



REINTERPRETING THE NATURE-CULTURE DICHOTOMY IN COLIN THIELE'S STORM BOY AND ITS 2019 FILM ADAPTATION: AN ECOCRITICAL ADAPTATION STUDY

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 20/11, 2025

Revised 14/02, 2026

Accepted 16/02, 2026

Abstract

This article examines how the 2019 film adaptation of Colin Thiele's *Storm Boy* (1964) reconstructs the nature-culture dichotomy through changes in characterisation, focalisation, and cinematic narration. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the study compares the novel with Shawn Seet's *Storm Boy* (2019) and analyses selected scenes that foreground Michael Kingley's relation to pelicans, Fingerbone Bill, coastal space, and industrial development. The analysis is framed by ecocriticism, Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, and Boggs and Petrie's concepts of film analysis. The findings show that the novel depicts Michael as a child whose daily life is integrated with the coastal environment, while the film repositions him as an elderly industrial figure whose childhood memories interrupt his involvement in a coastal development project. Through flashback structure, images of rain, pelicans, urban buildings, and Fingerbone's ecological knowledge, the film transforms a children's story of animal rescue into a critique of anthropocentrism, commodification, and modern society's separation from nature. The adaptation therefore does not merely reproduce the novel; it reinterprets its ecological meaning for a context shaped by climate anxiety and industrial expansion. This study contributes to ecocritical adaptation studies by showing how adaptation can expand a literary environmental narrative into a contemporary critique of socio-ecological change.

Keywords:

Anthropocentric;
Ecocriticism;
Film Adaptation;
Nature-Culture;
Dichotomy;
Storm Boy

تجريد

تتناول هذه المقالة كيفية إعادة بناء الثنائية بين الطبيعة والثقافة في الاقتباس السينمائي الصادر عام ٢٠١٩ لرواية كولن ثيلي *Storm Boy* الصادرة عام ١٩٦٤، وذلك من خلال التغييرات في بناء الشخصيات، والتبئير، والسرد السينمائي. وباستخدام المنهج الوصفي النوعي، تقارن الدراسة بين الرواية و فيلم *Storm Boy* للمخرج شون سيت عام ٢٠١٩، كما تحلل مشاهد مختارة تُبرز علاقة مايكل كينغلي بالبجع، وفينغربون بيل، والفضاء الساحلي، والتنمية الصناعية. تستند الدراسة في تحليلها إلى النقد البيئي، ونظرية الاقتباس عند هتشون، ومفاهيم بوغز وبيري في تحليل الفيلم. وتُظهر النتائج أن الرواية تصوّر مايكل بوصفه طفلاً مندمجاً في حياته اليومية مع البيئة الساحلية، في حين يعيد الفيلم تقديمه بوصفه شخصية صناعية مسنة تتقاطع ذكريات طفولتها مع تورطه في مشروع تنمية ساحلية. ومن خلال بنية الاسترجاع الزمني، وصور المطر، والبجع، والمباني الحضرية، والمعرفة البيئية التي يمتلكها فينغربون، يحوّل

الفيلم قصة أطفال عن إنقاذ الحيوانات إلى نقد للمركزية البشرية، وتسليع الطبيعة، وانفصال المجتمع الحديث عنها. وبذلك، فإن الاقتباس لا يكتفي بإعادة إنتاج الرواية، بل يعيد تفسير معناها البيئي في سياق يتشكل بفعل القلق المناخي والتوسع الصناعي. تسهم هذه الدراسة في دراسات الاقتباس من منظور النقد البيئي من خلال إظهار كيف يمكن للاقتباس أن يوسع السرد الأدبي البيئي ليصبح نقدًا معاصرًا للتحويلات الاجتماعية والبيئية.

