

FICTION TO FILM: THE EVERLASTING INSISTENCE ON FIDELITY

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ABSTRACT:

FILMS BASED ON LITERARY SOURCES ARE ALMOST ALWAYS JUDGED ACCORDING TO HOW FAITHFUL THEY ARE TO THE ORIGINAL TEXT(S). HOWEVER, THE ISSUE OF FIDELITY HAS BECOME MORE AND MORE CONTROVERSIAL. ON THE ONE HAND, THERE ARE CRITICS WHO CONTEND THAT THE "TRANSLATION" OF A PIECE OF LITERATURE INTO A FILM SHOULD BE BASED ON A QUITE LITERAL INTERPRETATION. AND YET, ON THE OTHER HAND, INCREASINGLY STRONGER VOICES ARGUE THAT THE INTERPRETATION MAY AND, TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, MUST BE AS RADICAL AS POSSIBLE. THE CURRENT PAPER AIMS AT PRESENTING AN OVERVIEW OF HOW THE FIDELITY CRITICISM OF CINEMATIC ADAPTATIONS HAS EVOLVED ACROSS TIME.

KEY WORDS: FIDELITY CRITICISM, ADAPTATION, CINEMA, FICTION, TRANSLATION

INTRODUCTION

The deep-rooted cultural assumptions about word and image have led to a general contempt and disregard for cinematic adaptations of literary works of art, explainable, to a certain extent, by a long-lasting insistence on fidelity, on what and how *should* be transferred from one medium to the other, as if there could be any prescriptive approach to adaptation. Nonetheless, for the receiver, adaptation implies a dialogical process in which the work that is already known is compared with the one being experienced². Viewers tend to compare their own mental images with those created by the filmmaker. In his *Novel to Film*³, Brian McFarlane pointed out that:

Everyone who sees films based on novels feels able to comment, at levels ranging from the gossipy to the erudite, on the nature and success of the adaptation involved. That is, the interest in adaptation, unlike many others to do with films (e.g. the questions of authorship), is not a rarefied one. And it ranges backwards and forwards from those who talk of novels as being "betrayed" by boorish film-makers to those who regard the practice of comparing film and novel as a waste of time.

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² Robert Stam, quoted in James Naremore, *Film Adaptation* (London: Athlone, 2000), 64.

³ Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 3.

Problems appear when the images created by the filmmaker do not correspond to those created by the reader. As Christian Metz⁴ underlined, “the reader will not always find his film, since what he has before him in the actual film is now somebody else’s phantasy”. It is the very familiarity with the source that constitutes part of the pleasure or disappointment with adaptation, but the connection to the source material and the comparison with it is inevitable. Moreover, a prerequisite of judging films as adaptations is the audience’s awareness and remembrance of the original. However, adaptation studies have been haunted by the pervasive feeling of loss in the process of transformation from literature to screen. Although it has often been proved that the insistence on fidelity is misplaced and inadequate, the issue needs to be addressed in order to complete the general picture. Adaptation is, beyond any reasonable doubt, culturally ubiquitous, but it remains to be seen if or to what extent it should be faithful to the original.

CINEMATIC ADAPTATIONS AND THE ISSUE OF FIDELITY: AN OVERVIEW

Even though the history of adaptation is as long as the history of cinema itself, adaptation studies were not established in the academia until the mid-twentieth century. Significantly, film and adaptation departments began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s out of English literature departments, “inheriting the assumption that the literary work is unitary and self-contained and that meaning is an immutable essence to be apprehended by the (fundamentally passive) reader”⁵. The author was considered “source and center of the reified text” and “the words on the page, emanating from the Author-God, were sacrosanct”⁶. In this context, adaptation studies were haunted by the argument that film destroys the authenticity and uniqueness of the work of art. This led to the assumption that the literary work, as the valued original, was superior, whereas the film adaptation was merely a copy, nothing more than “impure cinema”. Most of the criticism that followed was predictable, judging an adaptation’s merit by its closeness to its literary source, or, even more vaguely, “the spirit” of the book. Bluestone, for example, who argues that “changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium”, since “novels and films are autonomous media”, believes in the intrinsic superiority of literature. The novel, he claims, is “more complex” than the film, more self-conscious and self-reflexive, and, thus, better equipped to render thought. Bluestone even claims that novel and film are “mutually hostile” or “antithetical media”, and that adaptation is impossible⁷.

