTE, Gérard. 1980. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP.

—. 1997. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P.

HEILBRUN, Carolyn G. 1993. "Is Biography Fiction?" *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 76 (2-3): 295-314.

HEINEN, Sandra, and Roy Sommer, eds. 2009. *Narratology in the Age of Cross-disciplinary Narrative Research.* Berlin: De Gruyter.

HORSTKOTTE, Silke. 2009."Seeing or Speaking: Visual Narratology and Focalization, Literature to Film." In Heinen and Sommer 2009, 170-192.

HUTCHEON, Linda. 2013. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge.

IMDB (INTERNET MOVIE DATABASE). *IMDb.* [Accessed January 10, 2023].

KAKUTANI, Michiko. "Peering into a Reclusive Life." Review of *J.D. Salinger. A Life*, by Kenneth Slawenski. *The New York Times*, February 10, 2011. [Accessed January 13, 2023].

KENNY, Glenn. 2017. "Review: 'Rebel in the Rye' Looks at the Creation of Salinger's Classic." Review of *Rebel in the Rye*, by Danny Strong. *The New York Times*, September 7. [Accessed February 2, 2023].

KRANZ, David L., and Nancy C. Mellerski. 2008. *In/Fidelity: Essays on Film Adaptation*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

LEITCH, Thomas. 2017. *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*. New York: Oxford UP.

NAREMORE, James, ed. 2000. *Film Adaptation.* New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.

ORTNER, Sherry B. 2013. *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream*. Durham, NC and London: Duke UP.

"Phonies! Movies Inspired by J. D. Salinger." *TIME Magazine*. [Accessed May 6, 2025].

"REBEL IN THE RYE." *The Numbers*. [Accessed September 22, 2020].

RODRÍGUEZ MARTÍN, María Elena. "Unfaithfulness to Jane Austen? Communicating Readings and Interpretations of her Novels through their Film Adaptations." *ES: Revista de Filología Inglesa* 26 (2005): 189-200.

SALINGER, J.D. 1951. *The Catcher in the Rye*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

SALINGER, Margaret. 2000. *Dream Catcher: A Memoir*. New York: Washington Square Press.

"Salinger v. Random House, Inc." *H20 Harvard Law.* [Accessed June 10, 2020].
Shields, David, and Shane Salerno. 2013. *Salinger*. London: Simon & Schuster.
Slawenski, Kenneth. 2010. *J. D. Salinger: A Life*. New York: Random House.
Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. 2010. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P.
Stam, Robert. 2000. "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation." In Naremore 2000, 54-76.
Strong, Danny, director. *Rebel in the Rye*. IFC Films, 2017, 1 h 46 min. DVD.
THR staff. "'Rebel in the Rye': Film Review | Sundance 2017." *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 25, 2017. [Accessed October 28, 2022].
Variety. "Nicholas Hoult on Playing J. D. Salinger in 'Rebel in the Rye'." *YouTube*, February 8, 2017, interview. [Accessed November 24, 2022].

Received: 13 February 2023 Accepted: 1 August 2023

Susana García Montosa is a Spanish and English language educator and doctoral researcher. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English Studies and a Master's degree in English Literature and Linguistics from the University of Granada, Spain. She also earned a Master's degree in Spanish Language and Literature from the University of Delaware, USA. She has taught English and Spanish at both secondary and university levels in Spain and the United States, and completed a research stay at the University of Warsaw, Poland. Her research focuses on narratology, adaptation studies, and biographical film, with a particular interest in the representation of literary figures such as J. D. Salinger. She also designs and leads intercultural learning projects that foster dialogue between students across countries. She is currently completing her doctoral dissertation on J. D. Salinger with the University of Granada while living and working in the United States.