الكلمات المفتاحية :

المركزية البشرية
النقد البيئي
الاقتباس السينمائي
ثنائية الطبيعة
والثقافة
Storm Boy

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana adaptasi film tahun 2019 dari novel *Storm Boy* karya Colin Thiele yang terbit pada tahun 1964 merekonstruksi dikotomi alam dan budaya melalui perubahan dalam karakterisasi, focalisasi, dan narasi sinematik. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini membandingkan novel tersebut dengan film *Storm Boy* karya Shawn Seet tahun 2019 serta menganalisis beberapa adegan terpilih yang menonjolkan hubungan Michael Kingley dengan burung pelikan, Fingerbone Bill, ruang pesisir, dan pembangunan industri. Analisis dalam penelitian ini dibingkai melalui pendekatan ekokritik, teori adaptasi Hutcheon, serta konsep analisis film Boggs dan Petrie. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa novel menggambarkan Michael sebagai seorang anak yang kehidupan sehari-harinya menyatu dengan lingkungan pesisir, sementara film memosisikannya kembali sebagai tokoh industri yang telah lanjut usia, yang ingatan masa kecilnya mengganggu keterlibatannya dalam proyek pembangunan kawasan pesisir. Melalui struktur kilas balik, citra hujan, burung pelikan, bangunan perkotaan, dan pengetahuan ekologis Fingerbone, film ini mengubah kisah anak-anak tentang penyelamatan hewan menjadi kritik terhadap antroposentrisme, komodifikasi, dan keterpisahan masyarakat modern dari alam. Dengan demikian, adaptasi tersebut tidak sekadar mereproduksi novel, tetapi menafsirkan ulang makna ekologisnya dalam konteks yang dibentuk oleh kecemasan iklim dan ekspansi industri. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian adaptasi berbasis ekokritik dengan menunjukkan bagaimana adaptasi dapat memperluas narasi lingkungan dalam karya sastra menjadi kritik kontemporer terhadap perubahan sosial-ekologis.

Kata kunci:

Antroposentrisme;
Ekokritik;
Adaptasi Film;
Dikotomi Alam-
Budaya;
Storm Boy

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A. Introduction

Environmental issues have become increasingly pressing as modern societies expand industrial production, urban infrastructure, and patterns of consumption that depend on the intensive use of natural resources. Ecocriticism reads this problem not merely as a technical environmental crisis, but as a cultural and ideological problem: the way human beings imagine nature shapes how they treat the physical world. Anthropocentrism, which places human beings at the centre of value and treats other forms of life primarily as instruments for human use, is one of the key concepts through which ecocriticism explains environmental degradation (Goralnik & Nelson, 2012). In this framework, the separation between nature and culture is not neutral. It often produces a hierarchy in which human culture is considered superior while animals, plants, landscapes, and non-human life are reduced to resources.

Literature and film are important cultural forms for examining this hierarchy because both construct images of human life, social order, place, and non-human beings. Colin Thiele's *Storm Boy* (Thiele, 1964) is a significant literary work for such a discussion because it places a child, pelicans, a coastal landscape, and an Aboriginal figure at the centre of its narrative. The novel tells the story of Michael Kingley, known as Storm Boy, who lives with his father, Hide-Away Tom, near the Coorong in South Australia. Michael rescues and raises three pelicans after their mother is killed by hunters. His relationship with the pelicans, especially Mr. Percival, suggests a non-instrumental bond between human beings and animals. The story therefore offers a useful entry point for questioning the assumption that humans stand outside and above nature.

The ecological significance of *Storm Boy* becomes more complex when the novel is adapted into film. The story has circulated across different media, including the 1976 film, stage adaptations, an audio drama, and a video game. Shawn Seet's *Storm Boy* (2019) is particularly important because it changes the narrative frame of the original novel. The film presents Michael Kingley not only as a child in the past, but also as an elderly businessman in the present. This present-day Michael faces a conflict over a coastal development project supported by his company, while his granddaughter questions the ecological consequences of the project. Through this change, the film brings the childhood story into a contemporary context marked by industrial expansion, public protest, climate anxiety, and intergenerational disagreement about the environment.

Previous studies have discussed *Storm Boy* and other environmental films from several perspectives. Zonn and Aitken (Zonn & Aitken, 1994), for example, examined the 1976 film through the representation of Australian landscape, masculinity, and cultural identity (Walter, 2012). Other ecocritical studies have analysed how film and literature represent human-nature relationships, including technological domination, posthuman imagination, ecological degradation, and the desire for harmonious coexistence (Pan, 2020; Potter, 2019; Santoso et al., 2020). These studies are valuable, yet they do not sufficiently explain how the nature-culture dichotomy is transformed through the process of adaptation from Thiele's novel to Seet's 2019 film.

This article addresses that gap by reading adaptation as an ideological and ecological process. Following Hutcheon (Hutcheon, 2006), adaptation is not simply a copy of a previous work; it is repetition with variation, shaped by medium, historical context, cultural expectation, and the adapter's interpretive choices. In *Storm Boy* (Morris, 2019), the transformation of Michael from a child living close to the coast into an elderly figure entangled in industrial decision-making changes the ecological meaning of the story. The film does not only retell a narrative about a boy and a pelican. It reconstructs the tension between nature and culture by placing memory, development, Indigenous ecological knowledge, and animal agency within one cinematic structure.

Based on this background, the study asks two questions. First, how does *Storm Boy* (Morris, 2019) reconstruct the relationship between nature and culture in ways that differ from Colin Thiele's *Storm Boy* (Thiele, 1964)? Second, how is the nature-culture dichotomy reinterpreted in the film within the context of contemporary ecological discourse? The objective of this study is to show that the 2019 film adaptation expands the ecological horizon of the novel by turning a children's environmental narrative into a broader critique of anthropocentrism, commodification, and modern society's distance from nature.

B. Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method because it interprets narrative, dialogue, visual images, and ideological meanings rather than numerical data. The primary data are Colin Thiele's novel *Storm Boy* (Thiele, 1964) and Shawn Seet's film *Storm Boy* (Seet, 2019). The secondary data consist of theoretical works on ecocriticism, adaptation studies, film

analysis, and supporting studies on Australian environmental and Indigenous ecological discourse.

The method combines three analytical frameworks. First, ecocriticism is used to examine how literary and cinematic texts represent the relationship between human beings and the physical environment (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). The key concepts are anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, animal agency, and the nature-culture dichotomy. Second, Hutcheon's adaptation theory is used to explain the changes from novel to film, especially the questions of what is transformed, why the transformation matters, when and where the adaptation is produced, and how the adaptation responds to a new audience and context (Hutcheon, 2006). Third, Boggs and Petrie's film analysis is used to read cinematic elements such as framing, point of view, lighting, shot size, mise-en-scene, and the emotional focus of selected scenes (Petrie & Boggs, 2018).

Data were collected through close reading and close viewing. The novel was read to identify scenes related to Michael's relation to pelicans, Fingerbone Bill, the coastal landscape, and human exploitation of animals. The film was viewed repeatedly to identify scenes that modify these relations through the present-day corporate conflict, flashback narration, environmental protest, and visual contrasts between urban space and coastal nature. Screenshots were selected only when the scene directly supported one of the research questions.

Table 1. Unit of Analysis and Analytical Focus

Data Source	Unit of Analysis	Analytical Focus	Theoretical Lens
Storm Boy novel (1964)	Narrative passages on Michael, pelicans, Fingerbone Bill, and the coastal setting	Human-nature intimacy, animal agency, and the non-industrial coastal world	Ecocriticism and human-nature relationship
Storm Boy film (2019)	Present-day scenes of Michael as an elderly businessman, environmental protest, and corporate meeting	Industrial society, environmental conflict, and modern separation from nature	Adaptation theory and ecocriticism
Storm Boy film (2019)	Flashback scenes involving Michael, Fingerbone Bill, pelicans, and storm imagery	Memory, nostalgia, Indigenous ecological knowledge, and the return of nature within modern culture	Film analysis and ecocritical interpretation
Novel-film comparison	Changes in plot function, focalisation, rescue scene, and publicisation of Michael-pelican relation	Ideological shift from ecological intimacy to commodification and anthropocentric tension	Hutcheon's adaptation theory

