

The Persistence of Fidelity

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I. The Fidelity Reflex

¹ When Robert Stam entitles one of his recent efforts to theorise adaptation “Beyond Fidelity,” he could be speaking for a wide range of critics (54). Indeed, as the editor of two major adaptation anthologies, he *is* speaking for them. Stam’s principal objection is the covert moralising of fidelity discourse: “The conventional language of adaptation criticism has often been profoundly moralistic, rich in terms that imply that the cinema has somehow done a *disservice* to literature. ... The standard rhetoric has often deployed an elegiac discourse of loss, lamenting what has been ‘lost’ in the translation from novel to film” (“Introduction”, 3).

² There are problems with fidelity discourse beyond its implied moralising. For Robert B. Ray and Dudley Andrew, the problem with fidelity is that it makes for boring criticism. “Unquestionably the most frequent and most tiresome discussion of adaptation (and of film and literature relations as well) concerns fidelity and transformation” (31). Part of what makes this discussion tiresome is its unswaying commitment to the historically dubious and logically unnecessary assumption that “the task of adaptation is the reproduction in cinema of something essential about an original text” (Andrew, 31). Linda Hutcheon, similarly bored with fidelity discussions, highlights the same logical flaw: “Of more interest to me is the fact that the morally loaded discourse of fidelity is based on the implied assumption that adapters aim simply to reproduce the adapted text” (7).

³ Hutcheon may be writing 25 years after Andrew, but she still has something to gain by attacking what was, until recently, “the critical orthodoxy in adaptation studies” (7)—what Stam calls “the conventional language” and “the standard rhetoric” (3); what Ray calls (citing Jonathan Culler) “an endless series of twenty-page articles” (47). What she has to gain is the ability to talk about what interests her: “there appears to be little need to engage directly in the constant debate over degrees of proximity to the ‘original’” (7). This is a personal victory, not a disciplinary one (“Of more interest to me;” “I have always had a strong interest in what has come to be called ‘intertextuality’” [xii]). Still, it is a victory, if only on that scale.

⁴ Andrew, by contrast, hoped his attacks on fidelity discourse would change the discipline. “Let us not use [adaptation] to fight battles over the essence of the media or the inviolability of individual artworks. Let us use it as we use all cultural practices” (37). Reviewing Andrew’s essay in 1984, Christopher Orr was more pessimistic about attempts to change adaptation studies, and blunt about his disciplinary aims: “Given the problematic nature of the discourse of fidelity, one is tempted to call for a moratorium on adaptation studies” (72). And looking back on Andrew and Orr, Ray agreed that harsh measures were necessary for the field, but he more or less blamed Andrew for offering a fillip to fidelity in his call for more sociologically aware studies of adaptation. “I think we more urgently need to know something else” (48).

⁵ And yet the discipline resists. “All the various manifestations of ‘theory’ over the last decades should logically have changed this negative view of adaptation. ... Yet ... disparaging opinions on adaptation as a secondary mode—belated and therefore derivative—persist” (Hutcheon, xii-xiii, citing Stam). What I am calling the fidelity reflex, though, is not the persistence of the discourse, but the persistent call for it to end. For adaptation theory to have any chance of success, it must do two things. First, it must account for the persistence of fidelity discourse despite decades of resourceful argument against it. Second, it must account for its own blind spot: What has the campaign against fidelity failed to get at? And given this consistent failure to achieve its goals, why do critics persist in calling for an end to fidelity?

II. The Conversation of Judgment

⁶ How could adaptation studies have resisted such an onslaught—not simply of Hutcheon, Stam, Andrew, Orr, Naremore, Ray, and McFarlane, but also of Irigaray, Kristeva, Foucault, Derrida, Bakhtin, and Barthes? (Hutcheon, 21; Stam, 8-9). Ray's answer is that the field of film and literature has remained in a "pre-paradigmatic state," held there by the New Criticism's "veneration of 'art.'" (44-5). The "exigencies of the academic market" have given us a mountain of case studies that fail to add up to anything. They are the tribute paid to literature by those who would institutionalise film studies; adaptation studies make film acceptable to literature departments looking to "maintain declining enrollments in the humanities" (47), while "shor[ing] up literature's crumbling walls" (46).

⁷ As total an explanation as this is, indeed, as damning as Ray's indictment of the field may seem, even he finds the origin of the fidelity discourse outside the academy. It lies in our ordinary discussions of adaptations: "Without the benefit of a presiding poetics, film and literature scholars could only persist [there it is again] in asking about individual movies the same unproductive layman's question (How does the film compare with the book?) getting the same unproductive answer (The book is better)" (44). For Ray, the layman's question has poisoned academic criticism because it rests on a comparison: "Most of the articles written could have used a variation of the words in the title 'But Compared to the Original.'" (45). Hence the danger of Andrew's position for Ray, which offered not freedom from comparison but a typology of relationships.

⁸ "But Compared to the Original" is the title of an article by William Fadiman from 1965 that attempted to nip fidelity discourse in the bud. Yet as an instance of the fidelity reflex, Fadiman was already late to the game. The locus classicus is George Bluestone's *Novel into Film* of 1957. Here, we find those same "unproductive laymen" making "such statements as 'The film is true to the spirit of the book'; 'It's incredible how they butchered the novel'; 'It cuts out key passages, but it's still a good film'; 'Thank God they changed the ending'—these and similar statements are predicated on certain assumptions which blur the mutational process" (Bluestone, 5; Metz, 112).

⁹ They not only blur the mutational process; these statements make a terrible category error. "Changes are *inevitable* the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium" (Bluestone, 6). "It is as fruitless to say that film A is better or worse than novel B as it is to pronounce Wright's Johnson Wax Building better or worse than Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. In the last analysis, each is autonomous" (5-6). Or so Bluestone argues. None of our contemporary critics take such a hard line on medium specificity; for them, the crucial term is "intertextuality".

¹⁰ But whether they are partisans of a modernist medium specificity or a postmodern intertextuality (or intermediality), such critics are all dedicated to the proposition that there can be no hierarchy between textual instances. For the modernists, such rankings are impossible because there is an unbridgeable gap between media; for the postmodernists, because everything exists in a general citational field. Only fidelity discourse seems to require such impossible rankings. As Orr makes clear: "the danger of fidelity criticism, even when it is dealing with the most 'faithful' of film adaptations, is that it impoverishes the film's intertextuality" (72). And if Orr weren't clear enough, the editors at *Wide-Angle* chose that passage as a pull quote. Still, like a vampire, fidelity did not die.

¹¹ Let us back up. The joke Ray tells at the expense of his academic critic assumes that while the comparison of film with book has both a technical and an evaluative aspect, nevertheless the surreptitious evaluations of fidelity discourse corrupt even its technical conclusions. Yet it seems odd to claim that fidelity necessarily entails a surreptitious evaluation, even if it has done so in every case. For fidelity to seem a compelling standard, there would necessarily be an antecedent evaluation of the merits of the version the commenter had first encountered. No one would bother to discuss whether a book or film or any other version of a story were faithful unless she already had some allegiance to that story in some form—that would indeed be tiresome.

¹² I am saying that fidelity debates provide a way of avoiding questions of quality. Something is faithful or it's not. At least, whether something is faithful seems an easier question to settle than whether something is better than something very different. Whether and how *Cruel Intentions* (Roger Kumble, 1999) is faithful to Choderlos de Laclos' 1782 source novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is an easier question to settle than whether the Johnson Wax Building is better than *Swan Lake*. Indeed, a person who shifts the conversation from a discussion of merits to a discussion of matching demonstrates an anxiety about settling questions of art. In that case, what is unsettling about the

adaptation is not so much its *relative* goodness (in most cases, that would be quickly settled) as its ability to make us question a judgment we made of the prior work by providing a more-or-less systematic set of alternatives to and deviations from the prior work. (Here I mean prior, not “source” or “adapted” work. Whether we experience the adapted text or the adaptation first, we form our judgments about it, and those are the judgments that are under pressure.) Questions of matching or mis-matching address the viewer’s ability to recognise the systematicity of the differences *between* source and adaptation; questions of judgment speak to the perceptiveness of the viewer in recognising both the systematicity of the individual works and the grounds for her own judgments. Such recognitions are hard-won and evanescent; what was true for adaptation theorists is true for the laymen.

