Great Minds

at the

University of Toronto

From Page to Stage to Screen:
The Age of Adaptation

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This lecture was delivered on Monday, January 27, 2003.

Despite the evidence suggested by Spike Jonze's latest film—actually called *Adaptation*—every age can justify its claim to be the age of adaptation. The desire to transfer a story from one medium or one genre to another is neither new nor rare in Western culture. In fact, it is so common that we might suspect that it is related to how the human imagination creates. Despite the dismissive tone of some film reviewers, the act of adapting is not necessarily a secondary or a derivative one. After all, most of Shakespeare's plays were adapted from other literary or historical works, but that doesn't seem to have damaged the Bard's reputation. Shakespeare transferred his culture's stories from page to stage and made them accessible to (and enjoyable for) a largely illiterate audience. In recent years, it is true, we have witnessed on our television screens and in our movie theatres enough adaptations—based on everything from comic books to the novels of Jane Austen—to make us wonder if Hollywood has run out of new stories. There must be infinitely more candidates for the Academy Award for the Best Adapted Screenplay than there are for the Best Original Screenplay.

As my example of Shakespeare might suggest, adaptations have been the staple not only of the modern film industry but also (even before that) of the dramatic, dance, and musical stage—and, in fact, of literature in general. Although our age might well claim to be the age of adaptation, in part because of the surfeit of new media now available, the act of transposition and what we could call "re-functioning" is as old as art itself. It may have taken people like T.S. Eliot and our own Northrop Frye to convince me that art is derived from other art, but it didn't take those theorists to convince avid adapters across the centuries of what, for them, has always been a truism. In this sense, adaptation joins imitation, allusion, parody, travesty, pastiche, and quotation as popular creative ways of deriving art from art.

If this is so, why, then, have so many people lamented the results of this process of moving from the page to the stage or the screen? Here's a small sampling of the disparaging (not to say, discouraging) words heard, usually, but not always, about film in its relation to literature: "tampering," "interference," "violation," "betrayal," "deformation," "perversion," "infidelity," "desecration." The deeply moralistic rhetoric here belies the fact that what is at stake here is really a question of aesthetic and intellectual taste and, to be frank, cultural capital. For some people, as Robert Stam argues, literature will always have "axiomatic superiority" over any adaptation of it because of its seniority as an art form, but this hierarchy also has something to do with what he calls "iconophobia" (or suspicion of
the visual) and a concomitant "logophilia" (or love of the word as sacred). From this perspective, adaptations are, by definition, "belated, middlebrow, or culturally inferior." Commenting on the fledgling art of cinema in 1926, Virginia Woolf deplored the simplification of the literary work that inevitably occurred in its transposition to the visual medium, calling film a "parasite" and literature its "prey" and "victim." Yet, even this modernist novelist foresaw that film had the potential to develop its own independent idiom. Woolf wrote that "cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression" in words. And so it did.

Film semiotician Christian Metz has said about cinema that it "tells us continuous stories; it 'says' things that could be conveyed also in the language of words; yet it says them differently. There is a reason for the possibility as well as for the necessity of adaptations." The same, however, could be said of musicals, operas, ballets, songs, and other narrative forms. But I would argue that it is the very possibility of telling the same story in many different ways that provokes us to make the attempt. When we adapt, we create, using all the tools that creators have always used: we actualize or concretize ideas; we make simplifying selections but also amplify and extrapolate; we make analogies; we critique or show our respect. When we do all this, does it matter whether the narrative we are working with is "new" or adapted? Our post-Romantic valuing of the original is, after all, a late addition to a long history of borrowing and stealing—or, more accurately, of sharing—stories.