The analysis was conducted in five steps. First, the novel and film were compared to identify narrative transformations. Second, selected film scenes were classified according to visual and narrative function. Third, the scenes were analysed through mise-en-scene, framing, lighting, and point of view. Fourth, the findings were interpreted through ecocritical concepts, especially anthropocentrism and the nature-culture dichotomy. Fifth, the interpretation was connected to adaptation theory to explain how the 2019 film produces a different ecological meaning from the novel. Interpretive validity was strengthened by cross-checking narrative evidence from the novel with visual evidence from the film and by ensuring that each interpretation remained connected to the research questions.

C. Result and Discussion

The results are organised according to the two research questions. The first part explains how the adaptation changes Michael's position from a child embedded in the coastal environment into an adult figure involved in industrial culture. The second part discusses how pelicans, Fingerbone Bill, and flashback structure reinterpret the nature-culture dichotomy in relation to anthropocentrism and contemporary ecological discourse.

1. From Ecological Childhood to Industrial Adulthood

The most visible transformation in the 2019 adaptation is the reconstruction of Michael Kingley's character. In the novel, Michael exists primarily as a child whose daily life is formed by the coastal environment. He moves through the beach, speaks to animals, rescues birds, and learns from Fingerbone Bill. The third-person narration places Michael in a present narrative world where nature is not outside him; it is the space in which his identity is formed. The novel describes Michael's intimacy with the environment as follows:

A boy was wandering down the beach all alone. He was as calm and happy as you please, stopping every now and then to pick up shells or talk to a molly-hawk standing forlornly on the wet sand with his wings folded and his head pointing into the rising wind. (Thiele, 1964, p. 7)

This passage shows that Michael's relation to nature is not only observational but also affective. He feels calm and happy in the coastal space, and the narration normalises his interaction with a bird as part of everyday life. The beach is not presented as a commodity

or recreational object, but as a living space that shapes Michael's perception and ethical relation to non-human beings.

The film retains the childhood story but changes the point of view by introducing the elderly Michael in the present. This older Michael is not simply a continuation of the child in the novel. He becomes a figure split between ecological memory and industrial responsibility. The film opens with public protest and corporate pressure surrounding a development project. In these scenes, Michael is visually surrounded by media, police, public anger, and business expectations. The close framing of his face and the dim, greyish lighting signal discomfort rather than authority. The adaptation therefore relocates Michael from ecological childhood to industrial adulthood.