III. Induction, Authority, and the Case Study

¹³ If we see fidelity discourse as an avoidance of judgment, then, the repeated critical injunction against fidelity because it is surreptitiously judgmental is not an antidote to, but a reiteration of, the fundamental move. We may substitute something new for fidelity—sociology, medium specificity, textual openness—but we may not have improved our position. Indeed, one of the least attractive aspects of the campaign against fidelity is an unwillingness to see at all such “layman’s questions” as efforts to take the aesthetic seriously.

¹⁴ If Ray shares Bluestone’s desire to end the conversation of judgment, what is more striking about his piece is that it represents an uncharacteristic step backward from Bluestone’s argument on the same issue. Leading into his dialogue excerpts, Bluestone notes that quantitative analyses of films based on books, or of books sold upon the release of a film “tell us nothing about the mutational process, let alone how to judge it” (5). One might say about Bluestone’s interlocutors that they tell us something, although not much, about the mutational process, and something else, although again not much, about how to judge it. They may be mere laymen, but they exist on a continuum with Bluestone’s own work. What distinguishes Bluestone is twofold: a closer attention to the “mutational process,” and a restriction of our judgment to comparisons within a single medium (5). For Ray, again, the problem with comparisons is not that they are inattentive but that they import precisely the evaluative stance Bluestone is attempting to rule out through a belief in medium specificity.

¹⁵ Still, both are wary of the ordinary conversation about adaptations because it is improperly judgmental. For them, the passage from technical comparison to evaluative comparison is a slippery one. Better to hold off any consideration of merit, either through the wall of the medium or the archaeology of knowledge. Yet neither Ray nor Bluestone nor any of the other adaptation theorists has recognised the role fidelity discourse plays in the layman’s discussion, a role that is less the surreptitious evaluation of an adaptation than an attempt at an objective justification of the prior evaluation. When Orr offers a backhanded defense of a limited kind of fidelity criticism—“Fidelity to the letter, in contrast to fidelity to the spirit, can after all be verified” (74)—this is an extension, not a repudiation, of the layman’s discourse.

¹⁶ Part of the reason that the evaluation of the worth of a work of art or the success of a story is difficult lies in the search for grounds of comparison. What *exactly* would make this a better book? A better film? A better game? A better story? And part of the reason that adaptation studies, or laymen’s discussions about the relative merits of two versions of a story, are useful is that multiple versions of the same story make it possible to examine aesthetic alternatives. (What would work better?) Adaptations put the options on the table; they suggest particular alternatives, and (despite Ray’s despair) over time they may provide cumulative support for notions of adaptive success and failure at various levels of generality. Adaptation studies efficiently model the need for induction.

¹⁷ If comparisons are the first steps toward theorisation, fidelity discussions are the stalking horses for questions of authority, questions that might be (and are) answered sociologically or anthropologically or economically. Why is the first Harry Potter movie too faithful? Because Rowling successfully negotiated with Warner Bros. to get script approval (Pendreigh). In this frame, fidelity questions should be all the things Ray fears they are not: cumulative, heuristic, and, although he does not put it this way, worth the effort of professionalisation.

IV. Fidelity without Borders

18 If fidelity studies are the products of a New Critical "paradigm", they are an important transformation of it. Where the New Critic might demonstrate the systematicity of a particular work of art, the adaptation critic would displace that systematicity to the relationships between works. No wonder that the attribution of fidelity to an adaptation has suggested to everyone since Bluestone that the next move in the argument should be a turn to the modes through which the system imposes itself—what Bluestone calls "the mutational process," what Andrew calls "sociology."

