Introduction to Adaptation

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Although screen adaptations of literature have been around since the beginning of cinema and have provoked the most intense debates among the public at large, the subject has been long neglected in literary and film studies. Up until a decade ago, adaptation was normally regarded as an area unworthy of sustained academic study. So why has it taken so long for a journal, such as this one, to be launched? We have come up with ten reasons.

1. Champions of film, especially in the first half of the twentieth century saw the adaptation as ‘impure cinema’ and resented the dependency of film on literature, especially during the period in which film was struggling to be regarded as ‘the new literature’, an art form in its own right.

2. Writers and literary critics in the first half of the twentieth century considered film adaptations as abominations, crude usurpations of literary masterpieces that threatened both literacy and the book itself. Despite her acknowledging certain aesthetic potential in film, in “The Cinema”, Virginia Woolf saw films as degrading, with readers becoming ‘savages of the twentieth century watching the pictures’ (166). Similarly, the inaugural volume of Scrutiny (1932) included an essay on cinema by William Hunter entitled “The Art-Form of Democracy?” (enlarged in his book Scrutiny of Cinema), in which he reflected on how films target the lowest possible denominator. In light of this class-based assessment of film culture, adaptations or ‘the fiction films’, especially, were regarded as ‘the new opium’ (1932b), unworthy of further mention in such a journal as Scrutiny, and were effectively banned from literary studies from 1932 onwards.

3. Academia’s institutional history has contributed to the problem: film studies arrives in the 1960s often as the adopted child of literature departments and so has, from the start, a kind of secondary status. There is an unspoken assumption which remains alive and well in some corners of academia that film is not a ‘real’ discipline and ‘anyone can teach it’. In these terms it is clear that those attempting to champion the legitimacy of film as a coherent discipline might feel that a focus on the relationships between literature on screen only further diminishes this aim. Thus, studies in adaptation have until recently tended to inhabit a disciplinary twilight zone, tolerated by those in literary studies who might acknowledge the uses of analysing some adaptations as examples of the contemporary uses to which literature is put and resisted by those in film studies who regard it as an erosion of the field.

4. Most of the criticism, until the twenty-first century, was woefully predictable, judging an adaptation’s merit by its closeness to its literary source or, even more vaguely, ‘the spirit’ of the book. Logocentricism or a belief that words come first and that literature is better than film has been prevalent.
5. Prejudice that money and art cannot mix prevailed, primarily in literary studies.
6. Related to the above point, the necessity of and continual romance with the author and the fetishization of individual genius was and still is persistent.
7. The resemblance of film to Plato’s cave dwellers’ flickering lights was often behind the notion that an adaptation was merely a copy of a literary text (and nothing else), thereby dooming all adaptations as inferior, diluted versions of an ‘original’ (something akin to a Platonic form). Thus, an adaptation in these terms can only be regarded as a pale version of a reality that is itself pale.
8. ‘Adaptation’ has historically had negative connotations, emphasizing what has been lost rather than what has been gained. Criticism has been bedevilled by emotive words such as ‘violation’, ‘vulgarization’ and ‘betrayal’.
9. The study of literature on screen has largely concentrated on canonical texts, giving the screen adaptation a very difficult act to follow and skewing debates about the ‘purpose’ of adaptation. Adaptations that have usurped their ‘originals’ in the minds of their audience—films like The Wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming, 1939), To Have and Have Not (Howard Hawks, 1945) or Mary Poppins (Robert Stevenson, 1964)—have failed to receive critical attention as adaptations. ‘Bad adaptations’ receive more coverage than ‘good’ ones with the judgement of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ being generally based on ‘literary’ principles which seek out ‘failure’ to justify pre-conceived aesthetic judgements.
10. Adaptations are assumed too often to be based on a single ‘sourcetext’, ignoring shifting social and cultural concerns, other films, genre considerations or even financial and production considerations.

Hostilities to adaptation are identified by Robert Stam as types of ‘phobia’ or irrational beliefs which he enumerates in his landmark 2005a Literature and Film (co-edited by Alessandra Raengo) and which echo some of the points made above, including ‘anticorporeality’, a dislike/distrust of the material, ‘the myth of facility’, the conviction that films are easy to make and watch; class prejudice, the commonly held view that a film appeals to the masses rather than to a cultured elite; and ‘parasitism’, a feeling that adaptations immorally live off and drain the spirit of their literary sources (3–8). To varying extents, these mindsets dogged adaptation studies over the last century, and in many cases, in failing to cast all or some of these off, literature on screen scholars were their own worst enemies.

