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Introduction

Dan Hassler-Forest and Pascal Nicklas

Adaptation is all about change: from one work of art to the next. Therefore, adaptation is also about power. On one level, there has been the power of the ‘original’ text over its adapted version, which has in many cases automatically been considered a polluted or otherwise inferior copy of the primary text – the Hegelian slave to its more authentic master. But the ways in which adaptations are used in our contemporary context of ubiquitous computing and global capitalism enforce a power dynamic that is even more explicitly political: a continuous negotiation of existing social, cultural, and economic hierarchies that can be reaffirmed but also challenged by the new ways in which adaptations are circulated and appropriated.

By foregrounding the phrase ‘the politics of adaptation,’ this book means to suggest the political and ideological contexts and power relations within which artistic adaptations take place. With this approach, the contributors to this volume seek to explore new research challenges relating to history, political philosophy, and the changes in production and distribution that have been the result of globalization and media convergence. It also opens our eyes further to the importance of adaptation as a tool of appropriation and power negotiation in racial and post-colonial debates, as well as in terms of biopolitics and gender.

Since the act of adaptation by its very definition involves a process of transformation and rewriting, any adapted text must by necessity also involve the repurposing of ideas that implicitly or explicitly articulate a sense of political engagement. Case studies of adaptations can therefore be useful tools for examining larger ideological shifts, especially when examining the interaction between a specific text and its cultural reception. Focusing on the politics of adaptation therefore moves us beyond the traditional debates on fidelity and medium-specificity, seeking to
explore and mobilize the most recent developments and methodological shifts that are currently transforming the field of adaptation studies.

For many years, adaptation studies has already proclaimed itself to have reached ‘an important crossroads’ (Leitch, 2006). Originating among literary scholars with an interest in cross-media adaptations, the field has been heavily invested in examining similarities and differences between source texts and their numerous textual relations: novels that have been adapted into films, television series based on literary properties, video games based on cinematic franchises, and so forth. But as processes of globalization and media convergence have rapidly transformed our media landscape over the past two decades, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain or even properly identify the previously assumed boundaries between media, and the cultural hierarchies that once seemed to define their relative values. Digital convergence (Jenkins, 2006), ubiquitous computing (Negroponte, 1996), and the development of participatory culture (Nicklas and Voigts, 2013) have been important factors in the recent reconfiguration of adaptation studies, with a tension developing between the traditions of detailed textual analysis on the one hand, and the broader framework of cultural studies on the other (Carroll, 2009; Murray 2013).

In order to start suturing this gap between text-based case studies of individual adaptations and questions of social use and cultural context, the question of politics offers the field a productive way forward. As all adaptation processes inherently imply hierarchies of taste and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), both the theory and the practice of adaptation are ultimately determined by social relationships that are inherently political. An ideologically informed perspective on adaptation practices therefore must take into account not only the political economies that successfully produce and distribute adaptations in countless forms, but also the unpredictable ways in which such texts are received, negotiated, and appropriated around the globe. Building upon these central questions, this book develops new ways of understanding adaptation through a focus on political and ideological concepts, offering a perspective that combines specific case studies with an approach that is truly global in its scope.

The necessity for this intervention is all the more vital given the sweeping cultural, social, and technological changes that have transformed the mutual relationships between contemporary narrative media. Large-scale processes like globalization, media convergence and audience participation make it important to shift adaptation studies’ dominant framework from the analysis of cine-literary case studies to
the socio-cultural mechanisms and political economies that determine their value. It has therefore become necessary to examine more closely the various kinds of political and ideological assumptions underlying not only the contents of specific adaptations, but also – and perhaps especially – the cultural, economic, and social practices that surround their production, distribution, and consumption. This approach therefore also requires methods that combine more traditional humanities research with fields such as sociology, philosophy, fan studies, and new developments in the neurosciences.

