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## **THE APPEAL OF LITERATURE-TO-FILM ADAPTATIONS**

### **Adaptation as interpretation**

The debate on cinematic adaptations of literary works was for many years dominated by the questions of fidelity to the source and by the tendencies to prioritize the literary originals over their film versions.<sup>1</sup> Adaptations were seen by most critics as inferior to the adapted texts, as “minor”, “subsidiary”, “derivative” or “secondary” products, lacking the symbolic richness of the books and missing their “spirit”.<sup>2</sup> Critics could not forgive what was seen as the major fault of adaptations: the impoverishment of the book’s content due to necessary omissions in the plot and the inability of the filmmakers to read out and represent the deeper meanings of the text.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Imelda Whelehan: ‘Adaptations. The contemporary dilemmas’, in Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (eds), *Adaptations. From text to screen, screen to text*, London 2006, pp. 3-19.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Hutcheon: *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York 2006, pp. XII-XIII.

Another point of criticism concerned the perception problems related to the visuality of the filmic medium. It was an obvious fact that each act of visualization narrowed down the open-ended characters, objects or landscapes, created by the book and reconstructed in the reader's imagination, to concrete and definite images.<sup>3</sup> The verbally transmitted characteristics of the heroes, places and the spatial relations between them, open to various decoding possibilities in the process of imagining, were in the grip of flattening pictures. Visualization was therefore regarded as destroying many of the subtleties with which the printed word could shape the internal world of a literary work only in the interaction with the reader's response.

In order to be seen as a good adaptation, a film had to come to terms with what was considered as the "spirit" of the book and to take into account all layers of the book's complexity. But who could guarantee that the image of the work that a particular reader had created in his or her mind was better than somebody else's? Who could define exactly the elements of the literary work that formed its "spirit" and were indispensable to its recognition in another medium? Who could prove that only a literary approach was capable to reveal finite and ultimative truths about a book's identity and provide us with exact models of understanding it? Seeing adaptations from the perspective of fidelity revealed itself as too limiting. More and more critics started to believe that literature as art did not desire closure, that it did not satisfy itself with one approach only and did not take refuge behind a virtually constructed order of well-established interpretative procedures. Literature, like other arts, suggested a vast area of communicative possibilities through which it could speak to the audience. According to the theories of an open work of art and to some conclusions of the reader-response criticism<sup>4</sup>, meanings could be seen as events that took place in the reader's time and imagination. It was therefore necessary to place the emphasis differently, not on the source, but on the way its meanings were reconstructed in the process of reception. Filmmakers had to be seen as readers with their own rights, and each adaptation – as a result of individual reading processes.

In the last decade of research there has been a significant shift toward this de-hierarchizing attitude. The discussions "have moved from a moralistic discourse of fidelity and betrayal to a less judgemental discourse of intertextuality".<sup>5</sup> Adaptations are now being analysed as products of artistic creativity "caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin".<sup>6</sup> When an adaptation is compared with the literary work it is based on, the stress is on the ways the film creators move within the field of intertextual connections and how they employ the means of expression offered by the filmic art to convey meanings. An adaptation is seen as interpretation, as a specific and original vision of a literary text, and even if it remains fragmentary, it is worthwhile because it embeds the book in a network of creative activities and interpersonal communication.

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<sup>3</sup> The actors that are visibly present on the screen "circumscribe too much the characters", so that these cease to be open constructs. Cf. Seymour Chatman: *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, New York 1980, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Roman Ingarden, Umberto Eco, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley E. Fish, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Stam: *Film Theory. An Introduction*, Oxford 2002, pp. 209-210.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

An adaptation as interpretation does not have to capture all the nuances of the book's complexity, but it has to remain a work of art, an independent, coherent and convincing creation with its own subtleties of meanings. In other words, it has to remain faithful to the internal logic created by the new vision of the adapted work. Even if the filmmakers' reading of a given literary text clashes with our reading, we are willing to forgive all the alterations when they spring from a well thought-out scheme and can lend a persuasive new sense to the text.

### **The pleasures of adaptation**

Such attitude seems to be possible only when we are able to develop a distanced relationship with a literary text. Things look different in the case of adaptations that are based on the books we love and have interiorized so intimately that they have become an integral part of our imagination. Our favourite books possess the ability to plunge us into a magic realm, into an atmosphere that embraces all our senses. By watching an adaptation we want to prolong this magic, but the strong wish to revisit the beloved world of the book through film produces a feeling of hopeful expectation mixed with anxiety because the film is going to interfere with a world that is treasured and cherished in our hearts. An adaptation which does not respond to our personal vision of the book is immediately seen as an attack on our integrity.

