LITERATURE AND FILM ADAPTATION THEORY

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Abstract: The following paper deals with film adaptation theory in general and strategies of expanding short stories into films in particular. The purpose of this paper has been to deconstruct the preconceptions according to which literature is superior to film and to bring forth the fact that the two should be interpreted as such, not in relation to one another. Elements of film noir and neo noir have also found place in this research paper given that the primary sources belong to the genre. When it comes to the expansion strategies, this analysis includes its taxonomy and examples of how a short story can be transposed onto screen. Regarding the primary sources, Jonathan Nolan's Memento Mori and Christopher Nolan's Memento have proved useful and interesting alike. Other secondary sources include Linda Hutcheon's theory on film adaptation, Desmond and Hawkes's input on the matter, Stam and Raengo and others.

Keywords: film, literature, adaptation, fidelity, intertextuality

Adaptation of any kind is often described as deeply problematic; it is a real and common phenomenon that nevertheless constitutes a problem. In the transference of a story from one form to another, there is the basic question of adherence to the source, of what can be lost. The early writings about the relationship between literature and film are valuable in identifying some of the core issues at the heart of the adaptation process. There appear to be fundamental differences between the two media, and critics such as George Bluestone discuss issues of difference in audience perception of cinematic and literary forms, stemming from the differences in their raw materials. In his *Novels into Film*, he describes the camera's effect on our way of seeing, the centrality of editing and its effect on the narrative form: "The film, then, making its appeal to the perceiving senses, is free to work with endless variations of physical reality... Where the moving picture cones to us directly through perception, language must be filtered through the screen of conceptual apprehension." (20). He also discusses the two media's differing ability to handle time and space. He defines language as a medium consisting of "three characteristics of time – transience, sequence and irreversibility" (49), but in film "the camera is always the narrator, we need concern ourselves only with the chronological duration of the viewing and the time-span of narrative events" (49). It is precisely due to the difference between the two, the gap between the forms that adaptation is rendered into a far more creative and constructive process than simple translation.

Linda Hutcheon considers that if one only considers novels and films when referring to adaptation, then one is unable to completely understand the process (XI). When referring to the process of adaptation, there are many aspect to be taken into consideration; perhaps the most important ones, the ones without which adaptation could not take place are the story and the discourse. The story includes the content behind the narrative, comprising the chain of events, the characters and the setting, whereas the discourse is the means by which the content is communicated. As Desmond and Hawkes put it "In simple terms, the story is the what in the narrative that is depicted, discourse is the how" (39). According to the same

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critics, it is imperative for an adapter to identify the story behind a narrative in order to transpose it onto screen. It seems that being aware of the conventions of the literary story and the cinema is highly important.

Adaptation refers either to the act of adapting, to the state of being adapted, or the result produced by the adaptation of something. In film, adaptation is seen as the process of adapting a book or a play onto screen. A common form of film adaptation is the use of a novel as the basis of a feature film, but film adaptation includes the use of non-fiction, autobiography, comic book, scripture, plays, and even other films. From the earliest days of cinema, adaptation has been nearly as common as the development of original screenplays. Adaptation may certainly be seen as "an interpretation, involving at least one person's reading of a text, choices about what elements to transfer, and decisions about how to actualize these elements in a medium of image and sound" (Desmond, Hawkes 2).

