



Introduction

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Adaptation is a terrific topic for teachers of language and literature to learn about and exploit. Students at all levels have a reservoir of tales with which they are at least vaguely familiar, from *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* to *A Christmas Carol* and *Lord of the Rings*. All children will have seen one or another well-known story in comic book form, as a puppet play, or dramatized on stage, not to mention via TV cartoons. They understand that a given story can be read, staged, visualized, and even sung. For decades teachers have used the protean quality of stories to liven up their classrooms with adaptations so as to generate enthusiasm about important works of literature and the themes and issues contained in them. And some teachers of theater or fiction have used adaptations as a way to isolate the specific properties of literature, by showing the kinds of effects impossible to achieve on film or by providing visual examples of theatrical properties (such as staging) or novelistic devices (such as point-of-view). When it comes to masterworks of theater and fiction, adaptations entice reluctant readers to experience a work in a familiar, less intimidating format. At the same time one can see how a story's greatness is a function of its powerful expression in its original medium.

Adaptation has always been a standard practice in the arts whereby a successful work is given extended and invigorated life in the body of another medium. Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Jane Austen are alive today in the many films through which recent generations have encountered them. To study adaptation might at first seem like a technical exercise whereby the powers and characteristics of the medium in which the work originally appeared (play or novel) are compared to those of its subsequent emanation. One can examine the successes and failures of any given text being adapted (*The Divine Comedy* has never met with critical or popular approval when transposed) or the quality of a particular version (did Baz Lurhman find the right formula in his 1995 *Romeo and Juliet*, compared to the celebrated Zefferelli attempt?). The abiding values of the original can be recognized in the limitations of what we experience as a kind of echo down the ages. And the powers of the medium for which it was created can be compared to the different powers of the media into which it is made to fit later on. Much can be learned from the careful side by side comparison of a prominent original and the versions it has engendered.

Our seminar proceeded through case studies that sampled a number of categories of adaptation. Some examples such as *Beauty and the Beast* gave us a chance to look at several different historical moments and cultures when this fairy tale became relevant in one way or another: in France in the late 18th century; then again in France just at the end of WWII, and in the USA in 1991 in a version that still appeals to children around the world. The fact that both films were popular and critical successes allowed us to look more deeply into the expressive properties and limitations of animation and live action spiced up with trick photography. This story's origin is not terribly important, and so later artists in many media feel justified in "borrowing" it for their own purposes and in their own style. Myths operate as part of the cultural pool, such as the story of

"Orpheus" which has been passed down but without a definitive treatment. In 1959 a French filmmaker took it upon himself to set the tale in Brazil during carnival time, producing the award winning *Black Orpheus*. On the other hand, most classic tales come very much tied to the authors who made them famous: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Don Quixote*, and *Oliver Twist*, for instance. When such masterworks are adapted, you can be sure that the relation of the new version to the original is a matter of concern, and the question of "fidelity" is on the table. This issue has come under tremendous scrutiny and it spilled into our seminar as well. It provides the reason to look intently at certain adaptations that aim to "transform" the experience of the original into a modern medium. Our clearest example of transformation was *The Innocents* made from Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* which helped us assess the powers of the both prose and cinema. Interestingly, this tale also became both a play and an opera, though we did not look into these versions. Effort spent examining "transformations" can greatly improve our (and our students') understanding of the original work and of the properties and powers of film and of verbal language to deliver a fiction. Effort spent examining "borrowings," on the other hand, leads directly to discussion of broad themes and of different cultural or historical attitudes toward those themes. Just showing a version of the "Orpheus" myth raises questions about the power of art and imagination, about death and eternity, and about jealousy. Such universal themes can be discussed on their own, but they take on a particular tone when "borrowed" by Jean Cocteau in Paris shortly after the German Occupation. Adaptation lets one study the universal and the particular, so that students can see connections between stories made with them in mind and much older or foreign versions. This is always the case with recent adaptations of Shakespeare, when Leonardo DiCaprio plays Romeo or Ethan Hawke plays Hamlet.