In spite of the fact that in the case of best-sellers the audience will inevitably declare against all the details of the films that betray the cherished original, adaptations have not lost their appeal for the film industry. Filmmakers know perfectly well that their films are going to be scrutinized for any signs of unfaithfulness to the source. Nevertheless, they expose themselves freely to severe and unfavourable judgments and bring the audience's favourites onto screen. Observing these "masochistic" tendencies in her *Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon wants to find out "why anyone would agree to adapt a work, knowing their efforts would likely be scorned as secondary and inferior to the adapted text or to the audience's own imagined versions"<sup>7</sup>, in other words: "What motivates adapters, knowing that their efforts will be compared to competing imagined versions in people's heads and inevitably be found wanting?"<sup>8</sup> On the other hand she tries to explain what persuades the readers into going to the cinema or buying a DVD and watching an adaptation although they do not want to see their favourite book changed.

She comes to the conclusion that it may be fruitful to think about adaptations in terms of pleasure. 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

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<sup>7</sup> Hutcheon: op. cit., p. XV.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

understanding, and the confidence that comes with the sense of knowing what is about to happen next.”<sup>9</sup>

The repetition must be, however, accompanied by creation, by a reinvention of the familiar world and shaping it into something new. According to Hutcheon, the real comfort lies in the experience of tensions between old and new, “in the simple act of almost but not quite repeating, in the revisiting of a theme with variations”.<sup>10</sup> Watching the film that resonates with echoes of a well known world, that emerges from a confluence of pleasurable memories and new ideas, is like prolonging the myth that lies at the origins of our being and does not cease to intrigue us and give us force. The appeal of adaptations is therefore rooted in the desire to witness a rebirth of this myth. The different filmic versions of one single book are all manifestations of the same wish to revisit “an old friend”. The power which attracts the filmmakers is the desire to recreate and add some freshness to the familiar world. The power which draws the audience to an adaptation is the possibility offered by the film to see and hear what they imagined and learned to love in their own imagination, the wish to enter in a more sensual way into the beloved world created by the book.

The following lines will explore some other reasons for the enormous attraction of making and watching adaptations.<sup>11</sup> One of them lies in the urge to create. Being fascinated by a writer’s creation, filmmakers may find pleasure in sharing the aesthetic experience by completing the literary work and stilling their insatiable curiosity to find out how this “unwholesome” work can be transformed to the filmic medium. Cinematic adaptations blur the boundaries between different media, they force the filmmakers to penetrate the surface of a written text, to read out what lies beneath this surface and recreate it in the visual and aural medium.

The complexity of a literary work represents a great challenge to every reader because the world it evokes is an open-ended world that is left to be completed in the process of reading. The readers create their own private ideas about this world by piecing together fragmentary visions of both the directly articulated and indirectly suggested parts. An adaptation invites the viewers to discuss not only the film itself but also their private readings of the adapted text, for it gives them an opportunity to see how the cinematically active readers have responded to the book. When we watch the film, our private form of filling in the gaps is revitalized by the confrontation with the way another creative mind has filled in the same gaps. We become part of an interpersonal artistic communication which is very rewarding because it allows us to get insight into an artist’s creative mind and through this creative mind to the literary work. This combines the pleasure in exploring the literary text through the lenses of an artist with the pleasure in participating in the inner world of that artist. We are interested in the way the authors of the film respond to the significant parts of the literary work, how they transform the relations between the characters, structures and objects, how they mold the characters, how they add richness to their portrait, how they reconstruct the latent subtexts and how they shape visually and aurally all that lies beneath the surface of the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> The economic aspect of financial gain, made possible by joining in the stream of great popularity that a best-seller can generate, is left aside. Hutcheon discusses this issue together with some legal problems that may arise by undertaking an adaptation (*ibid.*, pp. 86-91).

verbally articulated work. The way the filmmakers link the details of the meanings into new meanings tells us a lot about how they see the world.

Another source of pleasure lies in observing the unity of the artistic communication across media. Films contextualize books in a visible and audible atmosphere and invite us to discover the unsuspected ways of seeing and hearing things. A specific combination of images and sounds can provide insights into the nature of the deep-seated meanings that do not lend themselves easily to verbal exploration. The ideas mystified in symbols and the veiled references to different aspects of life that we once decoded in a particular way speak to us from a new perspective and we learn to appreciate a literary text on a different level, we begin to notice that many of its elements gain a new life when interpreted in the context of the new medium's specificity. This oscillation between the different media is of great importance to our perception of the world, for it locates works of art in the energetic field between different modes of communication and beyond the limits of a particular medium.

