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## Introduction

In a collection published in 1936, Seymour Stem rants about the mechanical and infantilising process of screen adaptation in Hollywood: 'It means the reduction of every story to the lowest level of human intelligence, the assimilation of every idea to the spirit and grain of the universal Average Man.'<sup>1</sup> Advocates of adaptation studies have been contesting this view since the beginning of cinema, and only recently are there signs that the argument is beginning to be won. This volume attempts to pursue some of the reasons why literary adaptations on film and television have been so despised by critics; framing the subject is indeed difficult, but we've tried to strike a mean between a seemingly haphazard collection of case studies and a semi-deceitful promise that this volume offers a comprehensive, coherent and systematic overview of an area that just refuses to be pinned down.

Among the many dilemmas within the field is with what to call it. This book began with the working title of *Literature on Screen*, a logical extension of our recent collection of essays under that theme<sup>2</sup> and a testimony to the way our work has been nourished by the UK-based Association of Literature on Screen, established in 2006 and looking forward to its fifth annual conference in 2010. While the use of both 'literature' and 'screen' did, in our view, move us beyond the novel/film nexus to incorporate literature such as popular fiction, poetry, theatre, memoirs, and essays and screen to embrace television and video screens as well as films, 'adaptation' helpfully focuses on the process of exchange first and the concern with narrative form second. By popular consent in 2008 the Association of Literature on Screen became the Association of Adaptation Studies and with two eminent critics, Linda Hutcheon and Thomas Leitch, using the term 'adaptation' in their own recent monographs, perhaps the area is beginning to settle under a banner which can contain multitudes, and denies either 'literature' or 'film' unwelcome primacy. It would be impossible to do such a 'field' justice in a single book, and perhaps the time for attempting such a task is, thankfully, over. Instead, in this volume we are concerned with consolidating our own inquiries in the area, reflecting on the newest developments in the field and sharing some of our explorations and

interests, using a range of examples which, we hope, illustrate much wider points.

It is ten years since, in our 1999 publication *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, Imelda Whelehan attempted a critical overview in 'Adaptation: The Contemporary Dilemmas';<sup>3</sup> in this volume we begin with a chapter which negotiates some of the issues crucial today, and mark out the changing boundaries of this constantly remapped critical terrain. The second chapter takes in the first half of the twentieth century in its historical sweep, reflecting on what filmmakers and film enthusiasts have to say about adaptations at a time when film was struggling to stake its own aesthetic claims. The third chapter looks at adaptations from a literary vantage and can be twinned with chapter 2 as it uncovers some of the reasons why it is not until around the turn of the last century that literature on screen begins to receive sustained critical attention and become a discipline in its own right. These two chapters also serve to lay out the key reasons why the development of adaptations studies as a critical approach which can make substantial theoretical challenges and contributions to contemporary film, media and literary scholarship has taken so long.

Champions of film, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, saw the adaptation as 'impure cinema' and resented the dependency of film on literature, especially during the period in which film was struggling to be regarded as an art form in its own right (or 'the new literature'). Such critics bear out Kamilla Elliott's claim that the war between literature and film springs from the desire for both to achieve 'purity' – film as the guardian of the image and novel as the guardian of the word.<sup>4</sup> Writers and literary critics considered film adaptations as abominations, crude usurpations of literary masterpieces that threatened both literacy and the book itself. Virginia Woolf, in her essay 'The Cinema', saw films as degrading, with readers being replaced with 'savages of the twentieth century watching the pictures';<sup>5</sup> similarly, the inaugural volume of *Scrutiny* (1932) included an essay on cinema by William Hunter entitled 'The Art-Form of Democracy?' in which he reflected on how films, in particular, narrative films, target the lowest possible denominator. Adaptations, especially, were regarded as 'the new opium', unworthy of mention in such a journal as *Scrutiny*, and were effectively banned from literary studies from 1932 onwards.<sup>6</sup>

Here the pervasive view of the cinema audience as hopelessly passive and indiscriminating takes hold of high cultural criticism and so literary critics seek to reassure themselves that nothing can unseat literature. Needless to say, there were a number of film adaptations,

