Re-identity and Re-presentation in Film Adaptations: Instances of Anglo-American Cinema

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Abstract

Adaptation as a product and as a process of transculturalization and transideologization, would be focal point of discussion regarding the changes performed across cultures and ideologies when cinematizing a source text. The new ideological/moral/political niche that the film falls into, modes of representation and modes of reception greatly depend on a series of contextual elements such as: the political siding of the scriptwriter and director, the identity of the new audience, the chronotope of the new version on screen, the cultural frame where the new version becomes embodied. To put it differently, the new product will much depend on the 'who', 'when', 'where' or 'how'. Given that adaptations evoke language, ideas, policies, images or behavior that foreground certain groups - religious, genre, national - they must intend to provide no, or a minimum of, offense to racial, cultural, or other identity groups. We could thus bring into discussion the concept of "political correctness" applied to adaptations.

Key Words*: visual identity, transideologization, political correctness.*

Adaptation as a product and as a process of transculturalization and transideologization is a dominant point of discussion regarding the changes performed across cultures and ideologies when cinematizing a source text. The new ideological/moral/political niche that the film will fall into, the reception of the new audience, and its success will greatly depend on a series of contextual elements such as: the political siding of the scriptwriter and director, the period when the new version is revisited on screen, the geographical and cultural frame where the new version becomes embodied. To put it differently, the new product will much depend on the 'who', 'when' and 'where'. Given that adaptations evoke language, ideas, policies, or behavior that foreground certain groups - religious, genre, national - they must intend to provide no, or a minimum of, offense to racial, cultural, or other identity groups. We could thus bring into discussion the concept of 'political correctness' applied to adaptations.

Taking into account the temporal context of adaptations, Stephen Spielberg's adaptation of *The Color Purple* (1985) was released just three years after Alice Walker's novel, and soon became involved in a series of controversies connected to the moment when it was released. These were concerned with (1) identity: can a white male director adapt a novel by a black woman?; (2) the canon: which works of literature should be taught in schools?; (3) race: does the film offer a demoniac representation of black men?; (4) sexuality: was Spielberg politically correct towards the gay and lesbian groups when removing the overt lesbianism in the novel? (5) gender: was Spielberg 'correct' when choosing to push the film to an obvious patriarchal direction by portraying Shug "less bisexual, less rebellious and independent" (Stam, 2005: 43)

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and (6) Academy Awards: did racism, or the anti-Spielberg prejudice prevent the film from winning more Academy Awards? Steven Spielberg was accused of being less 'politically correct' by changing the politics of adapted works: he was said to have 'repatriarchized' Alice Walker's feminist novel in his film, while John Ford was accused of avoiding the "socialist drift of the Steinbeck novel" in his 1940 adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) (Stam qtd. in Naremore, 2000: 73).

Similarly, both Stanley Kubrick's and Adrian Lyne's adaptations, though 35 years apart, had to make decisions regarding issues of ideology and morality when adapting Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita, a novel that had raised much controversy and censorship. Kubrick's directorial concern had become influenced by McCarthy's intense censorship in the 1950's, and together with scriptwriter James Harris took into account the possibility to have Humbert marry Lolita "with a relative's blessing" (Boyd, 1991: 387). Since Lynne's version was released in the middle of a widespread general social anxiety regarding child pornography and pedophilia, the director decided to change the age of Lolita to 14.

Another important aspect in the study of adaptation would lie in the historical relationship between the audience and the literary/cinematic text. This desire or/and trend to recapture certain frames of the past is not necessarily a new thing and this desire comes from the awareness of scriptwriters, producers, directors concerning the taste and interest of the collective mind in a certain time-point in history, and is identified as a moment of acute longing where the crave for images of the past, even seen through the lenses of adaptations "are all symptomatic of the condition of the national psyche which is shedding layers of modernity and reverting to its own past tones under the stress of contemporary economic, political and social crisis" (Giddings and Sheen, 2000: 38). It can be inferred from the above that a perspective of the past which certain adaptations foreground opens a critical perspective of a historical event, in which the issue of fidelity and historical verisimilitude may be irrelevant given the realism of event revisited on screen, and allows a criticism of the ideology as a dominant shaping force in the production of popular adaptations. As Peter Reynolds put it: "images of literature in performance are seldom produced by accident or chance, nor are they natural and ideologically neutral. They have been designed and built […] in order to project a specific agenda and to encourage a particular set of responses" (1993:1).

The audience ideologically reconstruct and associate gender, class, sexual, racial, and other social differences that do not speak of values of the past most necessarily: take, for instance, the use of regional accents for the working classes, or ghetto American English for the Afro-American living in Bronx. On the other side of the social scale lie the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy who are assumed to speak Received Pronunciation English. It can be inferred that with adaptations of classic texts from earlier periods it is not only a question of filling in the visual 'gaps' that appear to be suggested by the adapter's interpretation of the original source, it is also a matter of a collective reception of patterns historically set. In terms of what is fashionably adaptable, the preference of the public for certain events dictates the focus of adaptation for directors, scriptwriters, producers. An example could be the interest in, and the consequential wave of, British film adaptations of nineteenth century novels, especially of novels by Jane Austen, who seems to have been most adapted to screen in the history of the British and American cinema[1]. Another example of the audience's interest in the past (cultural, historical) is

[1] Between 1938 and the 2015 there have been no fewer than seventy British or American screen versions of Jane Austen's novels or letters, which were released as feature films, TV (mini)series or biographic documentaries, of which most 'transculturalised'

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proved by the multitude of American adaptations of historical events, especially of World War II or the Vietnam War, films which were very popular in the 1990's. Two such piercing Academy Award-winning movies are Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), an adaptation based on Thomas Keneally's book *Schindler's Ark*, and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) which was simultaneously turned into a novel written by Max Allan Collins based on the screenplay by Robert Rodat. While the former is a biographical film telling the story of Oskar Schnidler, a German Catholic businessman who saved the lives of over one thousand Polish Jews during the *Final Solution*[2], the latter could be considered a historical revisionist movie, given its composition framed around the Omaha Beach assault of 6 June 1944, depicted in the intense excruciating twenty-five minute opening scene. Though the film is further constructed as a fictional search for a paratrooper of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division, this brick is nevertheless based on the real case of the Niland Brothers.

When discussing the classic adaptation, the critic has to address a number of issues: 1) does the adaptation seek to capture and render a sense of the past? 2) if so, what is the relation between the sense of this past and the 'present' of the adaptation? In some cases, the desire to depict the historical truth might surpass the desire to achieve a particular work of fiction, removing from the narrative some traits that might be anachronistic from a historical viewpoint. For some films such as Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), there is a danger that Hollywood, in its drive for market share and profitability, might favor a focus "on spectacle and heroism more than on actual history" (Cartmell and Whelehan, 1999:14). Another aspect of criticism and research of adaptation regards issues of temporality of adaptations: novel replications into film also grow old, and even a classic 1990s television serial can seem anachronistic and out-dated because of the new developments in terms of set design, costume, textual fidelity, techniques, and production values, which all make the adaptation seem a product of its own time.

Commenting on this tendency of the American cinema, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner asserted that the American society in the 1970's and 1980's had a conservative turn in terms of opinions, attitude, values, manifested in the "resolution-oriented of the classic Hollywood cinema" (1990: 9).

Transcultural adaptations often involve changes in racial and gender politics, which is the reason why the term 'political correctness' could be applied to adaptations. According to customs and mores, adapters are often charged with the difficulty of filtering a source text of elements that the target culture might find offensive, controversial, or irrelevant. In this way, the new version "de-represses" the politics of an earlier adapted text (Stam, 2005: 42-44). As political issues, ideologies and currents have temporal fluctuations, the adapted versions might vary accordingly. Although Jane Campion's 1996 adaptation of Henry James's novel *The Portrait of a Lady* (film script by Laura Jones) was quite faithful a film translation, the cinematic version has several feminist overtones through, for instance, an interpolated dream sequence causing much controversy among critics, in which Isabel has an erotic fantasy involving all of her suitors.

were: *Pride and Prejudice* - nineteen adaptations; *Sense and Sensibility* - nine adaptations; *Emma* - eight adaptations; *Persuasion* - four adaptations; *Mansfield Park - three* adaptations*; Northanger Abbey* - three adaptations.

[2] 'The Final Solution' to the Jewish Question is the reference for the German Nazis' strategic plan to engage in systematic genocide against the European Jewish population during World War II. The term was introduced by Adolf Eichmann, a top Nazi official who supervised the genocidal campaign, and who was captured, tried and executed by the Israeli authorities in 1961–1962. The implementation of the 'Final Solution' resulted in the most deadly stage of the Holocaust. The phrase displayed the belief that the Jewish European population itself posed a question and a problem, which was offered a solution.