Some theorists argue that it is a great mistake "to make absolute, unreconcilable distinctions between visual and verbal texts"<sup>12</sup> and that in a certain way all works of art offer multilayered modes of communication that break through the virtually established barriers between the different media. Each work lays the groundwork for many possible adaptations because each art can play with elements of other arts. Artistic devices such as metaphors or symbols are not just literary means of conveying significance, symbolic structures exist in all forms of artistic activity, in all fields of human creation, and using some of the devices that are characteristic of other media cannot be seen as borrowing from other arts, but as choosing from the broad range of mediatic possibilities offered by the nature of the world and deriving from the desires of the humans to communicate and to address all human senses. Works of art are made for people seen as a unity of body and soul, where the mental perception of the world is possible through the unity of senses, therefore they cannot be seen in isolation and with the focus on a small range of sensual possibilities offered by a specific medium. A literary work speaks to us not only through its words printed on paper, it can be also read to us, so that we get to know it by listening to a human voice. A painting is not only an image but also the temperature of the colours, their texture and the story the patterns and the colours tell us. These faculties of all forms of artistic expression prove their transitional and mediating nature and invite to translations and neverending decoding and encoding transformations.<sup>13</sup> A filmic adaptation is particularly pleasurable because it combines the conceptual world of a literary text with images and sounds and brings literature back to its original unity of spoken word underscored by music and accompanied by the physical presence of the performing artist.

This bodily presence of a human being seems to appeal most forcefully to our senses and is the starting point of another sort of pleasure – the fascination with the performers. Comparing various adaptations of a book we refer most of the time to the actors that shape the adaptations in the most visible way, we often go to the cinema or buy a DVD

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<sup>12</sup> William C. Wees: *Poetry-Films and Film Poems*, in [www.lux.org.uk/forms/film poems/weesarticle.pdf](http://www.lux.org.uk/forms/film poems/weesarticle.pdf). Wees quotes the American theorist W.J.T. Mitchell and his book *Picture Theory*, Chicago 1994.

<sup>13</sup> This view of adaptations collides with some filmmakers' "quasi-mystical search for the photogenic quintessence of film". Cf. Stam: *op. cit.*, p. 119.

because of some ingenious interpretation of a particular role. The actors are what we most deeply remember of a film and what we most love or hate about it. When we do not get to love the actor who is playing the role of our favourite character, this will spoil the whole film even if all other aspects of it are brilliant.

When we love the actors and their performance, we begin to gain new access to the well-known characters because of the great impact of the actors' corporality on our emotions. Feelings shaped previously into verbal language now continue to mediate between visually present people and the viewers. The characters, previously imagined vaguely within the world of the text, now expand to the world of really existing people. Our attitude towards the characters is marked by the performers' acting skills, it can be even fully changed in comparison with our first contact with the adapted text, for the actors have the most direct power to suggest new subtexts to the story and play a crucial role in establishing a new relationship to the book. The brilliant performance of a supporting actor can even reorganize the hierarchy of the characters we have in mind by letting a character who appears in the book on the margin of the main story emerge from his shadowy existence.

Laura Mulvey stresses another aspect of the fascination with the actors. She argues that the magic of the greatest films emerges from their ability to manipulate visual pleasure by encoding eroticism into the film language. A character's erotic charm is developed on two levels – for the characters within the film story and for the viewers within the auditorium – and the pleasure in looking takes the film for a short but intensive moment “into a no-man's-land outside its own time and space”<sup>14</sup> in which it becomes an energetic field of projections of the viewer's dreams and desires. Films often cast actors who do not look like the corresponding characters in the book in order to make the protagonists a better matrix for projections from the audience. It does not mean that the actresses and actors have to be particularly beautiful or handsome, on the contrary, the more hidden and indirect their attractiveness is, the more likely they are to have an erotic impact on the audience, for a film can be a catalyst of projections only if it plays with this potential in an indirect and subtle way.

