



The Art of Adaptation: Approaches and Practices

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Abstract

Adaptation is a process that existed in film making right from the beginning of its emergence. Starting with literature and then making use of different sources as raw material, film adaptation has become a unique process worthy of serious scrutiny. Notwithstanding its revered past, extensive practice, and its impact, the process of adaptation has never been seriously approached with theoretical rigor. This paper tries to look into the different approaches and practices in film adaptation.

Keywords: adaptation, cinema, texts, transfer, popularity, marketability.

Adaptation is the act of creating a work of art by taking elements from another work of art. Filmic adaptation is the transfer of a written work or other material into a feature film. Film adaptation studies typically involves analyzing the ways in which the source material is transformed and reinterpreted in the process of adaptation, as well as the creative and technical decisions made by filmmakers in the process of adapting a work for the screen. In film adaptation studies, scholars may examine a wide range of factors that can influence the process of adaptation, including the original source material, the filmmakers involved, the historical and cultural context of the adaptation, and the audience for the film. Scholars may also consider the ways in which adaptations can differ from the original source material, and the reasons for these differences.

The process of film adaptation involves a number of steps, including:

Selection: The first step in the process of film adaptation is selecting the source material that will be adapted. This decision may be influenced by

a variety of factors, including the popularity of the source material, the rights to the material, and the suitability of the material for adaptation.

Script development: Once the source material has been selected, the next step is to develop a script for the film. This may involve adapting the original source material into a screenplay, which outlines the story and dialogue of the film. The script may also need to be revised and refined through a series of drafts and rewrites.

Pre-production: During the pre-production phase, the filmmakers will begin to plan and prepare for the actual production of the film. This may involve casting actors, scouting locations, and designing sets and costumes.

Production: Production is the actual process of filming the movie. This may involve setting up and lighting the sets, rehearsing and filming scenes, and capturing sound and other technical elements.

Post-production: After the film has been shot, it moves into the post-production phase, which involves editing the footage, adding special effects,

and completing any other necessary tasks to finalize the film.

Distribution and release: Once the film has been completed, it is typically distributed and released to theaters or other venues for public viewing.

The first film adaptations are literary adaptations starting with the Holy Bible. *La Vie et passion de Jesus Christ* (1897), the thirteen scene production by Lumiere brothers and *La Vie de Christ* (1899) by Alice Guy are examples of Bible adaptations. During 1910s, adaptation has become a marketing strategy to adapt the established literary texts in order to attract the middle classes to the theatres. The benefit of this ploy is that the film could bring in an interest to the readers to see their favourite piece of literature on the screen.

In her work *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, Susan Hayward points "three types of adaptation: first the more traditionally connoted notion of adaptation, the literary classic; second, adaptations of plays to screen; and finally, the adaptation of contemporary texts not yet determined as classic and possibly bound to remain within the canon of popular fiction" (4). The most popular and widely discussed form of film adaptation is the adaptation of novels. However, film adaptation also includes non-fiction materials. They include newspaper reports, autobiography, comics, songs, and even other films. Adaptations generally try to appeal to literate audience by bringing onto the screen a very popular writer's work or an experiment by a less known author. Such an attempt is undertaken with an intention of marketability. That is why Cartmell and Whelehan opine that adaptations are "entertainment that strategically positions the consumer as the primary target" (163).

Apart from novels, films also make use of plays for adaptation purpose. The most popular dramatist whom Hollywood depends on is William Shakespeare. Therefore Shakespeare is often mentioned as the most popular screenwriter of Hollywood. His plays have been adapted multiple times. *Hamlet* was adapted more than sixty times, *Romeo and Juliet* about forty five and *Julius Caesar* around thirty times. Films are also loosely adapted

from Shakespeare as in the case of *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *Ran* (1985) and *She's the Man* (2006). Successful Broadway plays such as musical or drama, are also often adapted. Adaptations from theatrical performance do not require as many insertions and omissions as adaptations of novel, however, the set requirements and possibilities of movement often involve changes from one medium to another.

Cartoon or characters from comic books, especially superheroes, have been taken as subjects for movies. *Superman: The Movie* (1978) and *Batman* (1989) are two earlier successful movie adaptations of famous comic book characters. In the beginning of the twenty first century, movies like *X-Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* (2002) paved way for a number of superhero movies. The adaptation process for comics and novels are totally different. Many successful comic book series have been around for decades, with multiple variations of the character appearing along the way. Such movies generally try to make use of the backstory and spirit of the characters rather than copying a specific plot. Moreover, the characteristics of the subjects and their background are simplified or retold. The successful comic books based films include *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020) etc. A combination of comic book characters can be seen in films like *The Avengers* (2012) and *Justice League* (2017).