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as there are today, that were indeed poor and deserved the bad press, but actually most of these judgements appear to be constructed with little reference to any serious consideration of film. Moreover, most of the criticism, until the twenty-first century, was woefully predictable, judging an adaptation's merit by its closeness to its literary source or, even more vaguely, 'the spirit' of the book. Literature maintained its mystique as a solitary art unimpeded by the evils of commerce in such critical appraisal, even though this was a myth and enabled the perpetuation of the unexamined notion that money and art cannot mix. Furthermore, while adaptations were continually judged as effective or not, 'copies' of a transcendent original, they could only be a pale etiolated version of something distilled into a more 'palatable' form in face of the continued logocentric belief that words come first.<sup>7</sup> In this light adaptations can only be read as 'appropriation' and criticism has been bedevilled by emotive words such as 'violation', 'vulgarization' and 'betrayal', all emphasising what has been lost rather than what has been gained, and suggesting the forceful robbing of innocence from the pure literary text.

For many the study of adaptations has been restricted to a key focus on canonical texts, giving the screen adaptation a very difficult act to follow. Adaptations that have usurped their 'originals' in the minds of their audience – films like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *To Have and Have Not* (1944) or *Mary Poppins* (1964) – have failed to receive critical attention as adaptations. 'Bad adaptations' receive more coverage than 'good' ones, partly because they fulfil the prophecies of those who wish to see only artlessness in such a process and because there is little interest in the fate of the popular or middlebrow in writing on screen. Robert Stam identifies several sources of hostility to adaptation which he enumerates in the landmark essay which introduces the collection, *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (2005): the aesthetic prioritising of literature, the assumption (which has to some extent become a reality in critical approaches to adaptation) that there is a rivalry between literature and film, the prejudice against the 'embodiedness' of the visual image, the uncontested belief in the value of words, 'the myth of facility' (the conviction that films are easy to make and watch), accompanied by class prejudice, that film appeals to the masses rather than to a cultured elite (and that this is a bad thing), and a conviction that adaptations immorally live off and drain 'the spirit' of their literary sources.<sup>8</sup> To varying extents, these mindsets dogged adaptation studies over the last century, and in failing to cast all or some of these largely

unacknowledged prejudices off, adaptations scholars were in many cases their own worst enemies.

The latter part of the book considers selected adaptations through the contexts of authorship (Chapter 4), appropriation (Chapter 4), reception (Chapter 5), intertextuality (Chapter 5), genrification, genre (Chapters 6 and 7) and the phenomenon of the multiple adaptation (Chapter 8), where a number of films return to the same text to 'violate' it repeatedly with some striking accumulative effects. Although it is tempting to boast that this book can offer an 'overview', this would be overambitious, not to say impossible to achieve. Fortunately the time has passed when one critic can possess the subject knowledge to claim the power of overview: while our strengths in literary and film studies are complemented by our interest in the cultural industries, the law, video game technology and new media, we would not pretend to be able to intervene in these growth areas in any profound or sustained way at present. If anything, this book is our acknowledgement that the field of adaptations extends beyond our current scope; long may it continue to extend and confound our expectations, challenging the comforts of disciplinary integrity.

We have had the privilege of working and publishing in the field of adaptations studies since the mid-1990s and of sharing with and profiting from the ideas, perspectives and positions put forward by an increasingly formidable group of adaptation theoreticians. A number of these same writers have been responsible for landmark shifts in the available responses to adaptations. Brian McFarlane's reading of adaptations through a narratological framework exhorted readers to examine and codify the narrative strategies of literature on screen – a fine antidote to the strategy of bemoaning what's missing from a film of a book. McFarlane's engagement with narrative voice and its filmic replacement (the camera eye for the 'I') and the ways in which voice is translated into extra-cinematic codes has been taken on board by a number of scholars, most notably Robert Stam who, introducing his co-edited collection, *Literature and Film* (2005, with Alessandra Raengo), reiterates the significance of narratology for 'analysing certain formal aspects of film adaptations'<sup>9</sup> even while he emphasises the additional importance of context, whether that be historical, social or academic.