Another issue that is highly employed when analyzing adaptation is fidelity to the original, the source text. Fidelity has been for many years the primary measure of analysis of these interpretations. For adaptation studies, the tradition of fidelity is not without precedence, as John Desmond and Peter Hawkes note:

> "the field has been preoccupied with the fidelity issue. The main question asked about adaptations by reviews and critics alike has been to what degree the film is faithful to the text. The practitioners of this approach tend to judge a film's merit based on whether the adaptation realizes successfully the essential narrative elements and core meanings of the printed text. [...] How is it possible to identify the core meanings of a text when we know literary texts are capable of supporting an indefinite number of interpretations?" (2)

Comparisons between the film and the source material and the judgments over which is better that follow are inevitable but ultimately futile. However, as Desmond and Hawkes note, with an "indefinite number of interpretations available," fidelity no longer seems a compulsory criterion (2). Given that there is no agreed-upon method to compare text and film and no standard measure, the matter of fidelity is indeed overrated. Other critics, such as Linda Hutcheon, also refer to fidelity as an aspect which has been highly considered in adaptation studies, but which has to be left aside while other criteria are foregrounded (49). Fidelity may serve to inform the elements of cinema and the screenplay, but interpretations can be made in order to serve the creation of a filmed narrative (4). Furthermore, Desmond and Hawkes note that:

> "for the transition to be successful, it is important that the adapter understands the story as well as the means of expression of both discourses. Another way of saying this is that the adapter needs to be aware of the conventions of the literary story as well as of cinema itself... If the adapter doesn't take into account the conventions of each form, the conventions of the antecedent form will stubbornly cling to the adaptation and make it seem uncinematic." (40).

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In the language of fidelity, literature and films are never equals; texts are never judged in comparison to other art forms, films in particular, and only the adaptation is capable of being unfaithful to the text. Moreover, this language of fidelity implies a certain hierarchy where the literary text is the source and the film becomes a mere copy. One aspect which Desmond and Hawkes mention in their book is the fact that "An adaptation is not a better film because it is a close interpretation as opposed to an intermediate or loose one. In fact, some people argue that fidelity to a text is a surefire way to make a bad film" (42). Therefore, if close interpretations are not necessarily valued, why then stress on the matter of fidelity? If the relation between the "source" and the "copy" is not the one to ensure a film's quality, why then analyze a film primarily in its relation to the text?

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon tries to answer some very pragmatic issues related to adaptation, beginning with the reasons for using this process when creating a movie (6). She argues that although adaptations have been seen as inferior and secondary creations they are omnipresent in our culture. In trying to find reasons for the assumption that literature is superior to film I have come across Stam and Raengo's *Literature and Film: a guide to the theory and practice of film adaptation* that offers some interesting motifs. An interesting reason, I would add, comes from the deeply rooted and often unconscious assumptions about the relations between the two arts: "The intuitive sense of adaptation's inferiority derives [...] from a constellation of substratal prejudices. First, it derives from the a priori valorization of historical anteriority and seniority: the assumption that older arts are necessarily better arts" (4). Inherently, the art of literature is seen as superior to the art of cinema. Apart from the above mentioned there is another element that contributes to the hostility faced by adaptation; it refers to the dichotomous thinking that presumes "a bitter rivalry between literature and film" (4). Such a presumption however, puts films in a bad light where they are perceived as the enemy of literature. Unfortunately, there are records of this theory ever since film industry has expanded, and even in present day, certain individuals still consider the same (5).

Given that, according to a 1992 statistics, the majority of films that won prizes either the Oscar or the Emmy Awards were actual adaptations, Hutcheon offers reasons for the increasing interest in screening. Among other factors, she notes that media's expansion in many directions has contributed to the increase and that it has fuelled the demand for variety. One interesting aspect, which makes adaptations appealing to the public is repetition; the fact that people recognize and remember parts of the text offers individuals both the comfort of a ritual and a sense of surprise (4).