19 Pragmatic questions of mode, process, or sociology frequently appear as pacifications of skeptical questions of knowledge and being. This debate is no exception. One skeptic here is Ray, who initially asks "Why had the cinema committed itself almost exclusively to storytelling?" and then rephrases thus, "Why was commercial filmmaking so eager to make feature-length fictional narrative seem the inherent definition of *the cinema*?" (42). The latter question is modal, but not in the same way the Harry Potter question was. It displaces its concern from the mode of adaptation to the discourse about that mode, and by doing so it makes the question a more pressing one, one that likely has a particular, historical answer.

20 Ray's answer is that commercial filmmaking turned to realistic storytelling to appeal to a middle-class audience, to hide its operations, and to solidify its self-regulating industrial oligopoly (45). Here, the denigration of the middle-class audience takes the place of the injunction against fidelity discourse. In this view, middle-class moralists are the perfect complement to an industry always looking for a way to reduce its risks and to find stories that are pre-sold. Yet that image of the industry is both partial and underthought. It is partial because the adapted film does not simply hope to find the same audience its source first located—it wants many more and must expect many others. And it is underthought because when a film turns to literature as a way of guaranteeing an audience, it solicits an audience that is in a unique position to judge it. That audience might find the film worse, better, or somehow irrelevant, but those opinions respond to the film's openness to judgment in the first place. To be sure, realistic or studio-based cinema might have solicited comparisons only with other films (or with reality, or with the possibilities of film), but that is not, it seems, what occurred. Instead, the cinema in its most commercial forms opened itself up to judgment relative to the novel and the theater. It was a desperately bold move that paid off with startling rapidity.

21 Kamilla Elliott spends the great majority of *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* in an argument that might liberate the discipline from skepticism. How can adaptation be impossible and pervasive (134)? As an answer, she finds a productive "tension" in criticism between adherence to the theory that the content of a story cannot be separated from its form (hence cannot be carried from novel to film) and heretical arguments that show how it is that content peels off and finds new forms (134). The "heresies" are modes of adaptation that Hutcheon, Stam, and other postmodernist critics would recognise (ventriloquist, de(re)composing, genetic, etc.). Indeed, for Elliott, these heresies that are "so marginalised in the novel and film debate are central to its dynamics" (183).

22 The move "away from categorical models" toward "critical rhetoric and aesthetic practices" (244) and her attempt to write "beyond fidelity" are both seemingly conventional. But for Elliott, the fidelity debate is misguided not because fidelity asks the impossible but because at bottom critics of fidelity seek to purge cinema of its literariness. Her refusal to do that positions her more firmly outside fidelity discourse than any other adaptation theorist. Instead of a rivalry between novel and film, she suggests we imagine literature and cinema to be "reciprocal looking glasses" (209-12). Such an analogy would "ensure ... an endless series of inversions and reversals" (212).

23 Fidelity may be gone, but its "endless" parade of case studies remains, yet not because the skeptical question went unasked. "Is adaptation possible?" may be pacified as we turn to practice, but when it comes time to determine exactly which analogies are fruitful because they are endless and which "have a pernicious tendency to invert and twist endlessly" "further clarification" (Elliott, 244) and "further study" (Elliott, 183) will always be needed.

24 If laymen have persisted in judging adaptations and in raising fidelity questions when those judgments slip away, critics have persisted in their attempts to silence that conversation of judgment. Yet once criticism is freed from fidelity discourse's judgmental "bad conscience," it can only offer more of itself, endlessly. Questions of practice, authority, and generality float away from their original and insistent occasions. And when our conversation turns to judgments of adaptations, we will no longer have the criticism we most need, one that could let us know when we have reached the end of someone's persuadability so we might stop trying.

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