A variety of approaches can be utilised when reflecting on different adaptations of a single literary text; here we've chosen adaptations of Louisa May Alcott's nineteenth-century novels, *Little Women* and *Good Wives*. McFarlane's deployment of narratological codes, of

course, in common with Barthes's undertaking in *S/Z* (1970) extends from the formal to the contextual, and this can be demonstrated under the category of 'visual codes' by looking at the opening credits of the 1933 film of *Little Women* which are seen against a painting of the author, Louisa May Alcott's own home, Orchard House, in a snowy landscape framed by trees, with a woman in the left-hand corner, seen from behind, approaching the door. The effect is to draw you into the warmth of the home, symbolic of family and comfort. This is taken a stage further in the opening credits of the 1949 film which are set against an embroidered picture of the four girls in a snowy landscape, which gives place to an embroidery of the Alcott homestead with a figure seen from behind, pulling a Christmas tree. Again, the picture visually draws you in and signifies domestic comforts, Christmas pleasures and family values. In the 1994 film, the *mise-en-scène* of the opening shots presents us with a sequence of traditional Christmas-card pictures: a town covered in snow, a wreath being placed on a door, the replica Orchard House in winter with a well-wrapped woman approaching, a horse-drawn carriage, a wooden fence covered in snow, and a huge Christmas tree being dragged through a snowy lane. The familiar images of 'traditional Christmases' visually guarantee the film to be heart-warming and family-centred and this example also serves to show how both subsequent film adaptations adopt similar iconography to establish the same opening mood in audiences spanning six decades.

Another way to look at the three films is in their relationship to the source text by adopting taxonomical readings. There are numerous attempts to categorize 'types' of adaptations; to name one of the least complicated, Geoffrey Wagner suggests dividing adaptations into three:

1. transposition – in which the screen version sticks closely to the literary source, with a minimum of interference
2. commentary – where the original is purposely or unwittingly altered due to the intentions of the film-maker
3. analogy – a completely different work of art which is a substantial departure from the original.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of 'liberties' taken with the novels *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, the 1933 film directed by George Cukor and the 1949 adaptation directed by Mervyn LeRoy (very similar in structure due to the fact that two of the same screenwriters were used) are what Wagner identifies as 'transpositions' of the text; while increasingly diminishing

the Christian context, the family values and the relationship of the sisters are very close to Alcott's two novels. The 1994 adaptation, with Susan Sarandon and Winona Ryder, can be regarded as a 'commentary' akin to a critical reading of the film privileging feminism; Gillian Armstrong's film uses Susan Sarandon (with film baggage from the likes of *The Witches of Eastwick*, 1987 and *Thelma and Louise*, 1991) to inject an overtly pro-feminist perspective on Alcott's narrative by allowing Marmie to speak out against the restrictions of women's clothing and to encourage (rather than discourage, as in the text), the ambitions of her daughters. Going further afield, you can see traces of *Little Women* in other TV sitcoms and films, which can be regarded as loose 'analogies', such as Woody Allen's *Hannah and her Sisters* (1986), which moves the focus of the story from Jo to Laurie (Allen). Using taxonomies to suggest degrees of separation between 'original' text and adaptation is as old as the field itself, of course, and categories have multiplied and diversified to the extent that in Kamilla Elliott's *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (2003) there are six approaches in evidence. The danger of posing such a model of approach is whether such taxonomies risk privileging the notion of 'closeness to origin' as the key business of adaptation studies; additionally the boundaries between the various classifications are impossible to define and an adaptation can fit into a number of categories at once. Yet the will to taxonomise is a distinctive feature of adaptation studies, which reflects more than anything its need to establish a critical perspective of its own.

Considering the films in relation to reception arguably produces more useful results and allows us to focus on the process of adaptation as a business proposition where 'property' has a clear purpose in the market place. We need to ask the question: why make a film of *Little Women* in 1933, 1949 and 1994? What do the films tell us about the period in which they are based? How do they appropriate the novels for their own political, social and economic purposes? The approach adopted here owes much to Cultural Materialist criticism, which emerged in Shakespeare and Renaissance studies in the 1980s. As John Brannigan has explained, while opposing formalist readings that divorced literature from history, cultural materialists 'scrutinized how literary texts played their part in sustaining and perpetuating conservative ideologies'.<sup>11</sup> Their interest is in both the text and its afterlife (possibly all a text has) and looking at how a text has been constructed for a particular audience is especially illuminating when there are several versions of a single narrative. At a glance, the 1933 film, starring

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Katherine Hepburn, begins with Marmie at work in a wartime refuge, offering money to a poor father who has stoically endured family losses in the Civil War. Shortages of food and clothing here surely reference the audience's own situation during the Great Depression. Made between the wars, the film doesn't shy away from its political context, whereas in 1949, there's virtually no mention of the war, and Beth's death is neither shown nor explicitly reported. The 'poverty' of the March family is ignored in this adaptation that features extravagant costumes and plush interiors of the family home. Post-war, the production valorises domesticity, minimalises the emotional effects of the loss of a child, and showcases prosperity.

