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A Conversation with Linda Hutcheon on Film Adaptation Une conversation avec Linda Hutcheon sur l'adaptation cinématographique

Marie Pascal

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Article abstract

Linda Hutcheon is a pioneer on cinema adaptation, with her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), where she envisions adaptation as a transmedial process rather than as a faithful relationship a film must respect with a book. She has rejuvenated research in the field, overwhelmed dead-ends encountered by the adaptation critique, and offered thrilling perspectives on how to conceive such relationships between medias as different as comics, novels, drama, opera, video games, etc. Although her research interests now shifted to the operatic genre, she was as kind as to answer my questions for this first dossier of *Transcr(é)ation*.

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A Conversation with Linda Hutcheon on Film Adaptation

MARIE PASCAL

King's University College (Western University)

ABSTRACT

Linda Hutcheon is a pioneer on cinema adaptation, with her book A Theory of Adaptation (2006), where she envisions adaptation as a transmedial process rather than as a faithful relationship a film must respect with a book. She has rejuvenated research in the field, overwhelmed dead-ends encountered by the adaptation critique, and offered thrilling perspectives on how to conceive such relationships between medias as different as comics, novels, drama, opera, video games, etc. Although her research interests now shifted to the operatic genre, she was as kind as to answer my questions for this first dossier of Transcr(é)ation.

Keywords: *adaptation · Linda Hutcheon · opera · media*

MP: *I am organizing a workshop on film adaptations in May and I received three paper proposals on "fidelity". Personally, I am unsure of this concept's relevance to approach the dialogue text/film but these three proposals made me wonder if there may be circumstances where a debate on fidelity has some credibility. Do you think it could and under what conditions/for which types of adaptations?*

LH: Ah, fidelity! The Eternal Question of adaptation studies! I've come to alter my opinion about its relevance over time, to be honest, Marie. When I first started trying to theorize adaptation, the existing literature on the topic (with the looming exception of the wonderful work of Robert Stam) was fidelity-centred. There were dozens and dozens of articles and book chapters presenting case studies of how 'X' film was faithful to X novel (or not). Much of the early *theorizing* also began from the question of proximity: how close should the adaptation be to the adapted text (usually called the source text) to be called an adaptation?

Instead of that kind of question, I thought it might be fruitful to ask different ones that undid that notion of priority ("source") and considered texts as equals – for the audience, at least. It was only because of the late-Romantic and, frankly, capitalist valuing of the "original" and therefore the denigration of adaptations as secondary and derivative that the negative evaluations of adaptations vis-à-vis the "source" dominated discussions.

While it's obviously true that an "adaptation" works with another prior text, it never reproduces it; it is always a form of repetition without replication. And, in addition, and this is important, its audience may not know (or know well) that other "source" text, so an adaptation has to stand on its own as an autonomous cultural object and be judged accordingly. That said, as soon as something is identified as an adaptation, comparison is inevitable, right? It's a double-voiced text, containing at least two layers of lamination, to change my metaphors.

For me, it's the issue of *evaluation* that makes fidelity as a criterion problematic. An adaptation has to be different, but does it have to be better or worse?

MP: *I remember discovering your book (A Theory of Adaptation) in 2006, when I first started my MA on Stanley Kubrick's film adaptations, and I remember that you wrote about the pleasure of such kinds of films. Would you care to share your conception of the pleasure one (public, scholars, readers) can experience with such a medium (that is, if you still think the same).*

LH: The pleasures of adaptations are manifest everywhere. Our human thirst for stories—new ones, but also old ones – is constant: films, musicals, television series, plays, novels, operas, ballets, graphic novels and comics, videogames all adapt familiar and beloved stories. Now, so did Shakespeare, of course. It isn't new. Critics as different as T.S. Eliot and Northrop Frye have taught us that stories are always born from other stories. Or as Walter Benjamin put it: "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories." We know that children love to hear the very same stories told and retold nightly. Adults aren't that different, though we do need a bit of variety: enter adaptation. New media and new channels of mass diffusion have fed the desire/need for stories, so we recycle narratives. No surprise there.

MP: *Do you read the books (or first-hand material) before you watch and/or listen to (in the case of operas) transcreations? Do you try not to in order to concentrate on the work itself? Is it important to take into account the dialogue between the two or can they live their lives autonomously, without concern for the other medium?*

LH: I don't consciously "prepare" to see an adaptation unless I'm working on it for scholarly purposes. Many a time I've seen a film adaptation without knowing the adapted text – as I did recently with *The Power of the Dog* film. So, when I then went on to read the novel by Thomas Savage (from which the film was adapted), in a way I was reading and experiencing the novel as the adaptation of the film: for me, it came after.

I inevitably compared it to the film's version in part because I could *only* see the characters as Jane Campion had cast and directed them. Comparison is part of the fun, and part of the pleasure of adaptations. When we know the prior text, adaptations are stereophonic: they contain the echoes and references to that other text – *whichever* text it might be (film adaptation or "source" novel). But I have to say that in the case of reading the novel *after* watching the film, the director (with her/his casting, camera shots, *etc.*) does take over, indeed "colonize," my imagination utterly, so that I can no longer imagine the characters, setting or action independently of the film's version. I think I'd therefore prefer to read the novel first, now that I think of it... More imaginative freedom!

MP: *I understand your research interests have shifted since the first publication of A Theory of Adaptation—you are now analyzing operas, whether or not adaptations (??) I am wondering what you are looking for when coming into contact with an operatic adaptation? How do you analyze the processes at stake, in a few words?*

LH: In a way, opera is the UR-adaptive art form: since its beginnings in late 16th-century Italy, it has always relied on the tried and tested, rather than the new and original, and for obvious economic reasons. Opera is an expensive art form, with multiple creators and performers, so creation and reception have always been inseparable: audience expectations/desires condition what is offered in the theatre. Therefore, popular novels or plays (or before them classical myths and legends) have been perfect for operas to condense and shape through operatic conventions into a libretto. That dramatic text is then set to music in the score (which, in a way, is a sonic adaptation of the libretto's print words, dramatic action and stage world).

Opera is a musico-dramatic hybrid, bringing together into one simultaneous event the musical, the textual and the theatrical – all of which influence one another. So, for audiences, there can be intertexts in all the different media as a dramatic narrative and a visual world are adapted for the operatic stage.

As with all adaptations, operatic ones produce (in audience members who are familiar with what is being adapted) a doubled response, as they oscillate between what is being remembered and the adaptation they are experiencing on stage: Shakespeare's *Othello* exists together with Verdi and Boito's *Otello*, making the operatic performance a kind of palimpsest, with doubled layers of recollection and experience. This is part of the pleasure of adaptation, both intellectual and aesthetic. This is why I said earlier that the fidelity debates – if we omit the issue of evaluation – are not going to go away, nor should they, perhaps: the pleasure of comparison is real.

Now, if a member of the audience doesn't know the adapted text, they would simply experience the performance differently – as they would any other opera – that is, not as an adaptation. The palimpsestic doubleness will have disappeared. Maybe *that's* the secret of the ubiquity of adaptations: the rich doubleness is more pleasurable than any singleness?

Author's biobibliography

Marie Pascal completed her PhD studying figures of pariah and marginals in Quebec literature and films (University of Toronto, 2017). She is currently an Assistant Professor at King's University College (Western University) where she teaches francophone literatures, Quebec cinema, and language. Amongst her most recently published articles are: "L'écrit à l'écran : écriture, texte et lisibilité dans la transcréation québécoise" (*Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, vol. 30, n°1, Spring 2021, pp. 25-48) and "La mère abjecte dans la transcréation québécoise" (*Journal of Film Studies*, n°29, vol. 1, Printemps 2020, pp. 111-129). She is currently co-directing a book on Denis Villeneuve (Edinburgh University Press), and a dossier focused on the aesthetics of abjection in francophone arts (Dalhousie University Press).