This book therefore brings together a group of scholars from a variety of disciplines, whose work offers a wide-ranging set of approaches to the field. Their work has been organized into a series of thematic clusters focused on politics and adaptation, each of which explores in depth a case study related to this conceptual focus from a political point of view. These experts were brought together on the one hand to broaden and expand the field by incorporating interdisciplinary developments in academic methods outside the traditional humanities, and on the other to open up adaptation studies to scholars for whom adaptation studies’ literary focus has been a limitation.

Together, these authors have explored the politics of adaptation from a variety of disciplines and perspectives, while their work remains united by the conceptual questions that affect the entire field. This approach differs from earlier collections with similar cultural interests, which have mostly remained within the classical paradigm of literature and film studies (Nicklas and Lindner, 2012; Bruhn, Gjelsvik and Hanssen, 2013). The individual chapters in this book have been grouped into six clusters that can be accessed separately, but which build upon each other structurally and thematically.

These clusters articulate the six overlapping and mutually reinforcing frameworks identified by the book’s contributors as key issues within the debate we wish to address:

1. History
2. Media convergence
3. Postcolonialism and racial identity
4. Globalization and nationality
5. Popular genres
6. Biopolitics and gender

While all six topics provide engagements with a varied range of case studies and interdisciplinary methodologies, they remain united by
their focus on a critical approach to the political implications of adaptation processes. By moving from adaptation studies’ traditional emphasis on genres, texts, and authors to these critical concepts, this collection offers new approaches that aim to broaden the existing framework considerably.

These six areas of thematic interest together elucidate the most vital recent developments in adaptation studies, expanding the scope of the field by moving away from comparative case studies based entirely on close textual analysis, and firmly establishing an agenda rooted in the contextual study of complex social, cultural, and political processes. The effect of these interdisciplinary approaches is on the one hand a methodological pluralism generally characteristic of the humanities in recent years. On the other hand, the volume’s development of a politically informed approach to adaptation studies is neither uniform nor ideologically programmatic: rather than furthering any specific political agenda, the essays instead offer critical examinations of the power dynamics that are crucial to understanding adaptation theories and practices in the context of globalization.

Works cited

Part I
Adapting the Past: Politics and History
When we consider the politics of adaptation, it is only natural that we should gravitate toward the political motives in adaptations of different kinds. In accord with Fredric Jameson’s “transhistorical” imperative, ‘Always historicize!’ (Jameson, 1982, p. 9), most of the contributors to this volume focus on placing different adaptations in historical contexts in order to unmask these political motives. Before I yield the floor to my distinguished colleagues, however, I would like to approach this subject from more or less the opposite direction. Instead of discussing the historical contexts of adaptations, I propose to discuss the status of history itself as a series of adaptations. My goal is to establish a context that foregrounds not only the historical determination of adaptation, but the adaptive nature of historiography.

It is only fair to note that historians themselves see their own project as quite distinct from the adaptations to which they occasionally turn their attention. In Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies, for example, a glittering array of historians anatomize cinematic presentations of historical events, from the lives of the dinosaurs to the Watergate break-in. Their verdicts are remarkably predictable. Stuart Lake’s Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal, which ‘became the authority for nearly all the film portraits of Earp,’ was ‘an imaginative hoax’ (Faragher, 1995, p. 154). Strategic omissions make Patton ‘a simplification that supports the always popular folk theme of the redemption of the bad boy’ (Fussell, 1995, p. 244). ‘If the historical Houdini does indeed come back from the dead, he might make his first visit a vengeful one to Paramount Studios’ (Kasson, 1995, p. 215). Almost without exception, the commentators endorse editor Mark C. Carnes’s assertion that although ‘sometimes filmmakers, wholly smitten by their creations, proclaim them to be historically “accurate” or “truthful,”’ movies ‘do not provide a substitute for
history that has been painstakingly assembled from the best available evidence and analysis’ (Carnes, 1995, pp. 9–10). In chapter after chapter, contributors compare History to Hollywood, to the invariable detriment of the latter.

