

TOWARDS A THEORY OF ADAPTATION

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Abstract

From the initial days of cinema, adaptation has been an omnipresent procedure of filmmaking. According to what Hutcheon has stated in her book, *A Theory of adaptation*, adaptation theory refers to the methodical analysis of films which have been produced based on literary sources. In fact, movie adaptations have a history as long as the history of cinema itself and are becoming more prevalent all over the world. This study aims to provide a brief account of this theory and its main academics. In addition, this paper intends to argue the reason of classic novels' popularity with the movie producers. It can be concluded that unlike the hostility which the adaptations would encounter during this field's commencement time, now they are approved of by many critics as original productions, and this is the reason of their upward acceptance by many directors.

Key Words: Adaptation, Film, Literature, Adaptation theory, Adaptation fallacies

1. Introduction

Adaptation studies refer to the analysis of a text and its adaptation, whether that text is a novel, film, or play (Costanzo 21). Some of the most distinguished critics of this field include

Linda Hutcheon, Brian McFarlane, Deborah Cartmell, Imelda Whelehan, and Thomas Leitch whose useful interpretations on film adaptations have proved to be of high importance.

Cartmell has discussed the many different ways through which the directors may adapt classic narratives. He has stated that the classic fiction's plotlines are the first feature that any director may be drawn to; likewise, some filmmakers think of these novels' adaptation as "great art" that can endorse their production's position. Furthermore, the writer is supposed to hold an important rank in classic film adaptation, since he functions to both announce and denounce the film's "authority" (2).

Although adaptations are of very good status with the movie producers, they are considered as being lesser than the source texts. However, Hutcheon has proclaimed that the adaptations' ubiquity is growing excessively. Dudley Andrew, in his essay "Adaptation" has announced that the "making of film out of an earlier text is virtually as old as the machinery of film itself. Well over half of all commercial films have come from literary originals . . ." (qtd. in Snyder 21).

Also, many critics approve of adaptations as original productions, since the changes made by the directors result in such a novelty. In *Novels into Film* that is assumed as one of the very original versions in adaptation study, George Bluestone has professed that "changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium," and he concludes: "It is as fruitless to say that film A is better or worse than novel B as it is to pronounce Wright's Johnson's Wax Building better or worse than Tchaikowsky's Swan Lake" (qtd. in Leitch, *Twelve Fallacies* 3).

In her book, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Sanders refers to the connection between the source text and declares:

It is this inherent sense of play, produced in part by the activation of our informed sense of similarity and difference between the texts being invoked, and the connected interplay of expectation and surprise, that for me lies at the heart of the experience of adaptation. (25)

Sanders has also claimed that analyzing the similarities and differences between the adaptation and the source text is the vital motivation of adaptation studies. Correspondingly, in all these instances the audience's awareness of the explicit relationship between the adaptation and the source text is greatly important. In fact, the wish to make this relationship evident is related to the way how the reactions to adaptations depend upon the ideas of similarity and difference (22).

2. Relevant Studies

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon and O'Flynn as two of the most noteworthy specialists of this field debate the significance of adaptations. According to them, adaptation has always had a dominant position in the story-telling imagination and should be viewed as a separate field. This book is regarded as an end to the belief about adaptations' unfaithfulness.

In *Film Adaptation and its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*, Thomas Leitch has mainly discussed the way through which the creators of short silent films strained to attribute the eminence of literature to them, and why and how some films have pursued complete loyalty to their sources. Therefore, in order to analyze the different points that have been transferred while changing the novel into an adaptation, it is essential to use Leitch's viewpoints.

Deborah Cartmell as an influential scholar in the field of adaptation has argued in *A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation* some advantages of adaptations such as opening new ways into the research. Sanders' *Adaptation and Appropriation* as the next imperative book in this regard has presented different descriptions of adaptation and appropriation. It has similarly

provided some valuable data about the cultural and artistic politics behind adaptation, countless ways in which contemporary literature and film adapt, and eventually the influence on adaptation and appropriation of theoretical movements.

Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation contains an assortment of essays about the history and union of literature and film. Stam and Raengo have attempted to provide a comprehensive study of various novels and adaptations in order to talk about the newest attainments in the field.

“Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory” is an article by Thomas Leitch in which he has claimed that adaptation studies have been abandoned or neglected. He continues that film studies should focus on analysis and theoretical issues. Studies should also be more concerned with the practice of adaptation, since it is not appreciated by some critics who believe that it is inferior (149-171).

3. Discussion

The publication of George Bluestone's momentous work, *Novels into Film* in 1957 caused adaptation studies to become very popular in the realm of literary studies. According to Snyder , for a number of years, it was not obvious what people were teaching when they were teaching novels into film, or why they were teaching it (219). The mounting interest in adaptation studies has made the critics believe that the connection between a text and its adaptation is one of exchange; it was in contrast with what some critics such as Virginia Woolf had declared in the early twentieth century, because she did not approve of adaptations and supposed that they would reduce the original text to a shadow of its preceding prominent nature (Snyder 219-222). Adaptations are either very poor or so good that can make one forget or ignore the original;

however, there are some other adaptations which reignite interest in a long forgotten story (Whelehan).

What has made adaptation studies likeable in today's world is that it is more obsessed with the investigation of the procedure and the understanding of the inspirations behind an adaptation; the inspiration can be explanation, revision, or critique without being obsessed with which one is better, the original or the adaptation (Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins 19-20). The other reason of adaptation studies' popularity is its ability to simplify the understanding of social changes, narrative form, cultural difference, commercial imperatives, and power relationships (Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins 51). One of the other points which has led to this field's attractiveness is that the subject of adaptation studies in the present time has moved far beyond the dominion of novels and other literary works (Sanders p. 9).

Adaptation can refer to an altered or reviewed version of a text that is adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on the stage from a novel or similar literary source (Sanders p. 17). Even though this definition seems systematic, it is rather mismatched with current theories of media adaptation. According to Cartmell and Whelehan, these theories have moved beyond the unidirectional movement of literature to film (128-129).

The history of adapting texts into different forms is a lengthy one. For instance, historical events were the stimulation for paintings and sculptures, plays, written tales, and later, stories in the form of the novel (Bazin 23-24). Cinematic adaptations of literary and theatrical texts are as old as the medium of cinema itself (Leitch, *Twelve Fallacies* 22), and as long as screen adaptations have existed, so has the conflict between literature and film. According to Ermarth, in order to deal with adaptations, they should be thought of as "palimpsestuous" works, which are always

haunted by their source texts. If we know the source text, its presence is always felt in the adaptations (47).

According Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins, there are several reasons behind the belief that literature is better than film (38). This tension between literature and film has also informed adaptation theory, which, until recently, was principally concerned with the translation of the literary into the cinematic (Snyder 217). This study placed its focus on the idea of faithfulness, and the conservation of an order which employed the literary text as a primary or source text, and the adaptation as a weaker, unoriginal text (Hutcheon and O' Flynn 3).

Consequently, adaptations from literature to film and other media have often been branded in derogatory terms implying sacrilege, theft, impurity, dilution, and failure to preserve the integrity of the source (Cartmell and Whelehan 128). Such texts were also often judged on the misinterpreted supposition that the objective of the adaptation was only replication rather than other motivations such as reinvention or assessment (Cartmell and Whelehan 5-6).

However, recent developments in adaptation theory have made it move away from the dichotomy of film and literature and toward a focus on multidirectional flows across a transmedia model, concentrating less on what has been lost by a text during the process of adaptation, and more on what the text has gained by taking on a new form or variation (Murray 41).

When a text is changed into an adaptation, there will be a variety of factors, which are dictated by the nature of the source text, the reason for adapting the text, medium, and culture into which it is adapted. Also, an older text may need to be corrected or amended if it comprises antiquated features such as racial stereotypes; the text may be changed into a completely different setting for purposes of social or market relevance. According to Leitch, A story which is adapted into a video game may lose elements such as pacing and narrative flow, but gain other qualities

such as tactile interactivity and more scope for an extended and varied experience. Some texts also need to change their characteristics in order to survive in a new environment (*Twelve Fallacies* 99-101).

Successful adaptations change over time, and are adapted to new conditions. The best adaptations are those which achieve repetition without replication rather than being mere an imitation (Benjamin 223-225). The adaptation has to evoke and be amplified by the user's experience of the original, while also taking on different potentials of its own. A successful adaptation balances "the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty" by contributing to its persistent development (Hutcheon and O' Flynn 3).

From the very earliest works on adaptation like Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture* which was first published in 1915, the general relationship between literature and cinema has been one of the central points of focus for adaptation scholars. Most contemporary studies in adaptation studies investigate the adaptation of a classic novel to a play then to a film then to a musical or opera. Otherwise, there are some other studies on novels which appropriate ideas from other novels or plays, and among them there can be found a wide number of adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare and other great literary figures.

As one of the greatest scholars in this field, Linda Hutcheon is a Canadian scholar who is regarded as one of the most influential figures in the field of adaptation studies. *A Theory of Adaptation* as one of this critic's distinguished books is mainly about the unremitting progress of adaptation as an academic field. Hutcheon's theory of adaptation covers a wide variety of media, including films, opera, video games, and pop music.

Theory of Adaptation also presents a thorough discussion of comparative adaptation theory and a critical summary of the process of adaptation—the what, who, why, how, where, and when

of media manifestations established based on earlier works. Hutcheon also discusses the relationship between adaptation and fidelity, which is mainly concerned with what is lost through the adaptation. She believes that like parodies, adaptations have an obvious link with prior texts. However, unlike parodies, adaptations usually acquiescently publicize this connection (Hutcheon 3).

Hutcheon declares that the increasing arrival of new media and new channels has had an influential effect on the demand for adaptations; so recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of producing an adaptation. It is why adaptations are not regarded by her as inferior to the main sources. Hutcheon (7-8) has mentioned a number of points about adaptations. In her idea, an adaptation is an all-encompassing substitution of a particular work. This “transcoding” may involve a shift of medium or genre, or a change of context. Transposition can also mean a shift from the real to the imaginary, from a historical account or biography to a dramatized narrative.

She has also announced that as a process of creation, the act of adaptation always includes both (re)interpretation and then (re-)creation; this has been called appropriation. Third, seen from the viewpoint of its process of reception, adaptation can be observed as a form of intertextuality in which adaptations are believed as palimpsests that resonate through repetition with distinction.

Similarly, most of Leitch’s reputation is due to his arguing the most important fallacies in the field of adaptation. Leitch has explored a number of fallacies which have made adaptation theory as lesser than the main sources. Some of these fallacies (Leitch, *Twelve Fallacies* 149-171) are: 1. There is such a thing as contemporary adaptation theory as the most important reason behind adaptations’ being considered as unsuccessful. 2. Differences between literary and cinematic texts are entrenched in vital features of their respective media. 3. Literary texts are verbal while films

are visual. 4. Novels are mostly about concepts, but films are mostly about percepts. 5. Novels are better than films.

Deborah Cartmell is the next important figure in this realm. She has argued that adaptations are among the main facets of the cinema since its institution. She also assumed that some novels are written as future films, and the experience of reading some specific books is similar to watching a film (Cartmell and Whelehan 73–83).

Robert Stam as a principal critic of film theory has been mainly concerned with the prejudice against the adaptation of novels. He has also assumed film adaptation as a dialogic process. Stam has recently argued that "Film adaptations are caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin' (66); so, he has highlighted the dialogical aspect of any movie adaptation.

4. Conclusion

This study sought to present a brief account of adaptation theory and its main scholars. It was argued that the increasing arrival of new media and new channels has had an influential effect on the ever-growing demand for adaptations. What has made adaptation studies appealing in the modern world is that it is more concerned with the analysis of the process and the understanding of the inspirations behind an adaptation; the inspiration can be explanation, revision, or critique without being obsessed privileging the original work or the adaptation. The other reason of adaptation studies' admiration is its capacity to make the understanding of social changes, narrative form, cultural difference, commercial imperatives, and power relationships simpler (Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins 19-51).

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