In recent years it has become common practice to start from the assumption that all adaptations have more than a single source and consider how an understanding of intertextuality or what Gérard Genette, in *Palimpsestes* (1982), calls transtextuality, opens up the study of literature on screen to allow further contextual readings.<sup>12</sup> Taking Genette's 'intertextuality' (quotation or allusion to something else), it is obvious how the 1994 adaptation of *Little Women* pays homage to and borrows from the earlier films, especially in the use of Orchard House. Another example is in the closing frames of Mervyn LeRoy's 1949 film with the couple returning to the house framed by a rainbow – an intertextual reference to LeRoy's earlier film, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).<sup>13</sup>

Finally, we approach literature on screen via genre. In all three films, the narrative has been rewritten to allow the heroine to have both the (increasingly attractive) husband and a promising career as a writer, whereas Alcott's book forces Jo to make a choice: not a nice ending for Hollywood. In the novel, or at least in the penultimate chapter of *Good Wives*, the point at which all three films choose to end, the compression of 'true love' and 'authorship' is incrementally manufactured: in 1933, a rather decrepit Professor Bhaer (played by an old-looking 38-year-old Paul Lukas) proposes to Jo while surprising her with her (unnamed) book, fresh from the printers; in 1949, a much more dapper and younger-looking Professor (played by 33-year-old Rossano Brazzi) issues her with a volume entitled *My Beth*; while in 1994 the sexiest of all professors (44-year-old Gabriel Byrne) is chased by Jo after she receives from him proofs of the novel entitled *Little Women*. As we move forward in time, the films become more 'genrified' in the restructuring of the narrative in terms of the narrative strategies of romance and biopic. The latter can be seen in the explicit identification invoked between Jo and Louisa May Alcott (who emphatically

regarded professional authorship and matrimony as incompatible), with the last film commencing with the voice-over narration of Jo, the author of her own story.

Thomas Leitch has proposed considering adaptation (in particular, those that self-consciously position themselves as adaptations) as a genre in its own right<sup>14</sup> and, in a sense, any attempt to arrive at a systematic overview, like genre criticism, imposes one's own critical construct onto screen adaptation based on a culturally determined reading of its distinctive features. For a good part of a century, adaptations, while popular at the box office, have been, for literary and film critics, among the most despised forms of entertainment, often referred to as 'mixed cinema' or even more damning, 'impure' film, implying that film and literature when combined are mutually contaminating or polluting of each other. Mindful of such charges and of the impossibility of both recovering an adaptation and divorcing it from our own concerns, this book attempts to offer approaches that reverse the tendency to covertly belittle the adaptation as evidence of the cultural decline of the society in which it was produced while resisting the temptation to draw boundaries or to enforce single and reductive readings onto a field which seems to defy such containment. In the past the pursuit for purity in these two narrative forms has inhibited the growth of a more interdisciplinary celebration of the cross-fertilisations between literature and film and only adaptations theorists seem comfortable with the fact that adaptation is at the centre of the development of commercial fiction film. For some the field of adaptation studies remains too literary-focused and for others it gives unwarranted precedence to inferior films. There has been an over-entrenched concern with the differing 'industry conditions' of literature versus film and an uninterrogated assumption that we still read in the same way even while our viewing habits have changed demonstrably. Maybe it is stating the obvious, but commercial film and the numerous ways we can choose to watch it in the wake of DVD and digital technologies make it as portable and flexible as a novel; moreover, despite the admiration for literary stylistics and postmodern experimentation, people devour adaptations of realist representational novels as much as they always have.

With this in mind we offer this book as another contribution to the cluster of positions on adaptation. The book aims to offer a debate to be continued with some of the most interesting critics in the field and, more than this, attempts to provide the reader with a guide to the field itself and the subtle inflections that have marked a near-paradigm

shift in the last decade, as well as some of key positions and perspectives offered by critics since the dawning of cinema and well before the 'field' of adaptations studies had any meaning. The aim, as always, is to offer insights and debates useful to those with little knowledge in the area as much as it is directed to our colleagues whose own work, taken as a whole, reflects our increasing confidence in the space we occupy across the disciplines of literary, film and TV studies, and beyond.

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