Each of Past Imperfect’s sixty chapters includes a page-long sidebar labeled ‘History/Hollywood.’ In these sidebars we learn, for example, that although ‘producer John Houseman and director Joseph L. Mankiewicz surprised no one when they cast the distinguished British actors James Mason and John Gielgud as Brutus and Cassius’ in their 1953 production of Julius Caesar, ‘they shocked everyone when they chose Marlon Brando for the part of Mark Antony’ (Grant, 1995, p. 45). This statement is unexceptionable, but its implication in the context of History/Hollywood – that Mason and Gielgud are somehow historically appropriate choices for their roles in a way that Brando is not – is dubious. In fact, sidebar after sidebar undermines the neat division between Hollywood and history by the selection of historical illustrations obviously created after the fact, from the uncredited painting illustrating the Battle of Balaklava, which forms the climax of The Charge of the Light Brigade (1936) (Slotkin, 1995, p. 121), to Michelangelo’s sculpture of Moses, which reportedly inspired the casting of Charlton Heston in the 1956 version of The Ten Commandments (Segal, 1995, p. 37). In holding Hollywood up to history as a benchmark whose claims to accuracy are generically privileged, historians pretend to forget what they know perfectly well: that history itself is a construction, not an observation, because ‘language is not transparent and cannot mirror the past as it really was; rather than reflecting it, language creates and structures history and imbues it with meaning’ (Rosenstone, 2009, p. 37).

Documentary filmmaker Errol Morris notes further that it is invidious to distinguish between photographs posed and shot in a studio and photographs made on location that presumably have a more authentic documentary value: ‘every photograph is posed because every photograph excludes something’ (Morris, 2011, p. 65).

It is not simply historians who maintain different criteria for presentational genres as different as cinema, still photography, and history. Susan Bordo (2012), observing that ‘screen depictions are more likely than novels to be criticized for historical inaccuracy,’ sees this distinction as arising from ‘the post-Oliver Stone, postmodern problem: in our media-dominated, digitally enhanced era, people are arguably being culturally trained to have greater difficulty distinguishing between fact and fiction,’ especially in movies that are specifically designed to be more compelling than novels, much less histories, could ever be. Bordo’s
solution is for historical novelists and filmmakers to be more scrupulous in using their ideas about history to justify their imaginative inventions. Taking history as a benchmark for historical fiction in any presentational mode seems like an obvious move. Yet when Stephen Jay Gould – granted, a scientist rather than an historian – observes of Jurassic Park, ‘We cannot hope for even a vaguely accurate portrayal of the nub of history in film so long as movies must obey the literary conventions of ordinary plotting’ (Gould, 1995, p. 35), he overlooks the considerable extent to which his remark is true of all histories that cast their accounts of the past in the form of formally intelligible and thematically illuminating narratives – that is, of history as such.

Contemporary historiographers from Hayden White to Simon Schama agree that history is constructed according to the narrative conventions of causality, cogency, and plausibility, rather than observed; that history is hypothetical and therefore arguable; and that the contingent nature of all history means that it is always subject to further revision, for no historian ever has the last word. It is only when they deal with the cinema that they hold up earlier print histories, along with photographs, paintings, sculptures, and other post-facto illustrations, as unquestioned factual models from which filmmakers should never deviate. Even White, in his even-handed summary ‘Historiography and Historiophoty,’ seems not to notice that ‘historiophoty,’ the term he coins to describe ‘the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse,’ is not truly parallel to the apparently analogous term ‘historiography’ (‘the representation of history in verbal images and written discourse’), for in practice historiography refers explicitly to meta-historical writings about history, whereas White defines historiophoty in a way that conflates cinematic history and meta-history as if they were the same (White, 2009, p. 53).