Desmond and Hawkes also mention the information according to which in the early period of cinema, adaptation was produced in order to borrow literature's prestige for the new art form (15). Another aspect that Linda Hutcheon mentions is the financial appeal to adaptation. Screenings are often, if not always made after culturally accredited and appreciated novels, which are thus unlikely to become failures. Apart from the risk avoidance, the author notes that a best seller that has reached a million readers is very likely to reach up to eight million Broadway viewers, while a television adaptation will find an audience of many million more (5). Apparently, there is also an educational reason for adapting litearture into film; in this respect, film is a pedagogical medium that teaches the masses about their literary heritage (Desmond, Hawkes 15)

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Hutcheon moves on and analyzes adaptations as entities haunted at all times by their adapted texts. According to her, if one knows the primary text, one always feels its presence shadowing the one experienced directly. When a work is labeled as an adaptation, the author argues, its overt relationship with another work is openly announced (6). It is for this reason that adaptation studies are mainly comparative; clearly, adaptations are also autonomous works that can be interpreted and valued as such. Therefore, the proximity and fidelity to the adapted text should not be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis.

Starting from the author's idea that the adaptations are haunted by the adapted text, I would go further into detail and refer to Harold Bloom's theory of anxiety of influence. Bloom refers to a certain fear the author feels that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors assume essential priority over his own writing. Bloom's well-known theory of the anxiety of influence argues that writers suffer from an Oedipal fear and jealousy for their perceived literary "fore-fathers". As such, the unpublished writer puts himself under a great deal of pressure to break free from his most immediate, direct influences, to form his own voice, even to "kill" the threatening and over-bearing "father" of his particular literary experience and inspirations.[1] What I intend to imply by mentioning Bloom's theory is that the fear of being compared to the predecessors exists, but that when referring to adapters, the situation is even more complicated. It is indeed hard both to be analyzed in relation to the original and to try to bring in something new: a new perspective, a new interpretation of the same subject. Therefore, it is clear that adapters assume their position, are aware of the way in which they will be perceived, and yet, some, just as Christopher Nolan, come to surprise their audience in a good way. However, one must keep in mind that, if we were to follow Bloom's theory, the adapter would embody the Oedipal son figure who "slayed" his father figure.

Intertextuality is another concept that can be integrated in the process of analyzing adaptations. Structuralists and Poststructuralists such as Roland Barthes, Kristeva and even Hutcheon have dealt with the matter of interdependence of any one literary texts with all those that have gone before it. According to Kristeva literary texts are not isolated phenomena, but insead they are made up of a mosaic of preceding elements. Some theorists even believe that intertextuality is the very condition of literature, that all texts are woven from the tissues of other texts, whether their authors know it or not.[2] Therefore the latest theoretical trends have proven to come in handy for adaptation. Another critic, which I consider worth mentioning in the study of adaptation, and which is also mentioned by Stam and Raengo, is Jacques Derrida and his Deconstruction studies, especially the interest in deconstructing metaphysical opposition. Derrida's opinion was that each existing opposition implies that one term is stronger or rules over the other; whether the supremacy is chronological or socially constructed it must be deconstructed[3]. Deconstruction thus dismantles the hierarchy between the original and the copy (8). In a Derridean perspective, the prestige of the original is not considered the opposite of the copy; on the contrary, the importance of the original is actually created by the copies, without which the idea of

[1] Bloom, Harold. "The anxiety of influence. A theory of poetry. Second edition". New York: Oxford University Press, 1997
[2] Intertextulality and Rewriting Class, Ph.D Lucia Opreanu
[3] http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/derrida/deconstruction.html

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originality would not even exist. I would extrapolate and argue that a film as copy is not inferior to the novel as original.

Stam and Raengo also look at adaptation through the eyes of poststructuralist and postmodernist perspectives; in doing so they mention critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault: "Bakhtin's conception of the author as orchestrator of a pre-existing discourse, along with Foucault's downgrading of the author in favor of a pervasive anonymity of discourse, opened the way to a non-originary approach to all arts." (9). The authors of *Literature and Film*: *a guide to the theory and practice of film adaptation* explain that the critics' attitudes toward the literary author suggested a devalorization of artistic originality. Adaptation can be seen as an orchestration of discourses, a hybrid media mingling different collaborations (9).