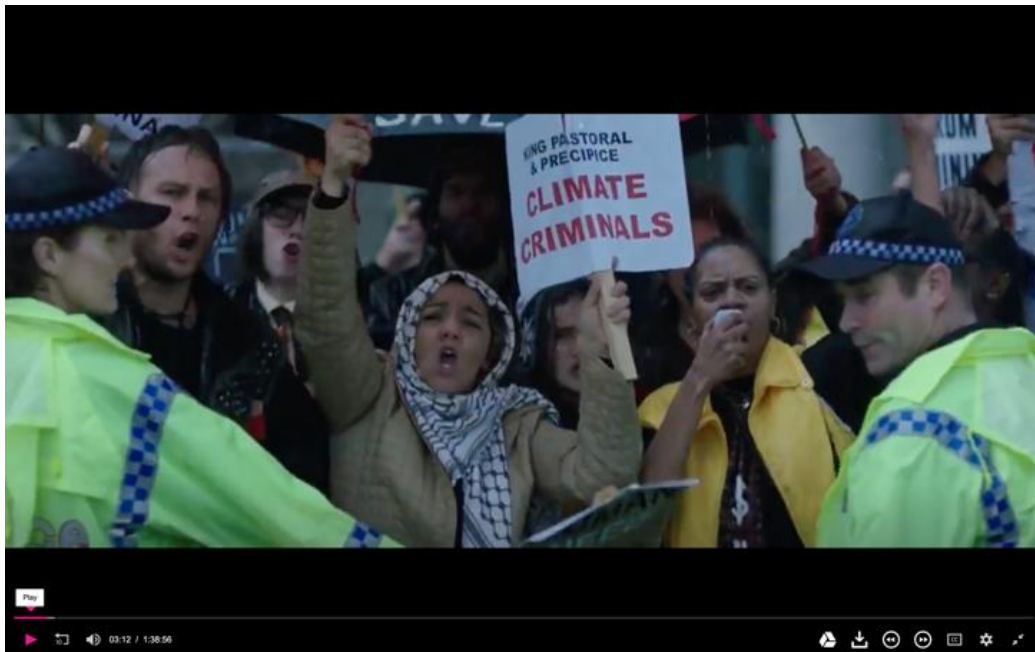


Figure 1. Environmental protest against coastal development. Source: *Storm Boy* (Seet, 2019), 00:03:12.



Figure 2. Elderly Michael Kingley under public and media pressure. Source: *Storm Boy* (Seet, 2019), 00:03:26.

Figures 1 and 2 mark the adaptation's new ideological emphasis. The crowd, police uniforms, press cameras, and protest sign move the story beyond the private relationship between a boy and pelicans. The film constructs a social field in which nature is contested by corporate development and public ecological concern. This addition responds to Hutcheon's idea that adaptation is shaped by the historical and cultural moment of its production. In this case, the 2019 film repositions *Storm Boy* within debates on coastal development, climate anxiety, and intergenerational responsibility.

The transformation also changes focalisation. The novel follows Michael's childhood directly, whereas the film makes childhood available through memory. Flashback becomes a cinematic device that allows the past to interrupt the present. Michael's memories are triggered by rain, storms, and images of the coast. The past is therefore not lost; it returns as an ethical reminder. This structure suggests that modern culture may try to separate itself from nature, but ecological memory continues to disturb that separation.



Figure 3. Michael looking at the storm from inside the corporate space. Source: *Storm Boy* (Seet, 2019), 00:05:03.

In Figure 3, Michael faces the storm from behind glass. The composition places his body inside an enclosed modern interior, while the storm exists outside. The window functions as a visual boundary between culture and nature. At the same time, the storm fills the frame and dominates his attention. This shot makes the nature-culture dichotomy visible and unstable: Michael is separated from nature, yet nature re-enters his consciousness and shapes his decision-making.

2. Pelicans, Fingerbone Bill, and Ecocentric Knowledge

The pelicans and Fingerbone Bill are central to the article's ecocritical argument because they challenge human superiority (Zonn & Aitken, 1994). In the novel, Fingerbone Bill is represented as a person who understands wind, sea, animals, and the marks left by the landscape. Michael's learning about nature is mediated through his interaction with Fingerbone. Thiele writes:

Fingerbone knew more about things than anyone Storm Boy had ever known. He could point out fish in the water and birds in the sky when even Hide-Away couldn't see a thing. He knew all the signs of wind and weather in the clouds and the sea. And he could read all the strange writing on the sandhills and beaches. (Thiele, 1964, p. 9)

The passage positions ecological knowledge as a form of literacy. Fingerbone can 'read' the beach and the weather, while other characters cannot. This does not mean that all Indigenous people should be reduced to an ecological stereotype. Rather, within the

narrative economy of *Storm Boy*, Fingerbone functions as an ecocentric figure who teaches Michael to recognise the land and animals as meaningful presences. The 2019 film intensifies this function by showing initial hesitation and social distance between Michael's father and Fingerbone. This visual tension indicates that the relation between non-Indigenous modern society and Indigenous ecological knowledge is not immediately harmonious.

