

Neil Archer and
Andreea Weisl-Shaw (eds)

Adaptation

Studies in French and
Francophone Culture



Peter Lang

Introduction: Theorizing Adaptation

To engage in any study of adaptation is to confront the often conflicting discourses that coalesce around the term across different contexts. If adaptation is regarded within scientific discourse as inherent and natural to all living beings, within the field of cultural production it is more likely to be seen as one artistic option amongst others. To ask within a scientific context why we should adapt would invite derision: we adapt because that is how we survive, exercise our curiosity, improve our skills and develop a sense of the world. Yet to ask the question in a literary or visual-cultural context, which this introduction is presently attempting, is to risk another kind of answer: one which might emphasize the derivative and second-hand aspect of adapted texts; their potential acquiescence to the safe, the tested or commercially viable option (in the form, say, of cinematic literary adaptation), and therefore a repudiation of those qualities – originality, creativity, spontaneity – often held to be essential values of any artist and artwork.

This is a view questioned by the essays presented in this volume. These essays suggest, rather, that adaptation in its various cultural modes be seen on a level with its scientific sense. In conjunction with a number of other recent works devoted to adaptation as an artistic practice,¹ we would like to suggest an approach to adaptation which emphasizes those same qualities – of originality, creativity and spontaneity – which might otherwise be held in opposition to it. Above all, this book moves beyond the idea that the work of adaptation, as cultural production, is reducible to that form of text – sometimes literary, though more often than not visual,

1 See for example: Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

theatrical or musical – thought to stand in a secondary and hence inferior sense to the original text from which it derives. Clearly, and as many of the essays here argue, there is always a degree to which some signified of a source text, be it the work's cultural connotations or the author's notional intention, is dialogued with in any work of adaptation. Yet if we are to discuss the adaptive process in positive and generative terms, and in turn challenge the discursive dominance of the 'original' over the 'copy' which would otherwise impede us, our work must adopt the following approach: firstly, we should question the supposed markers of fidelity to an anterior model that might be assumed to be the requirements of an adapted text; secondly, and relatedly, we might focus our attention more on those markers of infidelity, rather than fidelity, that distinguish and foreground the adaptive practice.

The Possibility of Adaptation

The trans-media nature of much adaptation – be it the theatrical versions of novels by Balzac or Proust, or the illustrations embedded within Céline and Tardi's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* – emphasizes that a 'faithful adaptation' (like its relation, the 'accurate translation'), is an oxymoron. French culture has often placed an emphasis on the correspondence of value and meaning across different faculties of sensation: for example, in the *dérèglement des sens* of Rimbaud or Baudelaire's poetry; the subsequent cross-fertilization of music and poetry in the late nineteenth century; or indeed, in Proust's efforts to evoke sense memory in prose. While we might concede that certain aesthetic equivalences can be felt or recognized across different art forms, it is nevertheless difficult to ascertain whether such equivalences are not merely analogic, experienced as an approximate equivalence of the

value of each part within its own aesthetic domain.² Dudley Andrew, taking this semiotic approach, consequently addresses the problem of adaptation in the following terms:

Since signs name the inviolate relation of signifier to signified, how is translation of poetic texts conceivable from one language to another (where signifiers belong to different systems); much less how is it possible to transform the signifiers of one material (verbal) to signifiers of another material (images and sounds)?³

It is important, moreover, to challenge the evaluative distinction between the borrowed or calqued nature of the adapted text, and the supposed self-sufficiency of the original work. Here we should note that the concept of *mimesis*, which has held such sway over artistic creation in the Western tradition, has its roots in practices of imitation. The artwork, then, to follow Aristotle's analysis in the *Poetics*, is always a copy of something within the world, whose significance lies not within its originality, but within its capacity to generate recognition through verisimilitude. The tension between the original and the copy (or what Harold Bloom would subsequently call the anxiety of influence)⁴ was in this sense of less concern to the Ancient Greeks; just as, to an extent, it was of less concern either to Shakespeare, or to his near-contemporaries in the French neo-classical drama, all of whom freely borrowed pre-existing narratives. The irony in fact in any claim to artistic originality is that it ignores the extent to which all representation adapts some form of prior conception – for example, those markers which constitute 'verisimilitude'. As Andrew emphasizes, such representations always draw on common signs through which meaning is produced; signs which are always culturally and historically contextual.⁵

To summarize these arguments, looking closely at works of adaptation enables us to see the value of questioning both the equivalence between art forms, and also the hierarchical status of certain art forms over another,

2 Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 102.

3 Andrew, *Concepts*, 101.

4 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

5 Andrew, *Concepts*, 97.

or of original works over copies. It enables us, moreover, to move beyond the question of an adaptation's 'fidelity' to its source. From a strict point of view, a true or faithful adaptation would by definition not exist, as it would simply replicate the primary model: how in fact can an adaptation in itself be experienced or recognized without its differentiation from the original? Adaptation study must therefore stress that the pleasures and meanings of adapted texts are always intelligible in terms of difference and dialogue, rather than subservience to some master text. To take a popular example, we might think of the way film and television adaptations of classic novels – Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, for example – assume their own visual shelf-life: their prominence, combined with the added value conferred on them by the book's literary status, confers on the adaptations in turn their own evaluation as 'classic'. At the same time, they might end up usurping the very source – the book, possibly less widely read than imagined – which helped confer their status in the first place. Not to mention the way Boublil and Schoenberg's musical version (now better known as *Les Miz*) has come to exist within its own signifying field of popular musical theatre, almost totally divorced from the novel to which it is notionally affiliated.

Adaptation, Authorship and French Critical Theory

Since adaptation theory focuses on the way in which second-order texts challenge their original models, generating meanings distinct from the latter, or in excess of them, it is perhaps not surprising that adaptation, as a practice and a critical study, should flourish within the late twentieth-century critical turn. In the French context, key essays by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault paved the way for adaptive practices in their analyses and critiques of the signifying properties of authorship and originality. In 'The Death of the Author', for example, Barthes suggests: