

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Film adaptations

Theories on the relationship between literature and cinematic art

Theses

by Péter Domonkos

Doctoral School of Literary Studies

Head of School: Géza Kállay CSc, Ph.D., associate professor

Doctoral program of general literary studies

Head of program: Ernő Kulcsár Szabó MHAS, associate professor

Members of the board and their academic degree:

Györffy Miklós CSc, PhD, habilitated associate professor (chairman)

Teréz Vincze PhD (opponent)

Miklós Sággy PhD (opponent)

Gábor Tamás Molnár PhD (secretary)

Sándor Hornyik PhD (member)

Zoltán Kékesi PhD (alternate member)

György Kálmán C. CSc, PhD, habilitated associate professor (alternate member)

Supervisor: Ernő Kulcsár Szabó MHAS, associate professor

Budapest, 2012

My dissertation consists of three parts. In the first part I have reviewed the special literature on this subject starting with an essay by Eizenstein and ending with the most recent publication by Thomas Leitch (*Theories on film adaptations*). In the second part I have drawn the conclusions and I have set up a complex methodology for studying individual film adaptations. In the third part I have presented three essays in the spirit of this method (*Analysis of works*).

I have reviewed the special literature on this subject along the canonised texts of canonical authors. When I defined the canon, I have kept myself to the simple aspect used by both the scientific community and the advertisements of books on the internet: who and which literary works are mostly referred to. In fifteen chapters, I have analysed twenty books and essays by fifteen authors, while I have also touched upon a number of other authors and their works.

The review of the canon is focusing on the author and the subject at the same time, it is chronological and thematic. The portraits of the authors are drawn up in terms of the major topics of the discourse on film adaptations. I see seven topics that seem to be fundamental for me and to which most authors contributed to. Right at the start, there is the prejudice against adaptations. Everybody has something to say about it. Then there is the scope of adaptation theories: which works are included by whom within the scope of discussion and which ones are not and under what principle. It is an indispensable question, what theoretical apparatus (or method with an old fashioned use of words) is recommended. A formalist one? Or another one from a semiological aspect? Rather with a narratological or culture theory approach? Does it refer to the reader-response theory or to feminism? And so on. A recurrent issue is the difference and the similarity between the set of signals and the possibilities of expression of the two media, including the relationship between the *image* and the *spoken word*, presenting *time* and *space* in literature and on film, showing *states of consciousness* by the two arts, the lot of *metaphors*, *descriptions* or the *narrator* during the filmmaking process. As a result of all this, the relationship between the adaptation and the original is an inevitable subject: the issue of *fidelity vs. infidelity*. Then the next subject is the typologies of adaptation. Although it is not necessary to raise, but it is quite general. Last but not least the social-cultural contexts of adaptations: the difference and the similarity between the two media; the ideological and economic issues, changes of cultural contexts in time and space and so on.

At the axe of my dissertation, there are two chapters of Part II. The chapter entitled „LESSONS” is going through the above listed subjects one after another and I am drawing the conclusions deriving from the special literature. Accordingly, the prejudice against adapta-

tions came from the modernist perception of art: both the followers of “pure film” and the representatives of the formalist study of literature (Russian formalists, the Prague school or the followers of the American New Criticism) emphasised the importance of the medium specific form. However, thanks to the postmodern theories of art – especially the theory of intertextuality and the theory of culture – adaptation is seen today as a widespread practice in art, much wider than originally thought.

Related to this subject is the gradual and limitless widening of investigations. Researchers have gradually extended the concept of adaptation to all possible topics. As of today, in the eye of the evolutionary literary theory and film theory, which uses the concept of adaptation in a Darwinian sense and considers art as an adaptation to the environment, every work of art is an adaptation. As far as I am concerned, against this limitless concept of adaptation, I keep to the narrower definition by Linda Hutcheon, who defined this concept – in line with its popular usage – in two ways: as an activity on the one hand and as a finished product on the other hand. As an activity, adaptation is the re-interpretation and recreation by the artist of an earlier work of art, taking the changed circumstances into consideration; and it is the interpretation of the adaptation in an intertextual context by the audience, with a regard to an earlier text along similarities and differences. The adaptation as a product is declared to be a thoroughly recoded work of art. It may be relocated from one medium to another or even within the same medium: from one genre to another (e.g. an epic rewritten to a novel), from one context to another (e.g. changing time and/or space coordinates), from reality to imagination (e.g. the dramatisation of a biography).

