



## Adaptation and appropriation of literary texts

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### Abstract

We often find movies, particularly those which become successful at the box-office, are based on literary works. Few decades ago, a film adapted from a literary work, be it a novel, a play, or a short story, was considered a secondary or a derivative work of the original, and, thus, less respectable. When it was found that some eighty-five percent of the Oscar-nominated films are literary adaptations, film adaptation started getting recognition as a respectable art form. Now adapting a film from a literary work is the demand of the day. The filmmaker gets a ready-made and an already well-received story for his film. Even the audience seems to prefer to see the movies rather than reading the literary work it is based on. It is so because within a few hours they get to know the story, plots, characters and themes of a literary work by watching the film. For those who have already read the book, they also prefer to go to the movie to see their favorite characters as living beings in real action – moving, talking, arguing and fighting - in the film. Moreover, watching a film has comparatively greater entertainment value than reading the book in bits and pieces.

**Keywords:** adaptation, appropriation, transposition, transfer, adaptation proper, fidelity

### Introduction

Today, ‘Adaptations’ are everywhere whether these are on the movie screen, television, on the musical and drama theatre, in novels and comic books, on the Internet and even in Theme Parks and Video Games. We need to understand this ubiquitous nature of ‘Adaptation’. Adaptations are not new to the present time. Even Shakespeare transferred his culture’s stories from page to stage and made them available to a whole new audience. Every great writer has also retold familiar stories in new forms.

### Film Adaptation

Studies related to Film Adaptation or what is termed as ‘Adaptation Studies’ over the years has emerged as a major offshoot of ‘Film Studies’. A film adaptation is the transfer of a written work, mainly from a novel or a play in whole or in part, to a feature film or TV series. It is a type of derivative work. Other works adapted into films include non-fiction (including journalism), autobiography, comic books, scriptures, plays, historical sources, and even other films. From the earliest days of cinema, in nineteenth-century Europe, adaptation from such diverse resources has been a universal practice of film-making. The main reason for this particular phenomenon of adaptation of a great book, or especially a bestseller, is purely commercial. But a skilled and ambitious filmmaker may see in a poorly received or poorly written novel enough visual potential to make a great film. Bluestone (1957:62) <sup>[1]</sup>, it seems, is closest to addressing the root cause of why this may be so when he writes:

What happens...when the filmist undertakes the adaptation of a novel, given the inevitable mutation, is that he does not convert the novel at all. What he adapts is a kind of paraphrase of the novel – the novel viewed as raw material.

This perhaps suggests that, while many a filmmaker will treat a classic work of literature as sacrosanct, faithful

adaptors tend to favour the long-held view that ‘literature’ is ‘better’ than cinema, and therefore it is necessary, when adapting, to advantage the source rather than the film based upon it. Thus, they attempt to make a “faithful” adaptation of the work – ignoring the fact that a film adaptation must inevitably add, remove and alter aspects of the novel in order to make a successful film – when it comes to either a poor or mediocre novel a filmmaker is often much more willing to alter aspects of the text during the conversion process into film (Shepherd 2009:10) <sup>[11]</sup>.

### Types of Adaptation

Wagner in his *The Novel and the Cinema* (1975:222-3) <sup>[12]</sup> is perhaps one of the first commentators to identify “three types of adaptation: transposition – a novel directly given on screen; commentary – where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect; and analogy (e.g. a film that shifts the action of the fiction forward in time or otherwise changes its essential context; analogy goes further than shifting a scene or playing with the end, and must transplant the whole scenario so that little of the original is identifiable) (Quoted in Cartmell and Whelehan 1999:8) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Examples of ‘transpositions’ include the various BBC versions of classic texts such as those of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, which attempt to be exceedingly faithful to the novels; ‘commentaries’ include a number of films including *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000), *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Terry Gilliam, 1998), *The Fixer* (John Frankenheimer, 1968), *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980) and both Stanley Kubrick’s (1962) and Adrian Lyne’s (1997) versions of *Lolita*; examples of ‘analogies’ may include *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), which sets Jane Austen’s quintessentially English novel *Emma* (1816) in 1990s Los Angeles, or *Eyes Wide Shut* (Kubrick, 1999), which sets Arthur Schnitzler’s Viennese novella *Dream Story* (*Traumnovelle*) (1926) in contemporary New York City.

### Close Adaptation: An Example

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is well-adapted by Mira Nair. It remained true to its source novel, in terms of plots, characters, themes and settings to a larger extent. We can find more than 90 percent of similarity between the novel and the film. We can call it a Close Adaptation.

### Intermediate Adaptation: An Example

The novella *Susanna's Seven Husbands* is of 59 pages. But the adapted film *7 KhoonMaaf* is of 2 hours and 15 minutes, i.e. of 135 minutes. The original existence of this novella is in the form of a short story of the same title (undated) and is a slightly more than five pages' length which one can finish reading within ten minutes. The filmmaker has expanded the plots and characters to make a full-fledged film. But the film remains true to its main plot i.e. a woman trying to find true love kills her seven Husbands. These changes in character alter the basic theme of the novel in significant ways. Yet the movie is entirely recognizable as based on the novella.