But historiophoty’s apparently fallacious conflation of history and meta-history might well offer guidance for historians who are increasingly tempted to conflate lexical history and historiography. Hence Dudley Andrew asks, ‘Why not treat historical films as adaptations, particularly now that so many historians, following on Hayden White’s Metahistory, consider their work to be largely that of re-creation, re-presentation, and textual elaboration?’ (Andrew, 2004, p. 191). In the final chapter of Film Adaptation and Its Discontents, I argued that films that identified themselves as based on a true story were positioning themselves as adaptations of hitherto nonexistent texts – not the historical record as such, but some subset of history identified only as ‘a true story’ – called into existence by the very act of adapting them. But these
arguments, which have had even less impact on adaptation studies than on historians, now seem to me altogether too timid. In this chapter I therefore want to examine a different relation between adaptation and history: an analogous relation based on the fact that history is itself always an adaptation of some earlier history.

This is most obvious in successive revisions of history textbooks, which are strictly speaking updates of their earlier editions, adding new events that bring them up to date and revising earlier judgments about, for example, the Iraq War and the Middle East to bring them in line with the latest developments in the Arab Spring and the winding down of the war. History textbooks that draw on academic histories rather than original research, as most such textbooks do, are also clearly adaptations that seek to clarify and simplify history, cutting footnotes and adding illustrations, in order to make history more palatable to a contemporary young audience, in the manner of Franco Zeffirelli and Baz Luhrmann’s respective film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. Even revisionist academic histories that take sharp exception to earlier histories are programmaticallly drawing on these earlier histories as sources in order to establish the originality of their own approach, and are therefore engaged just as much with adaptation processes.

It could hardly be otherwise. Most people who are not professional historians think that what historians try to do is to tell the truth about what happened. But historians know that what they actually do is look for new evidence about the past and better ways to interpret existing evidence. The primary kind of evidence they examine, unless the events are very recent indeed, is documents: letters, diaries, memorandums, memoirs, biographies, and of course earlier histories. Since not even the most conscientious historian has direct access to the minds of the founders of the American republic or the Roman emperors who fought Christianity for so long before making it the official religion of the empire, historians are inevitably reduced to reading and reinterpreting earlier documents. Even if those are primary documents, they are all united in trying to make sense of what seem to the observers to be important events. Therefore, all history involves rewriting and ideally improving earlier histories. Because historians’ reinterpretations of the historical record amount to reinterpretations of earlier interpretations, the writing of history amounts to the adaptation of earlier histories.

This process is inevitable for all historians who do not restrict themselves to primary sources. Classic histories from Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to Burckhardt’s *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* cannot help drawing on earlier histories, not only as a source for baseline
historical facts on which everyone is presumed to agree, but for a generic sense of what counts as history and what generic norms, conventions, and protocols govern historical writing, from chronological sequence to the management of citations. Even if history were nothing more than a selection and arrangement of facts, every selection and arrangement would already promote an interpretive agenda. And every such agenda arises because it is invited by earlier agendas that it endorses, qualifies, complements, or undermines. Every historical agenda acquires its meaning, its salience, and its apparent necessity from its dialogue with other, earlier agendas that it adapts in one way or the other.

Even journalism, which has so often been called history’s first draft, depends on earlier sources and agendas. Op-ed columns and feature stories borrow from hard news in order to find, as their authors constantly claim to have found, ‘the story beneath the story.’ Hard-news stories are in ceaseless dialogue with other such stories. Sometimes these stories are drawn from the new story’s own venue, as in the echo chamber of Fox News; sometimes they are drawn from sharply conflicting venues, as when MSNBC presumes to set Fox News straight. In either case, however, they are adaptations of earlier stories that aim to develop or correct them in order to provide the definitive story that will pass as the truth for at least one news cycle. Even news stories that draw on primary sources – observations, interviews, discoveries of new evidence – are interpretations of earlier texts, from interview notes to long-undiscovered documents to photographs that have been posed or staged, like the Abu Ghraib photos Morris examines, or manipulated in processing, like Ansel Adams’s landscapes, or selected from among other possible shots of the same subject, or necessarily framed in a way that excludes some items in the visual field as less salient than others. Historians, journalists, and their audiences consider photographs conclusive evidence, as Morris points out, only to the extent that they have already committed themselves to the hypothesis the photos seem to illustrate.