As far as an adequate theory or methodology to this topic is concerned, we can say that the trends of the last fifty years have been favourable to the research of film adaptations, since they contributed to the revaluation of adaptations. As Robert Stam has shown, progress has always taken place on the basis of reconsidering the concept of being literary. The representatives of the respective trends can be found at the canon of literature on adaptation. The flag-bearer of semiotics was Keith Cohen; Seymour Chatman for narratology, Dudley Andrew for hermeneutics, Joy Gould Boyum for the reader-response theory; Keith Cohen experimented with deconstruction in his essay on Eisenstein. A deconstructive approach was propagated by Robert B. Ray and Dudley Andrew was also an advocate of Foucault, not only of hermeneutics (*The Unauthorized Auteur today*, 1993). The prophet of intertextuality was John Orr, its present-day apostle was Robert Stam, of culture theory was Timothy Corrigan, of feminism were Cartmell and Whelehan, a couple of an author and an editor. More recently, the 'ethical

criticism', the evolutionary literary theory and film theory, as well as ecocriticism have been gathering followers in this field, too.

In retrospect, the concerns that literature is not filmable because of the difference between the two media, seem to be completely unfounded. First of all, McLuhan is absolutely right saying that film as all media incorporates its predecessor, in this case literature. Sound picture, but silent film already by inserts – is literally able to incorporate literary texts. In reality, it is able to express more and in various ways and not less than literature – thanks to its wider set of tools. Since it is not only working with words, but also with images and sounds. But already the idea is completely inadequate that adaptation is the presentation of a literary text line by line, word by word. Any self-respecting film director would follow a more original concept of a higher standard, while shooting a film from a literary text. He or she is not making images of film to replace the image of words, but he or she screens his or her own interpretation of the work and uses the whole film-making arsenal for this purpose.

If there are gnawed bones in the theory of adaptation, then it is fidelity to the original. This aspect has been a measure of value and a thorn in the eye of researchers working on adaptations for a long time. The first monographer of this subject, George Bluestone already spoke about different technical capabilities, different aesthetic conventions, industrial-economic differences between film production and book-trade, differences between the audiences and the censorship of the two arts. It is another issue that he generalized his Hollywood experience in the 50ies in an unhistorical way. Geoffrey Wagner called the attention to the fact that there were adaptations which were obviously not intended to remain faithful to their sources. Joy Gould Boyum pointed out that a film director did not screen a book, but rather his or her interpretation that could significantly differ from the interpretation of other readers. Dudley Andrew and Timothy Corrigan highlighted the differences between the works of literature and the historical, sociological, aesthetic and cultural context of their film adaptations. Seymour Chatman and the author-couple Desmond – Hawks showed that a director is forced to specify the gloomy details left by the author: he or she has to select actors and actresses to play the roles, to identify locations for the individual scenes, to look for décor and costumes for the shooting, to set up the camera somewhere (or on the contrary to define its movement), to decide our viewing angle, to select the lenses, etc. Therefore we have enough reasons not to call a film adaptation to account for the fidelity to the original; to consider it as a dream, an illusion or a wrong effort by the director; and a delusion by a critic.

A recurrent topic of the special literature is the classification of adaptations into certain categories. However, most of these typologies are made according to the measure of fidelity,

so by their nature they are useless and confused. An exception is Timothy Corrigan's typology which classifies adaptations on the basis of film history. He divided the history of the relationship between literature and film to various periods, differentiating subcategories within a certain period several times, according to the rivaling trends of different styles. Although his overview is inevitably rough-and-ready here and there, it is still by far more sophisticated than any other typology of adaptations, moreover by its historical nature it is unclosed and open to the future.

Researchers have always been interested by the historical, social, cultural and aesthetic contexts of literary works and their film adaptations, as well as the related ideological and economic issues. However, they got into focus only with the headway of culture theory, primarily by Timothy Corrigan. There is nothing better to highlight the significance of circumstances than the parallelism between biological and cultural adaptations. Just like living beings, stories also migrate to favourable environments. They adapt themselves to the circumstances by mutation. And the fittest survive.