It may be no accident that we use the same word—"adaptation"—for both the product and the process. The end result of the act of adapting does indeed bear the marks of the process itself—that is, of its creation and, even, of its intended reception. There are, therefore, three different, if related, perspectives to be taken on adaptation. As a formal phenomenon, adaptation is a combination of translation and usually distillation of the adapted work. Just as there is no such thing as a literal translation, there can be no literal adaptation. Transposition to another medium (or even within the same one) always means change: there are always going to be both gains and losses. In Walter Benjamin's terms, translation (like adaptation) is not a rendering of some fixed non-textual meaning to be copied or paraphrased or reproduced; it is, in a sense, an engagement with the original text that, in fact, makes us see that text in different ways. In most cases, because adaptations are usually to a different medium, they will be forms of "intersemiotic" translation or "transposition" from one semiotic system (say, words) to another (images, perhaps). In this sense, a set of visual illustrations could potentially constitute an adaptation: Aubrey Beardsley's famous illustrations of Oscar Wilde's play Salome or those of Phiz [Hablot Browne] for the novels of Dickens. In a sense, this is more accurately described as a "transcoding" rather than a translation, a recoding of a communication act into a new set of conventions. For example, Harold Pinter's screenplay for Karel Reisz's film The French Lieutenant's Woman transposes the narrative of John Fowles's novel into a totally cinematic code. The novel juxtaposes a modern narrator and a Victorian story; in the movie, we have, instead, a Victorian film within a modern film, itself a film about making the first film. The narrator's self-reflexivity becomes cinematic mirroring, as the actors who play the Victorian characters live out the scripted romance in their own lives. The role-playing motif of film acting echoes very effectively the hypocrisy and schizoid morality of the Victorian world of the novel. This is adaptation as translation—and as transcoding.

Moving from this formal definition of adaptation to the perspective of the adapter, in the film Adaptation, screenwriter Charlie Kaufman faces a humorous but anguished dilemma, as he worries about his responsibility to an author and a book he respects. As he senses, the creative work involved in adapting is a process of appropriation, of taking possession of another narrative, of abducting it, if you like, for one's own creative purposes. This is accomplished through what can only be called an act of re-interpretation. When visual artist Joanne Tod adapts Thackeray's novel Vanity Fair in the form of a series of ironic painted portraits of Toronto celebrities, she is reinterpreting the novel, making us think about it in a different way, as well as creating something new. In the process, she also inevitably "re-accentuates" certain elements of Thackeray's narrative, as (Charlie Kaufman—or by the end, his twin Donald—does more than that, of course!)

The third point of view to consider in defining adaptation is ours—that of the receiver, the reader/viewer/spectator/listener. If adaptation is a mode of interpretation for the adapter, it is a mode of what we call "interertextuality" for the receiver who knows the adapted text; it has been called "an ongoing dialogical process" in which we compare the work we already know with the work we are now experiencing. Sometimes this will be a means of prolonging the pleasure through repetition and memory. At other times, it will be an exercise in frustration—for exactly the same reason! Therefore, depending on our relationship to Tchaikovsky's ballet Swan Lake, we will either be delighted with or irritated by Matthew Bourne's adaptation, with its updating and queer ironizing of the familiar classical ballet. His muscular male swans and their homoerotic, violent, and sexually charged choreography allows (among many other things) the traditional pas de deux between the prince and the swan to be a dance of equals—for perhaps the first time. This prince is not just an athletic assistant to a ballerina
star. Not everyone in the audience will enjoy this transgression and critical commentary on the sexual politics of the balletic tradition. But no matter what our response, our intertextual expectations about medium and genre (as well as about this specific work) are brought into the foreground of our attention.

I've been defining adaptation here in terms of medium—whether from the formal, creative or reception perspective. But clearly genre too is an issue. In fact, when we move from one set of conventions to another, changes in genre can actually occur—deliberately or inadvertently. For example, a bitingly satirical novel about social pretense and pressure might be transformed into a benign comedy of manners—as indeed has happened in most television and film versions of Thackeray's _Vanity Fair_. (Arguably, it took Joanne Tod's paintings to restore the satire!) Some literary genres appear to be particularly recalcitrant to medium shifts, however: the epistolary novel comes to mind, for there are obvious problems in converting a story told through a set of revealing letters to a visual or aural. We can stop reading at any point; we hold the book in our hands and feel (as well as see) how much of the story remains to be read. But in film and stage adaptations, we are caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving story. And we have moved from the imagination to the realm of direct perception—with its infinite detail and broad focus. Adaptation teaches us that language is not the only way to express meaning or to tell stories. Visual representations are rich in complex associations; music offers aural equivalents for characters' emotions and, in turn, provokes affective responses in the audience; sound, in general, can enhance or reinforce (or even contradict) the visual and verbal aspects. On the other hand, however, a dramatization cannot approximate the complicated verbal play of poetry or the interlinking of description, narration, and explanation that is so easy for prose narrative to do.