Nevertheless, film began to raise its cultural status from entertainment or low-art into high-art. Francois Truffaut’s “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema”, originally published in *Cahiers du Cinema* in January 1954, was the first to attack the “tradition of quality” in French cinema, by dismissing films as literary, not truly cinematic, the work of mere *metteurs-en-scene*. Instead, he praised the cinema of film-makers such as Robert Bresson and Jean Cocteau, auteurs who managed to turn their films into the expression of their personal vision, although they relied on literary material. In spite of this, the assumption that literature is the superior medium would still hold, with film scholars like Maurice Beja unable to break away from it. Beja dismisses “betrayal” as a strong, moralistic, word and denounces the use of the fidelity criterion to the detriment of judging adaptations as independent artistic achievements; however,

⁴ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 12.

⁵ Mireia Aragay, ed., *Books in motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), 11.

⁶ Aragay, *Books in Motion*, 11.

⁷ George Bluestone, quoted in Aragay, *Books in Motion*, 13.

he invokes the concept of “the spirit of the original work” as that which an adaptation “should be faithful to”⁸.

Andrew Dudley, in his “The Well-Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory” (1980), was among the first to explicitly reject Bluestone’s argument that adaptation is ultimately impossible. Andrew pointed out that the discourse of fidelity was still “the most frequent and most tiresome discussion of adaptation”⁹. Similarly, Christopher Orr, writing four years later, stated that fidelity criticism “impoverishes” the film’s intertextuality by reducing it to “a single pre-text” while ignoring other pre-texts and codes (cinematic, cultural) that contribute to making adaptation possible¹⁰. Andrew’s and Orr’s contributions to adaptation studies need to be placed in the context of the deep transformations affecting both film and literary studies after Barthes’ seminal 1968 essay “The Death of the Author”. The literary source need no longer be conceived as possessing a single, univocal meaning that its adaptation(s) must faithfully reproduce. This view was also influenced by the aesthetics of reception: any text can be endlessly (re)read and appropriated in different contexts.

Arguing along the same lines as Orr, Erica Sheen (2000) and Barbara Hodgdon (2002) point out that the discourse on fidelity often involves a “rhetoric of possession”, with the critic being convinced that “s/he owns the Author’s meaning as manifested in the work”, and judging “the success of an adaptation in terms of its perceived adherence to that meaning”. Fidelity criticism also involves an “articulation of loss”, as the only possible outcome when deviating from the Authorial meaning¹¹. Likewise, Deborah Cartmell wrote that the very word “adaptation” has always had negative connotations, emphasizing what has been lost rather than what has been gained¹². Brian McFarlane also pointed out that the discourse on fidelity is rooted in the notion of the text as “having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, ‘correct’ meaning which the film-maker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with”¹³.

Some writers have proposed strategies that categorize adaptations according to how faithful they are to the original. Geoffrey Wagner, for instance, suggests three possible categories a) transposition, “in which the novel is given directly on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference”; b) commentary, “where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect”; c) analogy, “which must represent a fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art”. Similarly, Dudley Andrew also writes about “fidelity of transformation”, “borrowing” and “intersection”. There is also a third similar classification system suggested by Michael Klein and Gillian Parker. The two scholars write about three possibilities: a) “fidelity to the main thrust of the narrative”; b) the approach which “retains the core of the structure of the narrative while significantly reinterpreting or, in some cases, deconstructing the source text”; and c), regarding the source merely as raw material, as simply “the occasion for an original work”¹⁴. All these attempts, in turn, are meant to challenge the primacy of fidelity as a valid criterion for the analysis of adaptations, showing that, irrespective of the degree of faithfulness to the primary source text, films based on literature represent autonomous works of art, possessing their own intrinsic value.

The pervading sense of literature’s supremacy and the obsession with the issue of fidelity have undoubtedly hindered the study of adaptation; most criticism belonging to the 21st century acknowledges this fact and argues for a firm detachment from such approaches.

⁸ Maurice Beja, quoted in Aragay, *Books in Motion*, 17.

⁹ Andrew Dudley, *Concepts in Film Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 12.

¹⁰ Christopher Orr, quoted in Aragay, *Books in Motion*, 19.

¹¹ Aragay, *Books in Motion*, 20.

¹² Deborah Cartmell, quoted in Aragay, *Books in Motion*, 20.

¹³ McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, 8.

¹⁴ McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, 9-11.