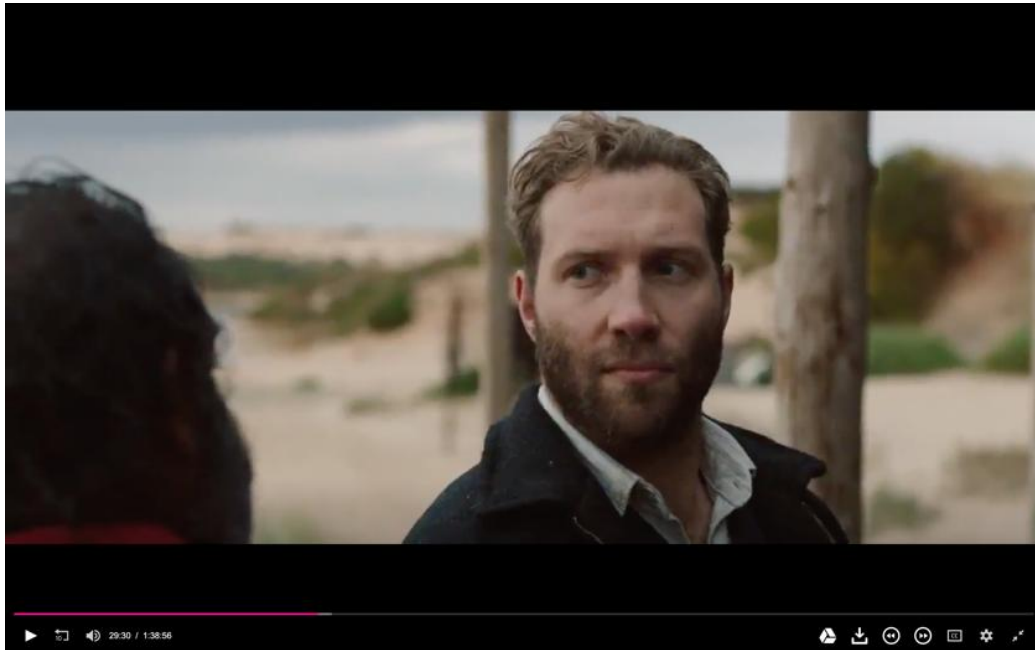


Figure 4. Michael's father looking at Fingerbone Bill with suspicion. Source: *Storm Boy* (Seet, 2019), 00:29:30.

Figure 4 uses facial expression and framing to signal unease. Fingerbone is partly outside the frame, while Michael's father becomes the object of the camera's attention. This choice highlights the father's guarded response rather than Fingerbone's presence. The scene suggests that the film does not present ecological wisdom as automatically accepted by human culture. It must first pass through suspicion, social distance, and historical tension.



Figure 5. *Fingerbone Bill performs a ritual of respect for the land. Source: Storm Boy (Seet, 2019), around 00:39:28.*

In Figure 5, Fingerbone's statement, 'Just talking to the land. Paying my respects,' transforms the landscape from a passive setting into an entity that deserves acknowledgement. The wide framing, open dunes, and presence of the pelicans create a visual composition in which humans, animals, and land share the same space. The film thus presents an alternative to anthropocentrism. Human beings are not isolated subjects who own the land; they are participants in a wider ecological relation (Wildcat, 2009).

The pelicans also disrupt anthropocentric hierarchy. Mr. Percival is not merely an object of Michael's affection; he becomes a more-than-human agent whose actions affect human lives. In both the novel and the film, Mr. Percival rescues a human character. However, the ideological implication differs. In the novel, the rescue leads to gratitude and recognition of the pelican's agency. The humans reward him with food and affection, suggesting reciprocity. In the film, the rescue becomes publicised and contributes to Michael's reputation. This shift indicates a movement from ecological reciprocity to partial commodification: the human-animal bond is transformed into a story that can circulate through media and produce social value for humans.

This difference is important because it shows that the film does not simply idealise nature. It shows how modern society can convert even an intimate ecological relation into a public narrative of profit, fame, or institutional advantage. The film therefore criticises

anthropocentrism not only through scenes of environmental destruction, but also through the subtle commodification of affection between humans and animals.