In practice, historians are as dependent on secondary as on primary sources. Without demonstrating a thorough knowledge of earlier histories of women’s suffrage or World War II, no historian could possibly get a hearing among the professional peers who provide unofficial accreditation, through reviews and citations and coursebook orders, for new histories. Literary biographers, for example, are expected to display their familiarity not only with the facts of Dickens’ life, but with his novels and stories and journalism and letters, the principal commentaries on his literary output, and of course the theories about his life set forth by earlier biographers from John Forster to Peter Ackroyd. The failure
to present due evidence of familiarity with any of these earlier texts not only deprives the historian of a priceless opportunity to contextualize his or her work, but offers self-aggrandizing reviewers an opening for the sort of academic bloodletting best calculated to establish their own reputations. Even one’s own autobiographical memoirs are shaped by generic imperatives that allow them to be made publicly available, accessible, and appealing.

Hayden White’s discussion of the relation between historical annals, which simply list and date events in chronological sequence, and history as we understand it, which imputes agency and causality to events and establishes some events as more important than others, indicates the ways history is always an interpretation, even if the interpretation is limited to the proposition that ‘great crops’ constituted the most important event of 722 CE (White, 1980, p. 11). Because every history is an adaptation of earlier histories, the dream of grasping historical truth by getting back to the primary sources is chimerical if only because no texts are capable of interpreting themselves, and therefore no texts are primary in the sense of not requiring interpretation. Since every history depends on earlier histories, all history, like it or not, is historiography.

Consider one example: the students in my graduate seminars in literary theory who thought they would get greater clarity from reading Lacan instead of commentaries on Lacan were the same students who begged me for a glossary of Bakhtinian terminology so that they could read Bakhtin without getting confused by funny-sounding words like ‘heteroglossia’ and ‘dialogized.’ When it became clear that they saw no contradiction between regarding secondary sources as necessary clarifications and as unfortunate obfuscations, I reminded them of the story with which Stendhal opens *The Charterhouse of Parma* (2000): Fabrice del Dongo, sent off to war, rides from one place in an enormous, vaguely defined battlefield to another with no sense of how the different skirmishes he sees are related, what the larger military goals are, or even sometimes who is fighting whom – only to have his author pull back, at the very end of his misadventures, to identify the battle in which he has been participating in such a clueless fashion as Waterloo. Stendhal’s comic, ironic skepticism of eyewitness testimony, shared in a different register by police officers around the world, eviscerates the assumption that primary, untextualized sources are most reliable because they have not been subject to the encrustations of interpretation.

Some kinds of knowledge thus seem to thrive on intimacy, others on critical distance. But no one kind of knowledge is complete in itself, and no one can pursue every kind of knowledge simultaneously. Just as
eyewitness testimony has its place in history, so do news stories based on interviews with witnesses, commentaries based on news stories, studies of current events that cite those commentaries, and histories that place those studies in broader contexts. Many of the essays in this book, devoted as it is to the highly abstract topic of the politics of adaptation, demonstrate in substantial detail that all histories are interpretations of earlier histories, that there is no such thing as uninterpreted or preinterpreted history, and that every history, and history as such, must therefore be considered adaptation.