### Loose Adaptation: An Example

The blockbuster Hindi film *3 Idiots* is loosely adapted from Chetan Bhagat's novel *Five Points Someone- What not to do at IIT!* The film has taken its base from the novel like plot and character but the film has expanded its plots and characters to such an extent that the film seems much better than the novel.

### Reverse Adaptation/Novelization: An Example

Reverse Adaptation/Novelization is the process of turning movies into books. Adapting books into movies is a normal phenomenon. But movies can also be turned into books which can be a good way to make some extra money. A movie script that is turned into a novel is called 'Novelization'. Though it is not usually considered much of a worthy literary endeavour, there is no doubt that such endeavours are big money-makers. For example, the novelization of *ET* made millions upon millions. Many successful novelizations are based on genre films, particularly science fiction and horror flicks such as: *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Aliens*, *Underworld*, *X-men*, *The Omen*, *Dawn of the Dead*; or action films like: *Indiana Jones*, *National Treasure*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Rocky series*, *The Terminator series*, *Jumanji*. In the 1980's, there were even books based on films like *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Gremlins*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Grease 2*.

### Language Adjustment in Adaptation

Fixed and Unfixed Language (also referred to often as specific and unspecific language) are helpful terms when talking about fidelity and film adaptation. As Desmond and Hawkes (2006: 34) <sup>[4]</sup> put it:

The text's verbal language and the film's pictorial and aural languages have distinct qualities that prohibit the exact replication of a text on screen. No matter how concrete and specific an author's diction, his or her verbal language is ultimately unfixed and unspecified. On the other hand, pictorial and aural languages are fixed and specified.

By way of an example they analyse the sentence: 'A tree stood in front of the house where I used to live.' Using this sentence as an example of text, they point out the specific

pictorial and aural language choices a Director must make to adapt the textual language into film. The choices are many: What kind of tree is it? What time of day is it? What season is it? What occupies the space around the tree? What does the house look like? From what point of view and perspective will the tree be shot? Furthermore, is there the sound of wind blowing through the branches? Birds singing? Etc.

Sometimes information is not at all available from the text, so the director must make decisions on his own. For example, the outfit that a character is wearing may not be specified in the text, yet the director must clothe the character.

One can see that the changes from unfixed to fixed language require choices. In turn, these choices can be used to create a close adaptation, an intermediate adaptation or a loose adaptation. The move from the unfixed language of the text to the fixed language of the film can play a significant role in any discussion of film adaptation. (Ibid.)

Bluestone in his *Novels into Film* (1957: 49) <sup>[1]</sup> discusses the two media's differing ability to handle time and space. He defines language as a medium consisting of "three characteristics of time – transience, sequence and irreversibility", but in film "the camera is always the narrator, we need concern ourselves only with the chronological duration of the viewing and the time-span of narrative events" (Ibid).

It is precisely due to the difference between the two and the gap between the forms that adaptation is rendered into a far more creative and constructive process than simple translation.

### Appropriation

The word 'Appropriation' was used by Julie Sanders to differentiate the type's adaptations which transpose the source culture to a different culture. In Appropriation, the plot, themes, characters and themes of the primary text are used, but shifts both language and setting into a new context. These films often advocate the same universality of theme and have the task of creating verbal, visual, and/or aural analogies that link two cultures. Even the viewers are also aware of relationship of the film with its primary source text. The most literal adaptations carry the same title as their primary source text. Sanders writes:

"An adaptation signals a relationship with an informing source text...On the other hand, appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (2006:26).

Though the appropriation are not tied to the source text by an acknowledgement, a juxtaposition of the source text against the appropriated text widens the possibility of its reading. Haider (2014) is a modern-day adaptation of Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* with twists and turns in the backdrop of the armed insurgency in the Kashmir of 1990s. The film is set in Indian-administered Kashmir. The protagonists in the film, Shahid Kapoor is Hamlet, Shraddha Kapoor Ophelia, Tabu Gertrude and Kay Kay Menon Claudius. The protagonists in the film, Shahid and Shraddha are clearly modern reworkings of Shakespeare's 'star-crossed' lovers in a 1990s Kashmir context. Though Haider story can stand independently, the awareness of the film's intertextuality deepens and augments the reading. This is an

