

## Adaptation Theory: The Current Foci

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the current directions of adaptation studies, in particular, the use of methods that read adaptations as components of cultural discourse. Intended to extend and contextualize the debate engendered by the different works on adaptation, the present paper demonstrates the necessity for adaptation scholarship to address more fully than it has the implications of adaptation studies. In doing so, the paper does not propose a rejection of the current foci or methodologies of the field—in fact, far from it. In building on existing approaches, it offers a framework through which to expand the theoretical methods they already embrace. To do so, it surveys three theoretically informed categories: appropriation, intertextuality, and authorship, each of which is proving influential in pushing the field of adaptation studies forward. These categories provide us with widely used language that addresses adaptation as a cultural force.

**Keywords:** *Adaptation studies, film, cultural studies, adaptation theory, narrative theory, intertextuality, appropriation, authorship.*

Adaptation studies are undertaking a process of theoretical reorganization. Rejecting the paradigms of fidelity and comparison on which the field was founded, adaptation scholars now approach the practice of adaptation as evidence of the social functions of the cinema. They are, in effect, responding to Dudley Andrew's now famous request, made over 20 years ago, for the field to move beyond simple comparative evaluations (Dudley 1984: 35-37).

Over the past few years, our understanding of adaptation has shifted even further, and we now read adaptation as a process of cultural dialogue rather than one of qualitative transcription. Contemporary scholars, such as Linda Hutcheon and Thomas Leitch, argue that the context in which an adaptation emerges produces for it a set of meanings that are critically more valuable than those which can be found through a comparison with its source.

This approach, however, has limits of its own. In particular within film studies, its formation into an applied methodology most often overlooks the fact that many adaptations have always been commercial products, intended to perform mercantile functions. Importantly, the production of essentially commercial adaptations is influenced significantly by the motivations of an economic industrial matrix from which they emerge.

Maltby argues convincingly that it is impossible to understand Hollywood cinema without exploring the interaction of these seemingly disparate elements; yet, such interaction has rarely been considered in full in the analysis of Hollywood adaptations. This oversight invites examination because, even with adaptation studies pursuing a paradigm that reads adaptations as engaged in, and reflective of, a diverse set of cultural relationships, it persists. In particular, what

tends to be overlooked, even by major theorists such as Hutcheon or Leitch, is how these relationships—the commercial in relation to the artistic and the social—emerge from, and are shaped by, the mode of production—the industrial origins—of adaptation.

In recent years, a few critics have begun to outline the necessity of weighing these relationships when reading adaptations. Writing about the methodologies of adaptation studies, Simone Murray identifies the need to give full consideration to the origins of the production of an adaptation by identifying what we risk losing if we fail to do so:

*Dematerialized, immune to commercialism, floating free of any cultural institutions, intellectual property regimes, or industry agents that might have facilitated its creation or indelibly marked its form, the adaptation exists in perfect quarantine from the troubling worlds of commerce, Hollywood, and global corporate media—a formalist textual fetish oblivious to the disciplinary incursions of political economy, book history, or the creative industries. (Murray 2008: 5)*

In his new book, Gueric DeBona transforms this contention into the basis for a revisionist approach to adaptation studies, suggesting that a consideration of the ‘industrial choices, audience reception and sociocultural environment guiding the production of a cinematic text’ leads to an understanding of adaptation more fruitful than those achieved through comparative analyses, even those informed by cultural studies (DeBona 2010: 2).

## APPROPRIATION, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND AUTHORSHIP

In film studies, critical interest in adaptation as a cultural dialogue represents a concerted attempt to move beyond two successive paradigms; one ontological, one semiotic that previously structured the development of the field. The ontological approach, active from the 1910s through the 1970s, pitted verbal against visual meaning, thereby initiating a discourse on medium specificity, which the field now seeks to overturn. The semiotic approach, which rose to prominence in the 1970s as a reaction against ontology, offered a scientific reading that articulates the different communicative potentials of literature and cinema, dismantling orthodoxies of fidelity and hierarchism originating from earlier beliefs in the aesthetic superiority of literature. Yet, both methods gave rise to a set of problems which the field is now struggling to overcome: namely, they each implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) confirm the primacy of literature, positioning literary meaning as the field’s true object of inquiry. They also position the direct comparison between an adaptation and its source as the field’s core concern, and in doing so, they limit the critical value of an adaptation to a reading of its difference from its source and ultimately obscure its involvement in larger processes of social or political exchange that include both media.

Responding to the reductive nature of these approaches, contemporary scholars propose adaptation as a form of cultural dialogue engaged in what is increasingly, and in a positive sense, spoken of as appropriation. For example, Julie Sanders, Robert B. Ray, and Linda Hutcheon position adaptations as invested in a cultural project more important than the simple exploitation of previous works. Literary critic Sanders offers appropriation as the transformation of an existing work into ‘a wholly new cultural product and domain’ (Sanders 2006: 26). Sanders reads adaptation as a focused announced form of appropriation in which adapters edit and revise their sources to bring them forth in a new light (Sanders 2006: 18-19).