The proposition that history is adaptation is hardly an original idea of mine. Indeed, an entire volume of essays on the topic, *The Adaptation of History: Essays on Ways of Telling the Truth*, has recently been published. After borrowing Alun Munslow’s (2012) distinction between ‘interpretive’ and ‘adaptive’ approaches to history, Defne Ersin Tutan and Laurence Raw, who co-edited the collection, break with Munslow in order to propose an altogether bolder view of history as adaptation:

Rather than engaging in debates about the way history should be approached (either adaptively or interpretively), all historical documents should be treated as adaptations... This view of history-as-adaptation values individuals as creative talents who not only come to terms with the world around them, but possess the capacity to transform that world through experimental behavior ... The major advantage of this approach lies in the way it democratizes the process of creating history. Narrating the past is, thus, no longer the preserve of the professional historian; everyone – filmmakers, novelists, sociologists, as well as those recounting their lives to an interviewer – participates on a level playing-field as witnesses to the past and how it relates to the present or future. (Raw and Tutan, 2013, pp. 10, 11, 12)

To democratize history by thinking of history as adaptation would amount to a seismic shift in the politics of both adaptation and history. Instead of recapitulating the persuasive case Tutan and Raw make for history as adaptation, this chapter will consider some of the leading implications of their proposition.

The most obvious of these implications involves the nature of history. If all history is adaptation, then the skepticism about primary evidence shared by police departments and French novelists leads to a deeper skepticism that there is even such a thing as primary evidence, since evidence counts as evidence only when it has been framed as such. Moreover, to frame facts as evidence, or even as facts, is already to adapt
them to an historical way of thinking. Instead of uncritically prizing primary evidence above secondary and tertiary evidence, we would be well advised to broaden the questions of what counts as the best evidence, how to deal with the fact that the best evidence can always be overridden by better evidence that may take the form of conceptually powerful new explanatory theories as well as new factual discoveries, and whether such theories can come as persuasively from the hypotheses embedded in fiction as from history.

We should also acknowledge that the goal of academic historians is not to tell the truth, but to get a hearing: to get their essays and books published, distributed, and widely discussed, and if possible to reset the terms of the professional conversation. Similarly, the goal shared by the authors of American history textbooks, for example, is not to tell the truth but to increase their sales by getting adopted by as many city and county and state Boards of Education as possible – a goal whose implications have been examined in searching detail by James M. Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (2008).

Considering history as adaptation reminds us at the same time of the irrelevance of fidelity as a criterion for adaptations, since no one praises a new history for being exactly like older histories. The value of each new history is determined instead by its cogency, its novelty, and its use-value: the way it answers the needs or desires of contemporary readers. In addition, thinking of history as adaptation challenges the assumption that what is preserved in successive adaptations – what adaptations seek to adapt – is the story, since it is clearly the story that changes in successive histories. Indeed, it is precisely the need, or at least the room, for new stories about the past that keeps historians in business. The facts may remain the same, but any new selection of facts, any new emphasis, any new interpretation, produces a new story, as we can readily see from considering the conflicting stories constructed by criminal prosecutors and defense attorneys. The fact that everyone who testifies in a court of law has sworn to tell the truth does not eliminate the possibility of contingent, hypothetical narratives, but in fact enables competing stories and sharpens the conflicts among them until one of them is sanctified retroactively as the truth by whatever legal ruling emerges from their duel.

To consider history as adaptation carries other implications that range far beyond the study of history. Christopher Shea, writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2012), asks whether Julian Young’s *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* plagiarizes from Curtis Cate’s *Friedrich Nietzsche* without ever considering whether certain kinds of plagiarism, or at least of wholesale adaptation, might not be inevitable.
in the writing of biography. It is hard to imagine, for example, anyone undertaking a biography of James Joyce whose starting point is not Richard Ellmann’s ground-breaking 1959 biography. Writing of Patrick McGilligan’s biography *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light*, Ken Mogg makes plain what many another reviewer has probably thought: his resentment that McGilligan ‘had scarcely given my book a glance’ (Mogg, 2012), with the implication that biographers and critics share a responsibility to consult and cite secondary sources. Instead of asking whether they ought to be adapting earlier stories of their subjects’ lives, biographers and their critics are constantly asking how closely they are allowed to stick to earlier lives, how much freedom they have to depart from them, and why they make the adaptive choices they do – exactly the questions that have preoccupied adapters of fictional stories.