Adaptation is a journal solely devoted to the academic study of literature on screen in the broadest terms. Previously, work on the subject has found homes in journals that publish short, more general pieces, books and journals on individual authors, periods or movements. That it is not going to go away is clear by the increasing prevalence of work in the field. Shakespeare on screen is now a critical industry, books on other authors and periods are also on the increase. The work of Kamilla Elliott (Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate, 2003), Linda Hutcheon (A Theory of Adaptation, 2006), Thomas Leitch (Adaptation and Its Discontents, 2007), Julie Sanders (Adaptation, 2006), and Robert Stam (Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation, 2005b and two collections co-edited with Alessandra Raengo, A Companion to Literature and Film, 2004, and Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation, 2005a) have confronted the prejudices
listed above and lifted us out of the rut of the knee-jerk ‘not as good as the book’ response, challenging the way we think about literature, film and television.

As an affiliation of the newly formed Association of Literature on Screen Studies (which has conferences in 2006 (Leicester), 2007 (Atlanta) and 2008 (Amsterdam)), the journal aims to offer academic articles and film and book reviews across the field, including both book to screen adaptation, screen to book adaptation, popular and ‘classic’ adaptations, theatre and novel screen adaptations, television, animation, soundtracks, costume and design, production, industrial and economic issues, social and ideological perspectives and genres in literature on screen. The journal offers an opportunity for the two disciplines to ‘talk to each other’, not as Literature and Film, but as literature on screen and ‘screen’ on literature, not demonstrating how the two arts are or are not similar, but how they contribute to and enrich each other through an understanding of the translation of one art into another and the commingling of the ‘literary’ and the ‘cinematic’ across both. The various strands of adaptation studies, based on authors, periods, genres and directors, to name a few, which have normally been kept apart, will be brought together under the umbrella of the journal. Shakespeare on Screen and, more recently Austen on Screen, for example, seem to have developed as disciplines in their own right; while laudable in itself, there is something to be gained about regarding Shakespeare films or Austen adaptations within the wider context of adaptation studies. Adaptation will be published twice a year and aims to appeal to academics within the growing yet currently underrepresented field of literature on screen studies.

The journal is divided into two parts: critical essays on a range of topics and a review section, including book and film reviews and a regular review article on work in a particular field of adaptation studies. At the second annual Literature on Screen Conference in Atlanta (September 2007), Thomas Leitch’s panel discussion on “The Future of Literature on Screen” concluded with a general agreement that more work on economics and production was needed. In this volume, Simone Murray answers such a plea and chooses the unmade film Eucalyptus as it ‘frustrates adaptation studies’ habitual recourse to comparative textual analysis and forces the discipline to engage with potential alternative methodologies for understanding how adaptation functions, or—just as interestingly for the present purpose—“it fails to function” (6). Her analysis of the ‘phantom adaptation’ indicates how both film and novels are driven by institutional issues and international networks and reflects on the power structures that determine the reasons behind the emergence of some adaptations and not others, which takes us far beyond aesthetic concerns towards the contingent and the arbitrary. The other two essays in the first section of this issue take on genre from strikingly different perspectives. Kamilla Elliott examines the manipulation of the Gothic genre in screen parodies, from the 1930s to the 2000s, which she argues consistently reveals inconsistencies and incongruities in Gothic criticism and exposes their adeptness at absorbing and parodying critical clichés themselves. Jeremy Strong identifies a critically neglected but long-standing formula of team film adaptations, which signifies a cluster across genres where ‘it is almost entirely forgotten that in the beginning there had been some books’ (56). In the second section of this issue, Richard Burt reviews the recent biopic adaptation, Becoming Jane, and Thomas Leitch surveys work in the field of adaptation studies. According to Leitch, adaptation studies is definitely on the move but it is an area that
looks both forward as well as backward and whose future direction is anything but in a straight line. 

*Adaptation* is committed to looking forward and to navigating whatever routes this field takes. Its very presence is testimony to the fact that adaptation studies has an important place in serious academic debate and is a discipline in its own right. Rather than symbolizing ongoing tensions between literary and television and film studies, it offers a new way for scholars across these areas of study to reset, contest and expose the existing boundaries between them.

REFERENCES