Further on, the focus of this paper will drop on the strategies of expanding short stories into films; when it comes to the aforementioned, three different ones can be used in order to accomplish Nolan's "expansion to feature size". One of the strategies is the concentration one; in using it, the filmmakers keep most of the elements of the narrative from the short story. They particularly concentrate elements from the short story at the beginning, middle or end of the film, also adding invented elements to the rest of the unfolding movie (Desmond, Hawkes 128). Another strategy is the interweaving procedure in which the adapters keep most of the elements from the "source" text dispersing them throughout the film, although not necessarily in their original order. The point-of-departure strategy implies filmmakers dropping most of the elements of narrative from the short story, keeping either the plot premise, a character's name, or just the title. An example of such a strategy was used in Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, adapted from his brother, Jonathan Nolan's *Memento Mori*. The director only keeps the plot premise, part of the title and uses these rudiments as a point of departure to invent a new story. Apart from the three above-mentioned strategies, there is also the possibility of combining them. There are situation when the concentration and interweaving strategies appear together in a film; in such an instance, the elements that were kept from the short story appear both at the beginning of the movie, as well as dispersed throughout it, without being displayed in their initial order. Some filmmakers even chose to incorporate elements from two short stories, perhaps written by the same author in their movies (Desmond, Hawkes 151). The film makes so many substitutions of plot, characters, settings and even theme that it sometimes seems that the director has added a whole new story. The two critics mentioned above inform their readers as to keep in mind that "filmmakers can use several different strategies to address the mismatch between the short story's brevity and the feature film's length" (153).

Subsequent to the information on film adaptation theory, I will engage in a study of film noir with its main characteristic, context and representations. Torben Schmidt places the genre in the early 1940s, when it first emerged in America. This type of movie mainly reflected the anxieties of a country entering a new era, and was seen by many as an antithesis of the Hollywood glamour productions of the 30s (3). According to Conard and Porfirio in *The philosophy of Film Noir*, defining film noir can be indeed challenging (10). While some look at it as a genre, others only consider that film noir represent a category of people who produced the same kind of films without being aware of the things they were producing. The most predominant traits of a film noir are the alienated and doomed antihero, the feeling of

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disorientation, pessimism, and even some rejection of traditional ideas about morality, crime as social criticism, gangsters, private eyes and adventurers, middle-class murder, portraits and doubles, sexual pathology and psychopaths (Conard, Porfirio 7, 11).

After having analyzed film noir, Mark Conard also engages in studying a tangential matter in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*. The critic argues that the term neo-noir describes any film coming after the classic period that incorporates the noir themes and sensibility. This covers an extended ground of movies given that the taste for noir and the desire of filmmakers to make noir films have shown no sign of fading in the decades after the classic era. These later films are sometimes not even filmed in black and white; they do however, contain the same alienation, pessimism, disorientation and moral ambiguity (5). Among other matters, the scholar argues that, whereas in classic neo-noir the protagonist searches the modern cityscape for an external villain, in neo-noir, the character's task is "to recognize a disjoint time continuum, in which what is effectively hidden is the detective's own identity as the villain" (6). In other words, Conard stresses the fact that the protagonist's inner struggle is highly emphasized in neo-noir film. An interesting aspect which I discovered upon studying Conard's book, lies in the fact that, in the author's opinion, neo-noir has an advantage to the noir film. Apparently, at the time film noir was produced, censorship represented an issue, and there were certain aspects which were forbidden from being put onto screen.