Nor are history and biography the only modes of nonfictional writing that are clearly rooted in adaptation. Reviewers and other observers of language know how deeply every new dictionary is indebted to the earlier dictionaries it seeks to supplant. The furore that greeted the publication of *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1961) over 50 years ago reminds us how risky it is for dictionaries to depart too dramatically from the practices of their predecessors. Even Dr Johnson’s dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary, both of them genuinely original in their historical approach to language and its uses, depended on compiling and adapting illustrative quotations already in the historical record to new uses.

Indeed, one could make a strong case for the adaptive nature of experimental science. The results of experiments are recorded in lab reports or articles whose formulaic rhetorical conventions are legendary. More to the point, every scientific hypothesis is modeled on earlier hypotheses, and the experiments designed to test each hypothesis are adaptations of earlier experiments. A typical experiment in chemistry or physics that frames its inquiry by controlling all variables except for a very limited range and then examines the effects of that small set of variables is building adaptation directly into its own structure. More clearly than any other kind of intellectual inquiry, experimental science reveals the vital role of genre in the design, testing, and reporting of the hypotheses that advance human knowledge.

It may well be that all scholarship, from the linguistic research that goes into the compilation of dictionaries to the design of experiments in biology and physics, is adaptive. Certainly Newton’s observation that his success in pursuing his own work depended on the fact that he stood on the shoulders of giants – itself an adaptation of an earlier aphorism,
as Robert K. Merton (1985) has shown – suggests that the goal of all scholarship, which takes off from and feeds back into a series of disciplinary dialogues, is to adapt earlier scholarship for an audience enlightened or burdened by new requirements or new information that make adaptation preferable to repetition. No wonder that Kamilla Elliott has recently explored the ways that ‘adaptations require theories to adapt to them’ (Elliott, 2013, pp. 20–21), taking the adaptive processes of adaptation scholars as both her subject and her object.

The line of argument I have been following inevitably raises the question whether all nonfiction, along with all fiction, is best seen as adaptation. Instead of pressing this question, I would prefer to invert its hypothesis and ask what it means to categorize a given pronouncement or work as nonfiction. For the purposes of librarians and other cataloguers, there is clearly such a thing as nonfiction; it is whatever goes in the room opposite from fiction. But nonfiction is a genre that makes sense only when it has been retrospectively constructed. Authors set out to write history or biography or philosophy or science; their work adapts the protocols of specific nonfictional genres, not the genre of nonfiction itself, whose sole presumed generic imperative – *don’t write anything that isn’t true* – would be of little help in establishing the authority of any text or locating it within a universe of earlier texts. For practicing authors, nonfiction is not a useful, or even a practical, generic choice; it is not a genre in which anyone consciously works. Generalizations about ‘all nonfiction’ are therefore suspect whatever their premises are.

Let me end this chapter with three postscripts that tie the implications of my argument back to the politics of adaptation. The first of them is raised by* The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012), a curious book that takes its shape from a running argument between its co-authors or competitors, journalist John D’Agata and fact-checker Jim Fingal, about the responsibilities of journalism – in particular, in relation to ‘What Happens There,’ a profile of life and death in Las Vegas D’Agata wrote – to factual accuracy. Fingal, the intern who was assigned to check the article’s facts for the magazine *The Believer* after it was rejected by *Harper’s* because of concerns over its factual inaccuracy, maintains:

> I, the hypothetical reader, am putting my trust in you to give me the straight dope, or at least to make some effort to warn me whenever you’re saying something that is patently untrue, even if it’s untrue for ‘artistic reasons.’ I mean, what exactly gives you the authority to introduce half-baked legend as fact and sidestep questions of facticity? (D’Agata and Fingal, 2012, p. 92)
D’Agata, arguing that the article should be considered an essay rather than nonfiction, maintains that ‘the facts that are being employed here aren’t meant to function baldly as “facts.” The work that they’re doing is more image-based than informational’ (D’Agata and Fingal, 2012, p. 17). To translate their argument into the politics of adaptation: should readers of history and other nonfiction be more concerned about the truth claims of what is adapted, as Fingal claims, or about the artistic appreciation and analysis of how it is adapted, as D’Agata insists?