The pleasure in experiencing moments of great erotic intensity can have a significant influence on our attitude towards the fidelity issue. The spectators will forgive any lack of fidelity if only their desire to experience visual pleasure and their wish to “correct” the book are satisfied.<sup>15</sup> No viewer will, for example, complain about the lack of fidelity to the source in the BBC *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) when they see the famous moment in which Colin Firth (Mr Darcy) emerges from a lake and comes across Jennifer Ehle (Miss Elizabeth Bennet). They will even be disappointed trying to find a similar scene in the original text and finding out that it never existed. The filmic addition is so ingeniously designed and performed that it seems to be an integral part of Jane Austen's world, and the absence of this scene in the book reverses the source-adaptation hierarchy: the audience's preference is, in this particular case, clearly for the film.

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<sup>14</sup> Laura Mulvey: 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Robert Stam and Toby Miller (eds), *Film and Theory. An Anthology*, Oxford 2000, p. 488. Mulvey refers only to the female body and the female stars, but her conclusions may refer to male characters as well.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Pat Kirkham and Sarah Warren: 'Four Little Women. Three films and a novel', in Cartmell and Whelehan (eds), op. cit., p. 96.

In the process of adaptation, apart from being translated into a sequence of visible images, the written words of a book are transformed to an oral/aural text, spoken by the actors or an off-screen narrator and received by the audience through hearing. There is no doubt that the human voice has the power to move people's feelings and that this ability can be used by the filmmakers to manipulate the audience's response to a film. It is, however, very difficult to explain why a person can get so much pleasure out of listening to a particular voice. The functions of the qualities that form the nature of a voice and are responsible for its individual colour are one of the most enigmatic aspects of interpersonal communication. We can only assume that the magic of a voice derives from those of its attributes that can be instinctively associated with some positive experiences in our lives and with people we are attracted to. Our fascination with the voice through which a literary text communicates with us can prolong this pleasurable experience and add some new force to the text itself.

The sensual force of the spoken word is undoubtedly intensified by the music used in the film. The audience can derive a lot of pleasure not only from listening to melodies and rhythms that create moods and heighten emotions provoked by the story, but also from analysing the ways the music reinforces the symbolic richness of the literary work, establishes new relationships between its elements, sheds a new light on its meanings and multiplies its interpretative perspectives.<sup>16</sup>

The undeniable pleasure in analysing the film language concerns all aspects of the filmic adaptation and can be regarded as a response to the human wish to evaluate. We simply adore judging works of art. We cannot help giving opinions about the artistic value of the means of expression employed in a film and about the selections undertaken by the filmmakers and the impact they have on the reception of the story. Judging a film and its authors gives us pleasure even if we give a negative opinion about some aspects of the film because it produces a feeling of satisfaction with our own reading skills due to the sensation of being better than the filmmakers at decoding the multifaceted literary text.

## Learning from adaptation

In the book mentioned above Hutcheon develops her theory focusing on the nature of people's engagement in different kinds of adaptations. She tests the most frequent truisms about adaptations, articulated by writers and literary critics, against the following three modes of involvement: the telling mode (e.g. literature), the showing mode (e.g. film or theatre) and the interactive mode (e.g. videogames or theme park rides). While the first two modes immerse the audience in the activity of reading, watching and listening by appealing mostly to their imagination, the interactive mode of engagement allows them to participate physically in the adapted texts, to enter the story and act as one of the characters.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. the model of tectonic, syntactic, semantic and mediating functions of film music proposed by Georg Maas and Achim Schudack in their book *Musik und Film – Filmmusik*, Mainz 1994, p. 35 and the following.

<sup>17</sup> Hutcheon, op. cit., pp. XIV-XV, 22-27.

What Hutcheon describes as an example of the interactive mode of involvement – playing a videogame based on a book or a film – is interacting only with the final product of adaptation. But people can be offered a far more interesting possibility to take part in the creative process of adapting. In comparison with videogames, where the interacting person has to obey the rules of the game and to follow some predesigned patterns, people interactively involved in the process of bringing a literary text onto screen create something spontaneously, out of the moment, following the patterns of their own imagination and responding to the unpredictable conditions of the filmmaking. It may be interesting to find out what such an experience can practically mean to philology students who are asked in their literature courses to analyse literary works and do this only by means of words. The following example gives evidence of the high communicative potential of adaptation and shows how the interactive immersing in the process of adapting actually broadens the students' horizons at many different levels.