Instead, scholars should focus on potentially more rewarding approaches to the phenomenon of adaptation, since:

[F]idelity tends to ignore the idea of adaptation as an example of convergence among the arts, perhaps a desirable – even inevitable – process in a rich culture. It fails to take into serious account what may be transferred from novel to film as distinct from what will require more complex processes of adaptation; and it marginalizes those production determinants which have nothing to do with the novel but may be powerfully influential upon the film. Awareness of such issues would be more useful than those many accounts of how films “reduce” great novels.¹⁵

This leads to an entirely different approach in what concerns the issue of adaptation; instead of viewing the original novel as “source”, we can consider it to be an intertext, one of the many that film usually relies on. So far, the discourse on fidelity has been based on the assumption that an adaptation is meant to simply reproduce the source text. However, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, adaptation is “repetition”, but it is “repetition without replication”, comparable to paraphrase¹⁶. There may be imitation and repetition, but only to a certain extent; the way stories are told is different in literature and film. More often than not, adapters “simplify” the source, omitting aspects that they consider unnecessary for the movie adaptation, or they extrapolate those elements that they consider noteworthy of higher attention. There is, indeed, a relationship to prior texts, but it is not (and needs not be) a hierarchical one. “Prior” does not necessarily mean “better”, although the tension between invention and imitation has always been at the core of adaptation studies.

Casetti argues that adaptation is the “reappearance, in another discursive field, of an element (a plot, a theme, a character, etc.) that has previously appeared elsewhere”¹⁷. Faithfulness to the source is not an important criterion since we are dealing with an entirely different communicative situation. The previous discursive element (the source material) is only present as a memory within the time and space of the new discursive event (the adaptation). Therefore, it becomes essential to focus on both text and context; “adaptation”, in Casetti’s words, “is primarily a phenomenon of recontextualization of the text, or, even better, of reformulation of its communicative situation”¹⁸. It is very common that both spatial and temporal displacement take place in the adaptation; in other words, the situation of the source text is often very different from that of the derivative text, and we need to take into account the context for the appearance of the latter. As it has been underlined before, there are many non-literary influences on cinematic adaptations which determine the way a text is adapted.

Adaptations are often compared to translations, but, since literal translation is never possible, there is no such thing as literal adaptation. Any translator needs to bear in mind the cultural background of the reader; similarly, the adapter has to take into account the addressee’s world. Adaptations occur across media and, by their very own nature, involve intersemiotic transpositions that render strict fidelity impossible. Since the early 1990s, translation historian and theorist Lawrence Venuti has insisted that the concept of fidelity needs to be replaced by that of the translator’s visibility or palpable presence in a translation, as a reminder that no act

¹⁵ McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, 10.

¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 7.

¹⁷ Francesco Casetti, quoted in Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, *A Companion to Literature and Film* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 82.

¹⁸ Casetti, quoted in Stam and Raengo, *A Companion to Literature and Film*, 82.

of interpretation – translation being, after all, interpretation – can be definitive¹⁹. The “visible” translator “refracts” the source text²⁰ - a view of translation which no doubt resonates with recent views of adaptation as recreation or rewriting rather than reproduction. Pressing further in this direction, Kamilla Elliott’s *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* argues for “a reciprocally transformative model of adaptation, in which the film (...) metamorphoses the novel and is, in turn, metamorphosed by it”²¹.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

It goes without saying that the same story can be rendered in discourses that have been constructed within different media, such as literature, film or theatre. Nonetheless, fidelity, i.e., the assumption that a literary source can be faithfully transposed into a film, remains only a “chimera”. Rather than searching for an elusive essence, adaptation studies need to focus on the literary text as “a space of heteroglossia which can generate a plethora of possible readings” and can be “reworked by a boundless context”²². The model of fidelity criticism is, therefore, inadequate for appreciating the richness of and motivations driving adaptations; no film adaptation is necessarily inferior to the film adaptation it is based on. Adaptations need not be faithful to their sources; in fact, “willful infidelity” seems to be “the very point”²³ (Murray, 2008: 6), especially for those directors who claim to be auteurs. Turning a book into a film is not a transposing process aiming at fidelity, but a highly interpretative endeavor.

All in all, in spite of the bad name the discourse on fidelity has acquired, completely overlooking the similarities and differences between the source text and its adaptation would be a fallacy. Comparative and contrastive analyses are important and welcome in the analysis of adaptations, as long as the investigation is not bent on favoring one medium over the other. It’s highly out of date to speak of literature and film as high art and low art nowadays; the old hierarchy does not hold any more. Hence, any approach on adaptations needs to focus on those aspects that can be transferred from text to screen and on the “solutions” adapters find to make the transfer possible.

¹⁹ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995).

²⁰ Aragay, *Books in Motion*, 30.

²¹ Kamilla Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 229.

²² Stam, quoted in Naremore, *Film Adaptation*, 57.

²³ Simone Murray, “Materializing Adaptation Theory: The Adaptation Industry”, *Literature/Film Quarterly* (Salisbury: Salisbury University, 2008), Vol. 36, No. 1, 4-20.

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