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When speaking of the politics of transcultural adaptations, the adapter has to consider what Linda Hutcheon calls the "context of reception", which is as important as the "context of creation" (2006:147). When regarding these, they will have to take into account that the referential frame can shift over time, and that the geographical location of the target audience of the adaptation may be completely different from the one of the source text. Take, for instance, Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, the most widely adapted novel to screen and its latest versions: Jow Wright's *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), and Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004). The former is quite loyal a transposition of the source novel, which involved the usual cuts that an adaptation undergoes (heavy time compression of several major sequences: Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley, Lydia's elopement with its ensuing crisis; the purging of several supporting characters: Louisa Hurst, Mr. Hurst, Maria Lucas, Mr. and Mrs. Phillips, the Gardiners' children; the exclusion of several sections in which characters reflect on or discuss events that have recently occurred, for example, Elizabeth's change of mind after reading Darcy's letter; change of locales or time of events). In the 2004 Bollywood adaptation, the adapter offered a postcolonial rereading of a Victorian past and transposed it into an Indian cultural context and contemporary setting. With this postcolonial adaptation, director Gurinder Chadha created a willful reinterpretation for a different context, and altered historical accuracy as well as the setting. Moreover, the characters' names were almost entirely adapted to local specificity: Elisabeth Bennet became Lalita Bakshi (all Bennets became the Bakshis), Fitzwilliam Darcy became Will Darcy, a Californian hotel business man whom Lalita considers an imperialist snob; the Bennets' residence Longbourn became Lalita's Indian hometown, Amritsar etc. Such adaptations offer a modern rereading of the past that not everyone will find acceptable. As Kamilla Elliott put it:

> Film adapters build on a hypercorrect historical material realism to usher in a host of anachronistic ideological "corrections" of novels. Quite inconsistently, while adaptations pursue a hyperfidelity to nineteenth-century material culture, they reject and correct Victorian psychology, ethics, and politics. When filmmakers set modern politically correct views against historically correct backdrops, the effect is to authorize these modern ideologies as historically authentic. (2003:177)

Transcultural adaptations engross more than merely translating words, and often cultural and social meaning has to be conveyed and adapted to a new environment. During the process of transferring from text to screen, possible dissimilarities in ideology, philosophy, religion, national culture, gender or race can open gaps that must be bridged by the script writer and director through a complex range of physical elements of frame composition, character and narrative re-construction, and linguistic entities. Facial expression, body language, clothing, and gestures are provided a new significance along with architecture, since they will convey cultural information that is both verisimilar and an "index of the ideologies, values, and conventions by which we order experience and predicate activity" (Klein, 1981:4).

Adaptations are new (hi)stories that travel across new media forms, across time and place, and in this process they end up gathering what Edward Said called different "processes of representation and institutionalization" (1983: 226). According to Said, ideas or theories that travel involve four elements: a set of initial circumstances, a distance traversed, a set of conditions of acceptance (or resistance), and a transformation of the idea in its new time and place (*ibidem* 226-27). Adaptations, too, stand as transformations of

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previous works in new contexts and local specificities become transferred to a new territory with a new hybrid product coming to life.

The audience of adaptation, whether scholarly or lacking any degree of expertise, should consider that it is not matters of 'fidelity' they should be judgmental about, but rather of the new identity adapters give to the new version, the reasons, implications behind these new identify, other possibilities, as well as the possible consequences of the choices the filmmakers have. The search of an original, of a single author in an age that postulated the 'Death of the Author' should be contemplated as no longer relevant for the quality and artfulness of a filmic replication in a postmodern age that long ago cancelled fixed/single meanings. Instead, adaptation must be accepted as a multiple-meaning product and an interpolation of discourses, texts, and authors.

One of the biases against adaptations lies grounded in the arguments that film could subvert and subdue readers of literature; research and surveys have actually demonstrated that the consumption of a successful film or a screen translation of a literary text could increase novel sales in a substantial way; on the other hand, it is equally proved that the share of the audience who enjoyed an adaptation and who will buy the source novel will be larger than the share who will actually start reading or even finish the literary counterpart.

The scholarly novel and film consumers will often try to assess the authenticity of the original in the adaptation, often admitting that the visual interpretation cannot parallel the art, profundity, complexity, intricacy, substance or brilliance of the novel. But the same scholars will be often forced to admit that a rather obscure and abstruse novel could be turned into a remarkably erudite and learned cinematic version. It is therefore important that, in the evaluation the audience perform irrespective of their literary or filmic expertise, respondents should not be biased as to the high/low cultural divide between the consumption of films and of literature. They should admit that textual comparisons across the literature/media divide demand adroitness and finesse, close reading and narrative analysis, as well as a good acquaintance with the general debates about the interface between 'high' and 'low' culture'. Such an approach will allow us to (re)define our actual reading/analytical/critical practices and skills in a postmodern cultural context, and admit that the reading of literary and filmic texts is part of the same critical field as the consumption of more readily acceptable and overtly commercial products.

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