In 2006 some students of the University of Szczecin participated in a three-day film workshop on adapting Heinrich Heine's famous poem dedicated to the legendary Rhine maiden Loreley. They worked together with some film professionals in order to put their theoretical ideas about adaptation into practice by creating two film versions of the poem. The main objective of the workshop that payed homage to the great German poet was to experience the richness of creative tensions that arose out of the fact that all what was expressed verbally in the poem and pictured by the force of imagination in the students' heads had now to be transposed to a different kind of perception. The students had to learn how to take risks and read a literary text in its openness to new decoding possibilities. The workshop revealed the intensity of the tensions that sprang from the desire to break down the original structures of the poem in order to stress some of its latent subtleties and from the strong wish not to betray the literary source. The students had the opportunity to understand that creating a special mood was far more important than following exactly all the details of the story. It was very rewarding to look at the ways in which the poem changed without stopping to be the same, how it gained new meanings by preserving its integrity, how it spoke to us through its embeddedness in the new context of production and reception.

Let us now look at some advantages of engaging philology students in the process of literature-to-film adaptation. Although hardly believed to do so, images do grant insight into the inner strength of a literary work, to what lies behind the literal surface. In an effort to visualize the poem, to construct a new order of it, the students come paradoxically closer to the text. Actively involved with the filmic creation they develop, surprisingly, a text-centred approach, they experience a greater communicative intimacy with the text focusing on each word in order to reconstruct its several possible meanings and connotations. The process of looking for appropriate images and music that could convey the meanings of the poem helps to detect the subtle nuances of the words and to develop a broader understanding of the text. Students who establish a visually reinforced relationship with the words have a finely tuned sense for their hidden messages. Making a film reveals to the students some details that they missed as they first read the poem, it helps them to decipher some of the symbols that they did not understand at the time. This gives them an opportunity to arrive at a different reading of the textual clues and to develop a greater self-awareness as readers. This cinematic approach cannot exhaust all the interpretative possibilities of a literary work, but it can enrich some of the verbally

constructed concepts with fruitful visual associations and stimulate the hidden meanings of the words to emerge.

Students involved in the process of filmmaking learn an important lesson about cinematic creation. The film is a product of a team's work, of a balance between a number of personalities that have to flow into one, of a combination of thoughts and ideas that nourish each other. The readings of a text that exist in the minds of several persons form only a starting point for the mutually elaborated final product. The students break through the intimacy of a personal contact with a literary text into an interpersonal process of sharing the decoded meanings in an interaction and integrating their own response to the text into somebody else's reading. Many ideas have to remain unrealized, many ways of visualizing something have to be given up – the awareness of all these losses teaches the students how to be humble. They learn to understand that a film emerges from an energetic encounter between its creators and the whole context of institutional and economic selections. This is also due to the simple fact that making a film out of a natural closeness to nature admits one "filmmaker" more: the weather conditions and their impact on the decisions made during the adapting process.

Participating in an adaptation workshop influences the students' attitude to the fidelity issue and makes them understand better the problems related to intertextuality. Both short films made during the Loreley-workshop move the traditional setting of the legend to the coast of Poland. In spite of the fact that the Loreley-myth is closely related to the Rhine, locating the story against the background of a seashore cannot be regarded as destroying the spirit of the legend. The stress is on the mysterious power of Loreley and on the motif of water as a natural element, not on a particular rock or a concrete river in a given geographic region. The films explore the internal logic of the world constructed by both the legend and the poem and pay homage to the Romantic notion of the multifaceted relationship between the real world and the supernatural forces that guide people's lives.<sup>18</sup> In consequence of this open structure of reading literature, the students develop a higher consciousness of the intertextual openness of culture.

All these advantages of engaging philology students in a film workshop give new evidence of the necessity to promote a symbiotic relationship between scientific and artistic activities. The move from a traditional academic form of reading literature into a bodily and creatively engaging process of filmmaking heightens the students' receptivity, stimulates their imagination and strengthens their power to analyse a broader range of meaningful structures which are offered by works of art. The students learn that all arts are interrelated because all seek to express the eternally valid truths of man's existence. They learn that each great work of art exists on many levels and suggests a great deal of interpretative possibilities which make it timelessly open to different approaches.

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<sup>18</sup> It is mainly the first film that gives voice to the deep-seated fears a lonely wanderer can be seized with when he enters the realm of a bad spirit. The eerie sounds that accompany the wanderer can be read as signals of the frightening omnipresence of Loreley and her seductive but fatal power over men. Further details of the project and more information about both short films can be found in my book *Zu Theorie und Praxis einer Gedichtverfilmung. Heinrich Heines Loreley in filmischer Interpretation*, Szczecin 2007.