Similarly, Ray proposes adaptation as the act of ‘citing’ an existing work within a new discursive context (Ray 2000: 44-46). Both lines of reasoning are echoed by Linda Hutcheon who argues that adaptations always exist in spaces ‘lateral’ to their sources, rather than below them in some kind of hierarchical chain (Hutcheon 2007:171). For Hutcheon, adaptation functions as a ‘system of diffusion’ whereby adaptations produce distinctly new creations that not only address the works they adapt but also transform those sources so as to create new interpretations without basis in the originals themselves (ibid: 170–72).<sup>i</sup>

This practice of reading adaptation as the selection and repositioning of existing works within new contexts is greatly enriched by the category of intertextuality. This category has been elaborated primarily by Robert Stam who, in a series of recent works with Alessandra Raengo, argues that cinema, like the novel, is involved in a dialogic relationship with the culture that produces it. Stam argues that films are open to the ‘infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture’, practices which reach a text ‘not only through recognizable citations but also through a subtle process of indirect textual relays’ (Stam 2005: 27).<sup>ii</sup>

Adaptation is therefore a specialized mode of film-making that brings together two networks of intertextual references, one present in the source text and one created by the adapted film (Stam 2005: 27). This reading positions adaptation, as Thomas Leitch notes, as a text immersed in a vast network of other texts, from each of which it borrows both knowingly and incidentally (Leitch 2008: 63). Originally intended to challenge the notion that adaptation seeks to reconstruct a single fixed meaning, intertextuality also complicates a reading of adaptation as appropriation. For example, Baz Luhrmann’s frequently referenced film, *William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet* (1996), appropriates Shakespeare’s well-known narrative as a part of the media culture that emerged widely in North America during the 1990s. However, the new set of meanings it produces for Shakespeare’s play emerge through its linking of the intertextual connections of that work, created through performances, previous adaptations, critical discussions, and cultural references, to a number of mid-1990s cinematic trends, such as the hyper-stylization that emerged from the music video, to which the film directly refers.

However, intertextuality poses a problem. By pointing to a network of textual connections that threatens to be limitless, it risks devaluing the specific projects of appropriation in which adaptations may be engaged.<sup>iii</sup> Concerned with establishing a manageable framework in which to contain the study of adaptations, a number of critics have turned to authorship—indeed, to the authorial intent discernible in the secondary work, in the adaptation. Hutcheon, for example, in comparing the multiple twentieth-century adaptations of a single story, uses authorial intent to negotiate the different sets of meanings they develop. Using biographical details, she establishes for each adapter a set of authorial concerns that explain the aesthetic and narrative changes each imposes on the original work. She thereby constrains a potentially vast object of study within a twofold category: who adapts and why (Hutcheon 2007: 95-105).

In a similar vein, Thomas Leitch when pointing to the work of one director, uses authorship to give meaning to the diverse adaptations made by Alfred Hitchcock. He suggests that Hitchcock’s career as an adapter from the 1920s to the 1970s involves the assimilation of both known and unknown literature into a unique directorial style. In doing so, Leitch argues, Hitchcock adapts by ‘wresting authorship away from the original work’ and asserting his own presence as an author (Leitch 2005: 109-10). In his view, a Hitchcock adaptation like *Rebecca* (1940, from Daphne

DuMaurier's 1938 novel) places its literary source into a new intertextual context, consisting of both Hitchcock's previous films and the carefully honed publicity surrounding his work. In this context, Hitchcock's adaptations serve to deepen the directorial presence known as 'Hitchcock,' increasing the connotations of a 'Hitchcock' film (ibid).

Christine Geraghty in turn offers an analysis of authorship in adaptation that contrasts with Leitch's, yet that also inadvertently opens his argument by giving us further options through which to understand how authorial presence guides the reception of an adaptation. Geraghty examines the influence of the figures of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen in adaptations of their work in which these authors are foregrounded as a means of structuring the reception of their material.<sup>iv</sup> The perception of Dickens and Austen as culturally important, produced through their evaluation in different media, both recently and in the past, as well as through the numerous previous adaptations of their work, becomes bound to these adaptations, announcing for them a level of cultural significance (Geraghty 2008: 15-16). In contrast to Leitch, Geraghty argues that it is the original authors of these adaptations who provide a plane of focus on which their numerous outward extensions are synthesized.<sup>v</sup>

Appropriation, intertextuality, and authorship offer a way of considering current tendencies within critical work on adaptation. These categories remind us that the field is moving quickly away from the precept, once so central to its methods, that film is a substratum of literature. In fact, current work points ultimately to an understanding of adaptation as a form of discourse. Francesco Casetti terms adaptation the 'reappearance' of discourse. He argues that literature and film are discursive formations, that their aesthetic presentation, institutional contexts, and the corpus of their works function together as 'reservoirs' of social meaning, and that adaptation practices participate in and contribute to that meaning (Casetti 2005: 80). What is at stake in adaptation then is the 'reappearance of an element (a plot, a theme, a character, etc.) that has previously appeared elsewhere', a reappearance that is accompanied by discursive implications already always at work in the original (ibid: 82). Casetti thereby names an overarching function that is implied in the work of these other theorists: the act of adapting is a discursive event, a point stressed by Robert Stam (2000: 68) in which specific adaptations select, amplify, contest, and repurpose the works they adapt.