The source texts for filmic adaptation do not just conform itself to literary texts. Adaptations can also include sub literary or para literary sources. Films have been made from reportage; e.g. *Bernie* (2011). Photographs also inspired films; e.g. *Pretty Baby* (1978). Films adapt other films; e.g. Malayalam film *Varathan* (2018) from *Straw Dogs* (1971). *Coward of the County* (1981), *Pretty Baby* (1978), and *Ode to Billy Joe* (1976) are examples of films adapted from songs. Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* (1957) adapted newspaper stories.

Epics remain as a source material for many films. Classic literary epics have been adapted several times in many languages; e.g. *Troy* (2004),

directed by Wolfgang Petersen. Bible and Greek mythology have been adapted frequently; e.g. *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) directed by Mel Gibson, and *Wrath of the Titans* (2012) directed by Jonathan Liebesman. In such adaptations, the film viewer already knows the story of the film, therefore such adaptations will minimise elements of suspense and focus on detailing and creativity.

In some cases, the adaptation process can carry on even after one transformation. Mel Brooks' *Producer* (1967) was a transformed into a Broadway musical first and then returned to film. Another instance is the film *My Fair Lady* (1964). In 1938 George Bernard Shaw's famous play *Pygmalion* was adapted into a British film with the same title by the efforts of Gabriel Pascal, a Hungarian producer. Songwriters Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner adapted the film *Pygmalion* into a stage musical titled 'My Fair Lady' in 1956. Seeing the success of Broadway musical production 'My Fair Lady,' film producer Jack L. Warner immediately made the plans to make the stage musical into Warner Bros film *My Fair Lady* (1964). Films have also adapted radio narratives. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (2005) began as a radio series for the BBC and then became a novel which was adapted to film.

At certain cases, the timing of the publication of the novel and the production of the film may be very close. Once it becomes a bestseller, producers rush to capitalize on the novel's commercial success. Examples include *Harry Potter* series and *Da Vin Ci Code*. In other cases, centuries or even millennia can elapse between the production of the film and the publication of its source text. Adaptations of novels such as *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe* and films from poems like *Beowulf* and *Troy* were filmed centuries after the originals. This gives screenwriters and directors more freedom to update and reinterpret the source texts.

Considering the fact that novels and movies were the popular narratives of the 19th and 20th centuries respectively, the filmmakers with the intention of capital gain sought to capitalize the responses novels evoked. The reason for the source

text's popularity is resolutely tied to its verbal mode. Reputation and admiration accomplished in one medium may affect work produced in another medium. By the time one reads popular fiction, a copy of it may be on the screenwriter's desk. Frederic Raphael claims "like known quantities... they would sooner buy the rights of an expensive book rather than develop an original subject" (qtd. in Mc Farlane 7).

Film critics such as Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo noted that literature pays indirect and begrudging homage to films' popularity, while film pays homage to literature's prestige (Stam and Raengo 7). George Bluestone gives testimony to this phenomenon referring to the report of Margaret Farrand Thorp:

...when *David Copperfield* appeared on local screens, the demand for the book was so great that the Cleveland public library ordered 132 new copies; the film premiere of *The Good Earth* boosted the sales of that book up to 3,000 per week; and the more copies of *Wuthering Heights* have been sold since the novel was screened than in all the previous ninety-two years of its existence. Jerry Wald confirms this pattern by pointing out, more precisely, that after the film's appearance, Pocket Books sold 100,000 copies of *Wuthering Heights*; various editions of *Pride and Prejudice* reached a third of a million copies; and sales for *Lost Horizon* reached 1,400,000. (241)

In the field of adaptation, reverse adaptation is a significant phenomenon. When a film becomes a blockbuster, they are adapted into literary works like novels or plays. Many film production companies commission adaptations of popular works or sell the title rights to publishers. Writers make novels out of these fictional movies using early scripts as sources. As a result, the novel version is often altered from the film version.

Adaptation has been an unavoidable phenomenon in the cinematic world since its beginning and throughout the years of its growth. However, the approaches and practices in adaptation have undergone a transformation over

the years. Not limiting itself to a few literary works, every text has become the source material for a film to take shape. Moreover, the marketing tricks have even concentrated on the reverse adaptation process.

The process of film adaptation is a complex and multifaceted process that involves many steps and decisions. It requires the collaboration of a variety of creative and technical professionals, and the final product is shaped by a wide range of factors including the source material, the filmmakers involved, and the audience for the film. With new technology in filmmaking offering immense possibilities, it is very likely that film as an art form will bring with it a wide range of innovation and creativity in adaptation.

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