

house gases into the atmosphere, and hence will delay the onset of the kind of global climate changes that are liable to turn El Niño into a serious hazard.

Our affair with El Niño is approaching a critical juncture. Constant El Niño could soon become fickle. Will he grow more intense? Will his brief visits become prolonged? As yet we have no definite answers. But we have learnt that much can be done to avoid calamities by implementing appropriate policies, even when the available scientific information has large uncertainties. Above all, we need to guard against the temptation to defer difficult political decisions because of a perceived need for more accurate information. Much more can be learnt from our affair with El Niño. We need to do so in a hurry, before we succeed in changing him.

Linda Hutcheon

*on the art of  
adaptation*

Despite the argument implicit in Spike Jonze's latest film, *Adaptation*, every age can justly claim to be an 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. It is in fact so common that we might suspect that it is somehow the inclination of the human imagination – and, despite the dismissive tone of some critics, not necessarily a secondary or derivative act. After all, most of Shakespeare's plays were adapted from other literary or historical works, and that does not seem to have damaged the Bard's reputation

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as an inventor. But in recent years, it is true, we have witnessed on our televisions and in our movie theaters enough adaptations – based on everything from comic books to the novels of Jane Austen – to make us wonder if Hollywood has finally run out of new stories.

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 T. S. Eliot and Northrop Frye to convince me that all art is derived from other art, but it didn’t take those theorists to convince avid adapters across the centuries of what for them – on the dramatic, dance, and operatic stage, and in literature in general – had 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 the process of moving from the page to the stage or the screen? So often film’s relation to literature has been characterized as a tampering, a deformation, a desecration, an infidelity, a betrayal, a perversion. The deeply moralistic rhetoric of such characterizations belies the fact that what is at stake here is really a question of cultural capital. For some people, as cultural theorist Robert Stam has argued, literature will always have “axiomatic superiority” over any cinematic adaptation of it because of its seniority as an art form. This hierarchy also has something to do with what he calls “iconophobia” (the suspicion of the visual) and the concomitant “logophilia” (the love of the word as sacred). From this perspective, adaptations are, by definition, “belated, middlebrow, or culturally inferior.” Commenting in 1926

on the fledgling art of cinema, Virginia Woolf deplored the simplification that inevitably occurs in the transposition of literary work to the visual medium, calling film a “parasite,” and literature its “prey” and “victim.” Still, she conceded that “cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression.” 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 could be said of musicals, operas, ballets, songs, and other narrative forms. While no medium is inherently good at doing one thing and not another, each medium (like each genre) has different means of expression and so can aim at certain things better than others. Art theorist E. H. Gombrich offers a useful analogy when he 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 the artist has a paintbrush, his or her vision of the same landscape will emerge as masses instead. A poet, by the same analogy, will be attracted to representing different aspects of a story than the creator of a musical spectacular; and 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 images.

Perhaps 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 simplify but we also amplify and ex-

trapolate; 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 postromantic valuing of the originary is, after all, a late addition to a long history of borrowing and stealing – or, more accurately, of *sharing* – stories.

I am just beginning a new research project to try to theorize adaptation, and while my general interest in the questions of adaptability and adaptation is wide and includes all those new forms of ‘remediation’ that information technology has given us, in this brief note I want to limit my remarks to the move from the page to the stage and the screen, that is, the move from a purely verbal medium to the embodied, enacted forms intended for performance. I would like to focus on how language, sound, music, and visual images together convey a once purely verbal narrative in a new way.

The shift from looking at black marks on a white page to perceiving a direct representation on the stage or the screen is a fraught move. Since it takes longer to sing than to speak (much less read) a line of text, operas and musicals must necessarily distill, often radically, the narrative of a novel or play. This necessary compression means the trimming of expansive plot lines, the removal of much psychological analysis, and the loss of stylistic texture. Characters and events are omitted; colorful slang and expletives are deleted. With literature, we start in the realm of imagination – which is simultaneously controlled by the selected, directing words of the text and unconstrained by the limits of the visual or aural. We can stop reading at any point; we can reread or skip ahead; we can hold the book in our hands and feel (as well as see) how much of the story remains to be read. But with film

and stage adaptations, we are caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving story. And there we have moved from the imagination to the realm of direct perception, with its infinite detail and broad focus.

The move from stage to screen entails yet another medium shift. Opera may have been Richard Wagner’s idea of the total work of art (the *Gesamtkunstwerk*) that unites all the arts of music, literature, dance, and the visual, but today it is cinema that fulfills this claim. “A composite language by virtue of its diverse matters of expression – sequential photography, music, phonetic sound, and noise – the cinema,” according to Stam, “‘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 that gives the “microdrama of the human countenance” and the separate soundtracks of film that permit voice-overs, music, and the nonvocal to intermingle.

There are clearly many different issues around medium, genre, production, and reception to consider when theorizing adaptation, including a very basic physical one. 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 theater. And, when we sit, quiet and still, in the dark watching real live bodies on the stage, our kind of identification is different from 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’ 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 theater. And the readers of cult classics are likely to be just as demanding of film adaptations as are the fans of the more traditional classics.

What happens when these readers see their favorite books depicted on-screen according to somebody else's imagination? The answer can be found somewhere in the audience reactions to the recent adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* and the Harry Potter novels. Now, for instance, that I know from the movie version of *The Lord of the Rings* what an orc looks like, I'll never be able to recapture my first imagined version of it. Is this good or bad?

Is there a limit finally to what we'll call an 'adaptation'? In his film *Moulin Rouge*, Baz Luhrmann borrowed Puccini's operatic story of the consumptive heroine and the bohemian artist from *La Bohème*, just as he deployed the conventions of film musicals and MTV music videos. Is his a multiple adaptation? And what about spin-offs? Are DVDs an extension or another aspect of adaptation? What about the toys, t-shirts, board and video games, and the websites? Where does what we are willing to call 'adaptation' stop?

These are the kinds of questions that I am asking myself at this early stage of my research. Of one thing I have already become convinced: that adaptation is not necessarily parasitic. Instead, it is a

fundamental operation of the storytelling imagination. For us in the audience, part of the very real pleasure of watching adaptations lies in recognition and remembrance. But it is equally true that part of the also very real masochistic fear provoked by adaptations lies in recognition and remembrance. This is one of the paradoxes that fascinates me, that makes me want to take on that reductive, negative rhetoric that sees adaptations as inevitably derivative and unfaithful to the adapted works.