## ADAPTATION AND NARRATIVE THEORY

The theory of choice when discussing adaptations is narrative theory, borrowed from literary theory. Narrative theory is based on the assumption that there is a difference between what is being communicated and how it is being communicated. This divide in narrative theory can be traced all the way back to Aristotle, but it is perhaps Seymour Chatman who should be credited with introducing the concept to adaptation theory. His book *Story and Discourse – Narrative Structures in Fiction and Film* (1978) certainly presented a narrative theory that has established itself as central to adaptation theory.

The novel, film and television are all narrative media, only with different manifestations of the narration. An investigation of narration in the different media, and a comparison between them can shed useful light on their relationship.

## FILM SEMIOTICS

Different media can be seen as having their own 'language', and the field of semiotics has been used to demonstrate this. Semiotics is a method that sets out to identify 'signs' in language. These signs are not meaningful in themselves, but are given meaning through social conventions and become 'codes'. The total sign system that can be identified in a film becomes the film's language. Semiotics is an important part of film theory, originally developed for literary theory but almost better suited for visual media. 'Semiotics does not favour verbal signification over non-verbal/pictorial signification, yet still offers a valid theoretical vantage point for the study of literature.'<sup>vi</sup> Semiotics has been important in the process to identify and describe what makes film and television distinctive as media of communication,<sup>vii</sup> and its introduction was a conscious attempt to counteract the tendency to view film as a stepchild of literature.

Dudley Andrew considers adaptation's distinctive feature to be 'the matching of the cinematic sign system to prior achievement in some other system'.<sup>viii</sup> 'The analysis of adaptation [...] must point to the achievement of equivalent narrative units in the absolutely different semiotic systems of film and language.'<sup>ix</sup> Both film and literature contain signifiers that produce signifieds. These signifiers might be different in the two media, but capable of producing the same or equivalent signifieds. The signifieds again lead to denotations, connotations and associations. 'The denotative material [...] may change from novel to film without affecting the connotations of the [...] motifs themselves.'<sup>x</sup> Again we are talking about the concept of equivalence rather than reproduction. Chatman suggests that narrative structures imparts meaning in three ways:

The signifieds are exactly three: event, character, and detail of setting. The signifiers are those elements in the narrative statement (whatever medium) that can stand for one of these three, thus any kind of physical or mental action for the first, any person (or, indeed, any entity that can be personalized) for the second, and any evocation of place for the third.<sup>xi</sup>

All adaptations can be approached as independent works of art, but this is rarely the case. Most adaptations must withstand the scrutiny of comparison. Those who are lucky enough to escape might actually stand to gain in critical acclaim. It is a far too common point of view that an adaptation always will be inferior to the original piece of writing it is based on. It is often claimed that bad books make good adaptations, while good books make bad adaptations.

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> As an example, Hutcheon offers Woody Allen's *Play it Again, Sam* (1972) as an announced adaptation of the thematic concerns of *Casablanca* (1942), two works which are rarely seen as having anything in common other than a sparse few intertextual allusions (172–73).

<sup>ii</sup> Stam again develops this line of thinking again in another essay (see “Dialogics”).

<sup>iii</sup> Several critics have turned to Gerard Genette's concept of *transtextuality*, which offers five types of intertextuality through which to explain the multitude of textual connections engaged by any given text. Regarding the influence of Genette on adaptation studies, see Stam, “Dialogism” 65–66. For a different, yet successful approach to limiting the number of possible intertextual allusions present in an adaptation, see Thomas Leitch's extensive classification of the different levels of adaptation available in a work (see “Allusion”).

<sup>iv</sup> This potential of the figure of Dickens is examined extensively by DeBona (see 37–63).

<sup>v</sup> Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995), for example, a widely celebrated contemporized adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815), contains numerous intertextual references, both to the emerging star personas of its principal cast (Alicia Silverstone, Paul Rudd), as well as to youth culture in the 1990s. However, it is the latent presence of Jane Austen that structures the reception of this film as an adaptation, connecting it Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited – Television and the Classic Novel* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 58. to a contemporaneous trend of Austen adaptations (*Sense and Sensibility* [1995], *Mansfield Park* [1999]) and to an emerging discourse on the value of Austen's literature in postmodern society.

<sup>vi</sup> Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited – Television and the Classic Novel* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 58.

<sup>vii</sup> Ellen Seiter, 'Semiotics, Structuralism and Television' in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. by Robert C. Allen, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>viii</sup> Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory*, p. 96.

<sup>ix</sup> Andrew, 'The Well-Worn Muse', p. 14.

<sup>x</sup> McFarlane, p. 25

<sup>xi</sup> Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 25