Chapter Two of Part II, entitled METHODOLOGY is first of all challenging Thomas Leitch's opinion on the desirable direction of research. In the first issue of the magazine *Adaptation* published in 2008 in Oxford, Leitch advised us to forget the “one book, one film” type of comparative analysis and to work exclusively with the general adaptation theory. Either in such a way that adaption is placed within the framework of an overall intertextuality theory; or focusing on a peculiar problem (e.g. self-reflection). Without questioning the significance of this research, I think that adaptation theory must be a methodology first of all: it has to make us conscious of what happens during reception and must help us with efficient tools when we get stuck with reading. Hutcheon is right when considering adaptation as a receptive activity of a shuttle movement between two pieces of work, along similarities and differences. And what else could be the purpose of activity by the recipient than grabbing the essence of the message, the interpretation of the adaptor?

However, the followers of the discourse on fidelity are working with a simplified model of reception: they are offering only the recognition of the so-called equivalences to the audience. They forget that adaptation is a re-interpretation and recreation of the original work with regard to the changes of circumstances. Differences must be seen clearly for this purpose. However, those who put the emphasis on differences are taking various differences into consideration and retrace them to different reasons. These differences are basically of two kinds: structural differences within the works and contextual differences.

As far as the determination of structural differences are concerned, the aspects of semiotics, narratology and intertextuality theory are inevitable. These theories have a logical priority over the schools addressing the sense of the works. Hermeneutics, reception aesthetics, the reader-response theory, post-colonialism, feminism, the queer-theory, ecocriticism and ethical criticism inevitably use their results and tools for comparing the original work to its adaptation. That is presupposing them.

As far as the determination of contextual differences are concerned, choosing the relevant context is a key issue. It is because going through the possible contexts in a mechanical way is not only infeasible, but it would make no sense at all. Setting a certain work into an appropriate context requires interpretation – even within a category. It is not enough to say: let us look at the political context, we also have to know from which point of view we should do it. And finding the proper aspect presupposes a structural comparison.

I have addressed the above mentioned topics during the analysis of the works. Although the range of possible intertexts changes from film to film, I have usually implied literary texts used beyond the basic text, film styles and film trends exercising an impact on the specific film, the works of fine art quoted, as well as the style imagery, the musical intertexts and scientific texts inserted into the film. A narratological analysis may imply a review of the modifications of the story, that is the plot and the narrative in a strict sense: adding new scenes, deleting scenes, changing the sequence of scenes and changing the point of view. However, in case of radical re-makes I also imply the analysis of the characters and the scenes. Modifications that can only be implemented with the signal system of a film are discussed under the title of “non-verbal signals” or “relations of signals”. Without a pretense of completeness, of course. I have been focusing at the casting, the costumes, the shooting locations, the décor, the use of camera, the editing and the film music (although the list and the emphasis may be very different between the films). Finally, in case of some films – depending on their nature – different contexts have been focused at. Nevertheless, again and again I have been addressing the place of a film within a life-work, its political-ideological context, as well as the tradition of its genre in order to evaluate the qualities of a certain film within the context of related works.

I have been analysing three adaptations according to the above mentioned criteria: *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1964), *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard (1990) and *Faust 5.0* (2001), shot by the avantguard Spanish theatrical company La Fura dels Baus with professional film director Isidro Ortiz. Pasolini's film is notable for the director sticking to the original text of the gospel. As we will see

later, this is far from being true and this film is a good excuse for putting delusions related to the fidelity of adaptations ad acta. Stoppard's adaptation is interesting, because the author directed a film from his own theatrical play. But we will see that this is no guarantee for remaining (more exactly: intending to or capable to remain) faithful to yourself. Furthermore, Stoppard also thematized the relationship between theatre and film and his film can be regarded as a valuable contribution to the discussion about the two media. Ortiz's film is a good example that culture theory is right when urging us to be more tolerant and to pay more attention. During a thorough analysis, this psycho-thriller proves to be a maze of well-thought-out and subtle allusions, offering an original and convincing *Faust*-interpretation for the attentive spectator.