3. Flashback, Nostalgia, and the Contemporary Nature-Culture Dichotomy

The 2019 film uses nostalgia as a central structure for reinterpreting the nature-culture dichotomy. Michael's childhood memories are not presented as sentimental ornaments; they function as ecological reminders that challenge his present involvement in industrial development. This strategy is different from the novel, where the story unfolds within the coastal world itself. In the film, the coastal past is recovered from within a modern urban and corporate present.



Figure 6. Fingerbone Bill appears in Michael's memory. Source: *Storm Boy* (Seet, 2019), 00:03:47.



Figure 7. Pelicans return in Michael's memory beside the modern built environment. Source: *Storm Boy* (Seet, 2019).

Figures 6 and 7 show that memory in the film is visual and ecological. The image of Fingerbone appears through blurred, dream-like framing, suggesting that his presence is not simply remembered but ethically haunting. Figure 7 places pelicans near a modern road and urban structure. This visual juxtaposition shows that nature and culture are not completely separate spaces. They coexist, overlap, and compete within the same social world.

The adaptation therefore presents the nature-culture dichotomy as an illusion produced by modern life. Industrial society may imagine buildings, corporations, and development projects as separate from the natural world, but the film repeatedly shows that these projects remain dependent on and vulnerable to nature (Bruckmeier, 2019). Rain, storms, animals, and coastal landscapes interrupt the smooth operation of corporate decision-making. Michael's internal conflict becomes a cinematic representation of the wider conflict between anthropocentric development and ecological responsibility.

The timing and location of the adaptation strengthen this interpretation. Produced in Australia in 2019, the film appears in a period when climate change, coastal development, species vulnerability, and Indigenous ecological knowledge had become urgent public issues (Readfearn, 2020). The film's ecological meaning therefore differs from the novel not because the novel lacks environmental concern, but because the adaptation translates that concern into a contemporary socio-environmental language. The novel foregrounds ecological intimacy; the film foregrounds the loss, memory, and possible recovery of that intimacy within industrial society.

Through this process, *Storm Boy* (2019) expands the original narrative. It transforms Michael from a figure of childhood closeness to nature into a figure who must decide whether memory can become ethical action. The film suggests that saving nature is not only a matter of personal affection for animals; it also requires resisting the social and economic systems that normalise environmental exploitation. This is the central ideological shift produced by the adaptation.

D. Conclusion

This study shows that *Storm Boy* (2019) reconstructs the nature-culture dichotomy by transforming the narrative position of Michael Kingley. In Colin Thiele's *Storm Boy* (1964), Michael is a child whose identity develops within the coastal environment and whose relation

to pelicans and Fingerbone Bill expresses ecological intimacy. In Shawn Seet's film adaptation, Michael becomes an elderly industrial figure whose memories of childhood disrupt his present involvement in a coastal development project. This transformation changes the story from a children's narrative of animal rescue into a cinematic reflection on industrial society, ecological memory, and anthropocentric conflict.

The film reinterprets the nature-culture dichotomy through flashback structure, visual contrast, and symbolic figures. Pelicans represent more-than-human agency, Fingerbone Bill represents ecological knowledge and respect for land, and the storm functions as a natural force that interrupts modern corporate space. These elements show that nature and culture are not separate domains. Their separation is an ideological illusion that allows modern society to justify exploitation, commodification, and environmental neglect.

The article contributes to ecocritical adaptation studies by demonstrating that adaptation can expand the ecological meaning of a literary work. *Storm Boy* (2019) does not merely reproduce the novel; it translates the novel's environmental concern into contemporary issues of coastal development, climate anxiety, intergenerational responsibility, and the commodification of human-animal relations. The limitation of this study is that it focuses only on the comparison between the 1964 novel and the 2019 film. Future research may compare the 2019 film with the 1976 adaptation, examine audience reception, or analyse how Australian environmental humanities and Indigenous ecological knowledge are represented across different *Storm Boy* adaptations.

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