As aforementioned, this paper will also include a brief analysis of the primary sources. Jonathan Nolan's short story is written in a very interesting manner; it consists of eleven parts, which initially seem to have no connection with one another. However, as the short story unravels itself, the eleven parts become interconnected, and constitute a whole. When it comes to the diegesis, the parts are divided; half of them are written in third person narration, whereas the other half contain a first person narrator who addresses a you. The first person narrator is gradually revealed to be Earl, and the third-person narrator reports on Earl's actions from outside the story-world. The story becomes even more interesting given that it seems that there is no action occurring. Most of the heterodiegetic parts are descriptions of the character's daily routine, whereas the homodiegetic sequences are very insightful and personal. The scenes of Earl coping with daily life are interspersed with notes in which Earl philosophically explains to himself what his condition means. *Memento Mori* is structured so that it unfolds as a dialogue between Earl and his subconscious, his need for revenge or closure fighting its way through the vacuum that his memory has become. The author addresses the issues of memory and mortality in a powerful yet minimalist manner. It is precisely the brevity of Nolan's story that makes it memorable. It boasts few descriptive details and a plot that is developed so minimally that it is just enough to keep the story coherent.

The adapted screened version of the short-story is even more tangled; given that Christopher Nolan does not follow a linear unfolding of the plot, the narrative structure of the film is one of the elements that has brought the film its prestige. Riveting on the plot, it centers on a single character- Leonard Shelby. The protagonist tried to step in on his wife's murder but could not help her. He did however shoot one of the aggressors, but the other one knocked him down and escaped. As a result to the entire situation, Shelby suffered a head injury, which resulted in "severe anterograde memory dysfunction"; this means that his short term memory no longer exists and he is only capable of paying attention for roughly fifteen

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minutes, without being thus able to create new long term memories. One important aspect in the movie is the fact that his memory prior to the accident is intact and he can perfectly recall everything. As a consequence to his condition, the character cannot remember people he meets, things he does, or places he goes to; therefore he cannot trust anybody, not even himself. The only certainty lies in the fact that he wants to catch and kill his wife's murderer.

In addition to Leonard Shelby's revenge story, there is also a parallel plot in *Memento*. The story of Sammy Jankis and his wife proves to be a very interesting, touching story in Lenny's life prior to the accident. As an insurance investigator, Leonard had a curious case of a man suffering from anterograde amnesia, in which the protagonist had to determine whether the problem was mental or physical. After evaluating the case, Shelby denies the insurance money for the Jankis family, which triggers the wife to act irresponsibly; being a diabetic dependent on insulin, and knowing that her husband loves her and would never hurt her, the woman asks Sammy Jankis to give her three consecutive shots. The man does not realize that he is overdosing his wife, and the latter sinks into a coma. As a result to the entire situation, Sammy ends up institutionalized. This parallel plot becomes highly important because of the fact that the story may in fact be the story of Leonard Shelby. Moreover, the ambiguous implications of Sammy's embedded story foreground one of the main concerns of the film- the precarious nature of truth.

The director manages to turn viewers into detectives themselves through this structure and to describe the protagonist's condition by means of the connection created between the character and the audience. It takes a while before viewers manage to create a coherent narrative out of all the information provided in the movie. Apart from the fact that the film is non-linear, with each new scene concluding where the previous one had begun, it is also divided into color and black and white scenes; there are twenty-two colored scenes intertwined with another twenty-two black and white ones.

After analyzing both the short story and the film in particular and the two in contrast to one another, I find it even harder to establish whether *Memento* is indeed an adaptation of *Memento Mori* or a different interpretation of Jonathan Nolan's original idea. I have already mentioned some information on intertextuality and how different works are interrelated and I have come across an interesting idea upon reading Stam's *Film Theory: An Introduction*. At a certain point, the author mentions the concepts of transtextuality and hypertextuality, wherein a hypertext transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends a hypotext (66). In this respect, I would go even further into saying that *Memento Mori* might be the hypotext and *Memento* the hypertext.

In order to conclude, I would add that in the case of *Memento Mori* and *Memento* there has been a relation created between the two. In my opinion, having read the short story and viewed the film only determined me to appreciate the two texts respectively. It is very interesting to observe the way in which two different people manage to transmit the same idea. Moreover, the fact that the media are different is yet another example of how a story can be told in various ways, and how each medium makes use of its subtleties and means of expression in order to attract the audience.

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