One theorist of verbal-visual relations, W.J.T. Mitchell, has implied that there is no significant difference between a verbal text and visual images. His argument is that "communicative, expressive acts, narration, argument, description, exposition and other so-called 'speech acts' are not medium-specific, are not 'proper' to some medium or another." Adaptations suggest quite the contrary, however. While I'll spare you a rehearsal of the long debates for and against the idea of "medium-specificity," I will say that I believe each medium has its own specificity, if not its own essence. In other words, no medium is inherently good at doing one thing and not another; but each medium (like each genre) has different means of expression and so can aim at (and achieve) certain things better than others.

For instance, if we think of adaptation from the creator's point of view, art theorist E.H. Gombrich offers us a very useful analogy. Gombrich suggests that if an artist stands before a landscape with a pencil in hand, he or she will "look for those aspects which can be rendered in lines"; if it is a paintbrush that the hand holds, the artist's vision of the same landscape will be in terms of "masses" instead. By analogy, then, a poet will be attracted to representing different aspects of a story (and in different ways) than will the creator of a musical spectacular. The linear and single-track medium of language will produce a different version than the multitrack film, with its amalgam of music, sound, and moving visual image.

An example will show best how this theory works in action. The British novelist E.M. Forster gave himself an interesting task at one point in his 1910 novel _Howards End_: how to represent in words the effect and the meaning of music—music which his readers would have to imagine, of course, and not hear. He begins the novel's fifth chapter with these words: "It will be generally admitted that Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is the most sublime noise that has ever penetrated into the ear of man." Forster goes on to describe the effect on each member of a family, the Schlegel family, whose ears this "sublime noise" penetrates. Novels can do this: they can take us into the minds and feelings of characters at will. However, the focus of this episode, in which the family attends together a...
symphony concert in Queen's Hall in London, is specifically on one character, Helen Schlegel—young, newly hurt in love, and therefore someone whose response to the music is intensely personal and deeply tied to her emotional troubles at the time.

As the orchestra plays the third movement, she hears "a goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end" (32). In the first movement she had heard "heroes and shipwrecks," but here it is terrible goblins she hears, and an "interlude of elephants dancing" (32). The goblins are frightening because of what Helen sees as their casualness: they "observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world" (32). Forster continues, "Helen could not contradict them, for, once at all events, she had felt the same, and had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! The goblins were right" (33). Totally moved, not to say upset, by the end of the piece, she finds she has to leave her family and be alone. As the novel puts it, "The music had summed up to her all that had happened or could happen in her career. She read it as a tangible statement, which could never be superseded" (34).

What happens when this scene is transposed to film, in the Merchant/Ivory production adapted by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala? The concert, in a sense, remains, but Helen attends alone. It's not a full orchestral concert this time, but a four-handed piano performance, accompanying a lecture on Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. A few of Forster's own lines remain, but very few. Since we can only see Helen on film and not get into her head, we can only guess at her thoughts—no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world. Helen sees as their casualness: they "observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world" (32). Forster continues, "Helen could not contradict them, for, once at all events, she had felt the same, and had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! The goblins were right" (33). Totally moved, not to say upset, by the end of the piece, she finds she has to leave her family and be alone. As the novel puts it, "The music had summed up to her all that had happened or could happen in her career. She read it as a tangible statement, which could never be superseded" (34).

She leaves the hall, taking by mistake the umbrella of a stranger, one Leonard Bast, who is someone who will play an important part in the rest of her life and, indeed, in the rest of the novel.

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While Forster used this scene to give us insight into the imaginative and emotional world of Helen Schlegel, the film seems to have made it the occasion for Helen to meet Leonard Bast (and to do so in a culturally loaded context). And in terms of plot action, that is indeed what happens in this scene, and so this is what the film aims to achieve. Interestingly, what a movie can do that a novel cannot do is let us actually hear Beethoven's music. But we cannot get at the interior of the characters' minds as they listen; they must visibly, physically embody their responses for the camera to record—or they must talk about their reactions. And, of course, in this film there is lots of talk about music, art, and many other things—and not only in this rather overt lecture form.