This question is of great importance for historians and adaptation scholars alike, for it leads to a second observation that is pivotal. Despite the commonsensical appeal of Fingal’s defense of factual accuracy against D’Agata, whom Gideon Lewis-Kraus (2012) has called ‘a nonfiction fabulist’ (Lewis-Kraus, 2012, p. 45), it seems inescapable that whether or not history is written as adaptation, it will be consumed as adaptation by readers who approach it through the generic lens of earlier histories, and whose experience and expertise are measured precisely by the extent to which they can read all history as adaptation. Considering the analogies between adaptation and history, Clare Foster concludes that

the paradox of adaptation is not only similar to, but part of paradoxical claims that [historical] accuracy is both important and not, or that their adaptation of history is partially ‘true.’ The paradoxes are part of each other, not only in terms of the hagiography of a notional original, but in terms of an implicit address to multiple – and often contradictory – audiences. For if we accept that adaptation connotes the simultaneous co-presence of two texts (in unequal relationship), then these also imply the simultaneous co-presence of two audiences (in implicitly unequal relationship): those who recognize something of the source text being alluded to; and those who have no knowledge of it. (Foster, 2013, p. 123)

Given the unequal status of historians and non-historians, readers and viewers who know something of a given adaptation’s sources and readers and viewers who do not, the question behind Susan Bordo’s title ‘When Fictionalized Facts Matter’ could be more usefully recast in terms more general and more pointed: Why do fictionalized facts matter? When don’t they matter? How – in which generic contexts, with what force and which implications – do they matter? These are potent questions for both historians and adaptationists.

Finally, I must acknowledge the ultimate question that my very brief analysis of history as adaptation raises, a question that has become increasingly urgent for adaptation studies as its range and ambition have grown. If history and experimental science are shaped by adaptation, if genre itself is a mode of adaptation, then what, to recycle a question I
have already pressed into service as the title of an earlier essay, isn’t an adaptation – or, to be more precise, what is the use of a critical term that is so broad that it includes every imaginable utterance? If everything is an adaptation, what is the point of labeling anything as an adaptation?

These are hard questions, but they need not lead to critical paralysis. After all, labeling every human utterance a communication or an expression does not prevent us from making many more useful observations about different utterances. If we decided, to use the most reductive scenario, that every text were an adaptation, we would be well advised to shift from defining adaptations in exclusionary terms that attempted to distinguish them from non-adaptations to examining more closely how they work through a combination of familiarity and novelty. It would make sense, under this hypothesis, to adopt a generic approach to adaptation, treating adaptation, as I have suggested elsewhere, as a genre, and focusing on how the different genres through which adaptation worked, from ritual tragedy to lab reports, inflected its practice. And we could turn, as Kamilla Elliott has done, to a meta-study of the practice of adaptation experts and other observers, asking, if all texts are adaptations, why some texts but not others have been institutionally treated, and continue to be treated, as adaptations. If we considered all textual production, even life itself, to be radically adaptive, there would still be plenty of work for a more generously conceived study of adaptation without losing its primary focus on why and how texts, and perhaps things that aren’t texts, change.

All of these developments would require us to treat adaptation more seriously as a genre or quasi-genre or meta-genre. So I conclude by echoing but changing Dudley Andrew’s famous formulation about the sociology of adaptation (Andrew, 1984, p. 104): it is time for adaptation studies to take a generic turn. With due apologies for my lack of originality, I would suggest that echoing-but-changing is exactly what all adaptation scholars, and all scholars, and even all lesser organisms do.

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