example of appropriation where the source text is embedded within the film text. In such appropriation of text, the real interest lies not in the source texts, but in the new text. The practice of displacing the setting is commonly applied to Shakespeare's plays both on stage and screen in order to preserve the effect of their poetry, while suggesting a more contemporary relevance. Briane Mcfarlane's methodology is useful in analyzing an appropriation. While choosing a text for appropriation, 'transfer' and 'adaptation proper' are considered. 'Transfer' is concerned with those elements that can be taken almost directly from the novel and transferred into film, while 'adaptation proper' is concerned with the elements which need to be reinterpreted for the film. Numerous strategies are considered for considering the idea of transfer, namely, the story/plot distinction, the cardinal functions in the source text, the character functions, and the psychological patterns. While 'story' is simply the basic succession of events—the raw material—the plot is the way in which the 'story' is creatively reformed. The novel and the film may share the same story but the strategies are different. Cardinal functions are those narrative actions which make up the story and the part played by the characters in the plot is termed as character functions. The main action, characters, and the psychological patterns of the characters of the source text, which comes under the consideration of transfer, are carefully transmuted. As appropriations transpose the cultural setting of the source text, the elements of the transfer are appropriated aptly to the target culture. The psychological patterns which reveal certain universal human behaviours are usually transferred directly to screen. Once the elements of transfer are appropriated, aspects of adaptation proper are transferred. The mise-en-scene and the extra cinematic codes specific to the target culture are employed.

### Problems in Transposition of Space and Time

As Bluestone in his *Novels into Film* (1957: 103) <sup>[1]</sup> illustrates, the inherent problem with many transpositions is that they adhere stringently to the plot of the novel from which they are derived, yet of course the plot was never designed to convey images upon the eye, but rather only to convey images upon the mind's eye. Thus, Bluestone produces what is universally accepted as one of the most important paragraphs in his book:

Both novel and film are time arts, but whereas the formative principle in the novel is time, the formative principle in the film is space. Where the novel takes its space for granted and forms its narrative in a complex of time values, the film takes its time for granted and forms its narrative in arrangements of space. Both film and novel create the illusion of psychologically distorted time and space, but neither destroys time or space. The novel renders the illusion of space by going from point to point in time; the film renders time by going from point to point in space. The novel tends to abide by, yet explore, the possibilities of psychological law; the film tends to abide by, yet explore, the possibilities of physical law. (Ibid.: 61)

When a screenwriter and director adapt a novel into a film they are taking a text which – while it does of course exist in physical space as an entity but not as a narrative – is constructed within a framework of time, i.e. chronologically rather than spatially organised. They then transform it into a

text which – while it exists within time – is arranged according to spatial principals.

Another important film scholar, Jean Mitry (1971: 7-8), also dealt with this dilemma in a similar manner when he wrote that:

Time in the novel is constructed with words. In the cinema it is constructed with actions. The novel creates a world while the cinema puts us in the presence of a world which it organizes according to a certain continuity. The novel is a narrative which organizes itself in a world; the film, a world which organizes itself in a narrative.

Both Bluestone's and Mitry's preceding comments, when arranged together, should go some way to indicate just how different these two aesthetic objects – the novel and the film – actually are, and as a result highlight the immense difficulties facing screenwriters and directors who wish to make successful and intellectually challenging adaptations. (Adopted from Shepherd 2009: 12-13) <sup>[11]</sup>.

### Adaptation and Fidelity

'Fidelity' is a term used when talking about film adaptations. The degree of fidelity represents how faithful the film adaptation is to the original text. In other words, the book is the norm and the film should be a perfect copy of the book in terms of sight and sound. Desmond and Hawkes in their book *Adaptation: Studying Film and Literature* (2006: 2-3) <sup>[4]</sup> do not use fidelity "as an evaluative term that measures the merit of films, but as a descriptive term that allows discussion of the relationship between companion works". One of the first adaptations was filmed in 1924 with Eric Von Stroheim's *Greed*, a literal adaptation of Frank Norris's *McTeague*. The film adaptation was over 16 hours long! That was probably the last literal or a fully faithful adaptation of a novel ever attempted. Some other mediums, the short story, for example, or the comic book, lend themselves to literal adaptations, but not novels. Since that time, directors have used a variety of techniques to create adaptations that fit within a reasonable time frame.

### Conclusion

Some film critics such as Linda Hutcheon have a different view. They feel that to think about adaptations in terms of pleasure is a more fruitful way of looking at this phenomenon. The source of this pleasure seems to derive from the combination of the known with the unknown. It appears almost certain that "the appeal of adaptations lies in their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty", what can be compared with "a child's delight in hearing the same nursery rhymes or reading the same books over and over. Like ritual, this kind of repetition brings comfort, a fuller understanding, and the confidence that comes with the sense of knowing what is about to happen next" (Hutcheon 2009: xv).

No sooner than a book becomes a bestseller the filmmakers try to procure the rights of the book to adapt it into a film. They are sure that the marketing part of the film will be done by the popularity of the book. Moreover, everyone is running short of time these days. They rather prefer to see the movie than read the book it is based on. Whether it is any type adaptation or appropriation, when the text is converted into moving pictures it creates an altogether different magic. Gone are those days when adaptations or

appropriation of a text into a film was looked down upon as a secondary or inferior work. On the other hand, adapted or appropriated movies are the demand of the day.

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