The transposition from page to stage has received less attention than has this kind of cinematic act of translation to the screen, but it too is rich in lessons on the specificity of genres and media. For instance, since it takes longer to sing than to speak (much less read) a line of text, operas and musicals must necessarily distill (radically) the narrative of a novel or even of a play. The necessary compression means a loss of stylistic texture, a trimming of expansive plot lines and possibly fascinating side issues, and a removal of much psychological analysis. Minor characters are omitted; colourful slang and expletives are deleted. In a ballet, even the words are silenced, leaving the expressive human body to carry the entire narrative line, with the aid of the music, of course.

While there is a long tradition of dramatizing novels—from the work of Dickens in the nineteenth century to that of George Eliot in the twentieth—there is a very real sense in which every staging of a play text is literally a move from page to stage. And it is not only directors like Peter Brook (though he is infamous for doing this) who will edit a play text heavily, rearrange plot events or cut characters. From the other perspective, however, the print text of the play will not necessarily record certain "indeterminate" things like gestures, expressions, tone of voice; it is up to the director and actor to actualize them and to interpret—in effect, to adapt (ad-aptare)—literally to fit the words to the stage. In musical drama, the score too has to be brought to life in actual sound, and not remain inert, lifeless black notes. A visual and aural world is physically created on stage—be it in a play, a musical, an opera or other performance piece—from verbal and notational signs on a page.

Opera may have been Richard Wagner's idea of the "total work of art" (the Gesamtkunstwerk) that united all the arts of music, literature, dance, and the visual, but today it is cinema that makes this claim. As one theorist puts it, "A composite language by virtue of its diverse matters of expression—sequential photography, music, phonetic sound, and noise—the cinema 'inherits' all the art forms associated with these matters of expression...the visuals of photography and painting, the movement of dance, the decor of architecture, and the performance of theater." Film clearly has resources that the stage can never have: the power of the close-up to give the "microdrama of the human countenance" or the separate soundtracks of film that permit things like voice-overs, music, and the non-vocal to intermingle.

The larger issue underlying this move from page to stage to screen is that of the general translatability of narrative, or what's called "narrativity." Critics seem to agree that the same story can be told in different media, but that equivalences must be found in the different semiotic systems involved for such things as "characters, events, motivations, consequences, context, viewpoint, imagery." Yet the early Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein wrote a famous essay called "Dickens,
Griffith, and the Film Today," in which he linked Dickens' novelistic techniques and moral stance with those of the film medium. And certainly all of literature (not to mention dance and opera) became "fodder" for the early cinema. For the new art form, intent on winning both artistic respectability and a middle-class audience, adaptations of the stories from Shakespeare and Dante seemed a safe bet, and indeed they were.

The shift to dramatized form—either filmed or staged—is not simply a kind of formal "remediation" or "transmediation"—to use some of the newest terminology available. As I've been arguing, it also entails those other dimensions of the process of creation and reception. After all, the act of adapting from print to performance entails a significant change of creative model: from solo literary production to collaboration, with multiple intermediaries delivering the work of art to the receiving audience. To take film as an obvious example, exactly who on the production team would we actually call the "adapter"? Is it the actual screenplay writer? The director? The editor? The production or location or casting managers? The set or costume designers? The music director or composer? The actors? In Hollywood, some of these figures are designated as stars, while others are relegated to the status of journeymen. While the actors and the director tend to take most of the credit(s), occasionally the cultural (and economic) capital does flow to the scriptwriter, but perhaps only if he happens to be a famous dramatist like Harold Pinter adapting The French Lieutenant's Woman for the screen, or like David Hare, adapting Michael Cunningham's novel, The Hours.

Perhaps the more interesting question to ask about the creative dimension of adaptation is: why would respected writers like Pinter or Hare choose to adapt the work of another artist, knowing that at least some receivers—including reviewers—are bound to consider even their work secondary or derivative? Is it purely for economic gain? Or is it the desire to bring a literary work to a wider audience? Is it to trade off on a book's cultural capital? Is it to cash in on its canonical or cult popularity? All are possible, of course. The technical, artistic, political, and personal intentions of adapters are the stuff of reviews but rarely of theoretical study—at least not since the pronouncing of a virtual critical anathema on the very considering of intentionality in the literary theory of the last half-century: critics wrote of the "intentional fallacy," the "death of the author," and so on.22 Adaptation, however, is an intensely personal as well as deeply convention-mediated process, as this next example will show.

The historical tale of 16 Carmelite nuns from Compiègne in France, who were guillotined during the Reign of Terror that followed the French Revolution, was first adapted or appropriated in 1931 by a German convert to Roman Catholicism named Gertrud von le Fort. Her novella, entitled Die Letzte am Schafost, was interpreted as a metaphor or allegory for the growing Nazi crisis in Germany. In the 1940s, the American playwright, Emmet Lavery, adapted the story in his religious play Song at the Scaffold. During the Second World War, Father Raymond Bruckberger and Philippe Agostini wrote a film scenario from le Fort's novella, this time portraying the nuns' fate as an allegory of the French Resistance. In 1947, they asked one of France's most important Catholic writers, Georges Bernanos, to write the dialogues for this scenario.

Bernanos was living in Tunisia at the time, having left France out of his disappointment with post-war society there; he was also dying of cancer, and this detail turns out to be a significant one. Despite the fact that Bernanos was a deeply political (and polemical) man, his version of the story became a way of coming to terms with death—in an intensely personal way. The political motives of the scenario faded away completely; Bernanos made additions to the narrative that focused on both religious notions of grace and the individual's facing of the fear of death. In short, Bernanos openly encoded his own struggles and fulfillments in the dialogues he wrote. Sadly, he died before the film was made, though the final version (not completed until 1960) used a greatly altered screenplay, since the producer found Bernanos' text too un-cinematic.

However, the writer's literary executor, Albert Béguiu, saw dramatic possibilities in it. Believing that these dialogues were in fact totally "Bernanosian" in their themes (despite the scenario by other hands), he edited (thus "adapting," in a sense) and published them as a play by Bernanos, called Les Dialogues des Carmélites. A few years later, at the suggestion of his editor, French composer Francis Poulenc decided to adapt the play for the operatic stage. But (and this starts to sound like the curse of this narrative) this creative process coincided with his own breakdown and his abject terror of dying, as well as with the actual death of his partner. It is no wonder that the most powerful scene in the deathbed scene. Poulenc's many letters written during the composition of the work show the very close links between the personal and the creative.

This is all part of the important context of the production of an adaptation; but the context of reception is equally significant. Both are obviously material, public, and economic contexts, as much as they are cultural, personal, and aesthetic ones. Even in today's globalized world, major shifts in context—that is, say, in national setting or time period—can change radically how the transposition of a narrative is interpreted, ideologically, as well as literally. How do we react when a male director adapts a woman's novel, for instance, or when an American director adapts a British novel? (Or both—as in Neil LaBute's version of A.S. Byatt's novel Possession?)

In shifting cultures, and therefore sometimes languages, adaptations make alterations that reveal much about the contexts of reception. For example, in
1845, the French writer Prosper Mérimée wrote a novella about a Spanish gypsy we know best today by the opera named after her, Carmen. One section of that story was indeed adapted by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy for Georges Bizet’s 1875 opera of that name. There are so many famous (and infamous) productions of this work—from those done in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia to postmodern European variants—that some of them can be considered, in and of themselves, adaptations. But this isn’t the only form in which we get Carmen’s story: this femme fatale also reappears on the ballet stage, but the dance work created by the French choreographer Roland Petit, designed as a star vehicle for Mikhail Baryshnikov, differs considerably from the earlier one by Alberto Alonso, this time for the Russian ballerina, Maya Plisetskaya. (Guess which one put Carmen centre stage and which gave the starring role to her lover, Don José?) Obviously production intent, national context, cultural valence—all can potentially alter the ideological freight of the story we watch.

There are many films made of the opera Carmen itself, of course, including one by Francesco Rosi, who set it in naturalistic Spanish space. But there are also cultural transpositions. Otto Preminger’s 1954 Americanization, called Carmen Jones, translates the operatic narrative into a popular stage and then film musical, set in the Second World War and with an all-black cast. Carlos Saura could be said to have re-hispianized and re-gypsified Carmen in a flamenco idiom and in a postmodern, self-reflexive manner in his 1983 film. African director Joseph Gai’s more recent (2001) film, Karmen Gei, is set to indigenous Senegalese music and choreography, but the story of the dangerous but alluring woman remains legible despite the cultural transposition. This list, however, does not exhaust the genres or cultures represented by adaptations of Carmen: there is a Carmen on Ice, performed by Olympic skating stars, and only last year Hip-Hopera: Carmen appeared, featuring the star of Destiny’s Child as the heroine. Gender and racial politics, as much as national, cultural or temporal change, can play a role in the reception of these adaptations.

It is probably safe to say that the intended receiver of the work is on the mind of the adapter from the start. Hollywood films in the classic period relied on adaptations from popular novels—or, to put it another way, they relied on the "tried and tested." British television, on the other hand, has specialized in adapting the "culturally accredited [eighteenth- and] nineteenth-century novel"—or, we could say, the "tried and trusted." Therefore, one of the major issues becomes whether the audience knows the adapted text or not. If not, there is obviously more creative freedom for the adapter; if the adapted text is well known, however, there is frequently a palpable tension between the audience’s desire for fidelity to the beloved literary work and the creator’s desire for autonomous reconfiguration or even critical commentary.

There are clear advantages sometimes to knowing the adapted text. If we know well the basic story outline of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, for instance, we are likely to fill in the gaps necessitated by the distillation of the plot in the opera or ballet versions of it. When music is added, it certainly seems to help if the story is familiar. As librettist and dramatist Terrence McNally recently put it, “Music adds such an enormously new dimension to a piece, it’s enough for any audience (or critic) to absorb at one hearing. If the characters and situation are familiar, listeners can relax and let the music take them somewhere new and wonderful.” Nevertheless, it is probably easier for an adapter to forge a relationship with audience members if we are NOT overburdened with affection or nostalgia for the adapted text. Without foreknowledge, we are more likely to greet a film version simply as a new film, not as an adaptation. The director, therefore, will have greater freedom—and control. For instance, Tod Field based his film In the Bedroom on a short story, “Killings,” by André Dubus. This work is undoubtedly less well known than E. Annie Proulx’s novel The Shipping News, which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. For this reason, I suspect that viewers of Lasse Hallström’s film of that novel were more (or perhaps simply differently) demanding than were those of Field’s. It seems evident that reviewers often bone up on the novel before seeing the film made from it, in order to judge if the adaptation is “faithful.” But marketing reports show that normal folks in the audience are just as likely to read the book after seeing the film, if it is successful at the box-office.

Audience foreknowledge of the adapted work, then, is one important issue; another is a more physical aspect of reception. The private and individual experience of reading is closer to the private visual and domestic spaces of television, radio, DVD, video, and computer than it is to the public and communal viewing experience in the dark of the theatre. And, when we sit, quiet and still in the dark, watching real live bodies on the stage, is our level and kind of identification different than it is when we sit in front of a screen and have reality mediated for us by technology?

Certainly, new electronic technologies have made what we might call fidelity to the imagination (rather than a more direct fidelity to reality) possible in new ways, well beyond earlier animation techniques and special effects. The many new adaptations of fantasy fiction are, arguably, the result of these technological breakthroughs. One of the central clichés of film adaptation theory is that audiences are more demanding of fidelity when dealing with the classics—with the work of Shakespeare or Dickens, for instance. But a whole new set of what we might call “cult” popular classics—the classics of fantasy—are now being made visible and audible in the movie theatre. And their readers are likely to be just as demanding of film adaptations as are the fans of the more traditional classics.
While our imaginative visualizations of literary worlds are always highly individ-
ual, the variance among readers is likely even greater in fantasy fiction than in
realist fiction. What does this mean when these readers see one particular version
on the screen—most simply put, that of the director’s imagination? The answer,
of course, can be found in the reviews of (and more generally, the audience reac-
tions to) the recent adaptations of both The Lord of the Rings and the Harry
Potter novels. Now that I know what an orc looks like (from the movie), I’ll
never be able to recapture my first imagined version again. The question is: is this
good or bad?

I have been concentrating here on adaptations that cross media, but I should
say that many, of course, do not: there are plays based on plays (think of Robert
Lepage’s reworking of Hamlet called Elsinor); there are all those film “remakes” of
other films, and those song “covers.” Composers have made purely orchestral
works out of sung operas, and piano versions of symphonies. These too are
adaptations. But how elastic do we want to make this category? Is there a
limit to what we’ll call an “adaptation”? In his film Moulin Rouge, Baz Luhrmann not only bor-
rowed Puccini’s operatic story of the consumptive heroine and the bohemian
artist from La Bohème, but he also deployed the conventions of film musicals and
MTV music videos. Is this a multiple adaptation? And what do we do with spin-
offs? Are DVDs an extension or another aspect of adaptation? What about the
toys, t-shirts, board and video games, and websites? What do we call something
like “The Lord of the Rings—The Two Towers—The Exhibit” that was at the Royal
Ontario Museum in 2002? Then there’s that growing world of internet “fan fic-
tion”—the (erotic) fiction written to and about the characters of various tele-
vision series. Where does what we are willing to call “adaptation” stop? Or does it?

Whatever our individual answers to these questions, I know that I’ve now
become convinced of one thing: that adaptation is not necessarily secondary or
parasitic. Instead, it is a fundamental operation of the storytelling imagination.
A narrative has to be uncreated before being recreated—but it’s all a form of cre-
ation. For us, in the audience, part of the very real pleasure of watching adapta-
tions lies in recognition and remembrance. But it’s equally true that part of the
also very real masochistic fear provoked by adaptations lies in...recognition and
remembrance. That’s one of the paradoxes that fascinates me, that makes me
want to challenge that reductive, negative rhetoric—and theorizing—that see adapta-
tions as inevitably derivative and unfaithful to the adapted works. The film
actually called Adaptation reminds us all that, in Darwin’s theory of evolution,
generic adaptation is seen in positive terms, as biological improvement for better
suitability to a given environment. Is there a parallel way to think positively
about narrative adaptation within a cultural environment? And, can we resolve
the tensions between, on the one hand, the manifest commercial viability of
repetition and the equally manifest pleasure it provokes through remembrance
and, on the other, our continuing, post-romantic suspicion of it, combined with
the displeasure provoked by lack of “fidelity” to what is deemed an “original”?
Answering these questions would be a major step in tackling the move from page
to stage to screen in this, one of the many ages of adaptation. ONWARD!

NOTES

1 The first three are pointed out by Brian McFarlane, Novel to Film (Oxford: Clarendon
Press, 1996), 12; the others by Robert Stam, “The Dialogics of Adaptation,” in James
Naremore, ed., Film Adaptation (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000),
54. This kind of language proliferates in “fidelity criticism” that elevates literature above
72-76.

2 Stam, 58. The citation that follows is from James E. Naremore, “Introduction: Film

tion is from the same page.

4 Christian Metz, Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema, trans. Michael Taylor (New
York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 44.

5 What is true in English is also true, at least for the film/literature adapting relationship,
in German (Literaturverfilmung) and French (l’adaptation filmique).

6 See Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn,

7 For definitions of intersemiotic translation, see Julia Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic
Alicja Helman and Waclaw M. Osadnik, “Film and Literature: Historical Models of
Film Adaptation and a Proposal for a (Poly)System Approach,” Canadian Review of
Comparative Literature 23.3 (1996): 646; Stam, 62; Patrick Cattrysse, “Film

8 For a full analysis, see Neil Sinyard, Filming Literature: The Act of Screen Adaptation

9 This term of Mikhail Bakhtin (from The Dialogic Imagination) is used by Joe K. Law
to talk about adaptation in “The Dialogics of Operatic Adaptation: Reading Benjamin

10 Stam, 64.

11 In “The Literary Adaptation,” Screen 23 (May-June 1982), John Ellis argues that since
novels and films are meant to be consumed and not repeated, the process of adaptation
to film "should thus be seen as a massive investment (financial and psychic) in the
desire to repeat particular acts of consumption within a form of representation that
discourages such a repetition" (4-5).


4. E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1941), 31. All further page references will be in parentheses in the text.


12. Ellis, 3.