With the Shakespeare industry in mind, our seminar looked at processes of cultural dissemination whereby a great many books, movies, plays, and even musicals have interacted in a larger sphere governed by an economy that has its own momentum. We considered the franchising of art through Barnes and Nobles and other media conglomerates, as novels or plays become films and some films get turned into musicals. Does a work's identity get lost as it gains broad acceptance through its dispersal in different media? Does adaptation permit old forms to survive or does it distort them so much that they lose their original value?

The stakes of the question are broader than literature. "Adaptation" is the name for Darwinian processes by which species survive the changing circumstances of their environment. The word can be found in the cultural as well as the biological sphere too. Individuals, families, and large social groups adapt during the normal course of their life cycles, as when middle school children must adjust to changing classrooms, leaving the womb of their home classroom and the security of a single teacher. More dramatically, individuals and groups can be forced to adapt—or else to atrophy—when history brings them into sudden contact with an unexpected situation. Many immigrant kids probably have a hard time adapting to the brusque social mores that operate in urban schools in the U.S.

How do we feel about adaptation? The moral force of this question imposes itself whenever issues of personal or ethnic identity are at stake, as when an overly sensitive child sheds his "poetic" nature to become "one of the gang," or when the youngest members of a group that has immigrated abandons the rituals and language they were born into so as to become fully assimilated (adapted) Americans. You can sense the ambivalence of this term clearly in the culture industry when famous works are re-shaped to meet modern audiences under new conditions. And so this seminar was concerned with that values as much as the techniques of adaptation.

Being such a common practice, adaptation is an umbrella term under which all sorts of curricular units could be devised. Participants developed their individual units using the vocabulary and concepts that were tossed around the seminar table. One unit focused on contemporary avatars of the Greek hero Ulysses, first so that

students might recognize that all people, including themselves, should cultivate virtues to meet the trials that will inevitably come their way. Homer's particular way of linking these trials episodically will give these students a sense of this foundational text and how it underlies so many of our stories. Naturally topics associated with Shakespeare (and we had three of these) involve questions of fidelity. Since his plays are sacrosanct, every deviation from them suggests an important "updating" either to make the original relevant in a different context or to bring out some aspect of the original that a filmmaker wants to highlight or exploit for reasons of personal expression. Several other units involved famous novels that became even much better known thanks to adaptations that ensued. This has been true of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1898) put on famously as a radio hoax in 1938 and then made into two popular films (in 1953 and 2005). With *The Color Purple*, we have a Pulitzer Prize winning novel that became a Steven Spielberg film three years later, leading to a much discussed Broadway Musical. There is something powerful about the main themes of both the Wells and the Walker novels and about the ways they were successively adapted, drawing huge audiences on each occasion. With *Blade Runner* we have the case of a film bringing attention to an important but much overlooked 1968 novel. The differences between these two equal artworks initiate a dialogue students can follow out about crucial themes (artificial intelligence, animal rights, free will) and about the power of books and films. Some units combine a great deal of contextual material alongside works of literature and film. One aims to expose students in Spanish classes to masterpieces of literature that open onto cultural questions about Spain and Latin America. Another takes its point of departure from the 1961 film *A Raisin in the Sun* to explore the landmark play written by Lorraine Hansberry, and through it, the history of social change and social outrage involving African Americans in northern cities. One unit looks at the general situation of entertainment culture in America, particularly animated films, to help students understand where their values come from. Like all the units, but more directly, it aims to give students tools with which to watch films critically.

And this was surely a chief value of studying adaptation. We all come away better able to understand how films make meaning and, because of this, we can see just what kind of significance a story holds for the person or culture adapting it. This leads to a far greater understanding and appreciation for the work's original composition and situation. Teachers may be enthusiastic or appalled by the promiscuity of adaptation, by the way it so often tries to entice the public through a seductively youthful look, the product of media cosmetics. Yet in parading famous literature, adaptations provide an extraordinary opportunity to observe the entire mechanism of culture at work, including the significance of these works and the cultural operations of the media in which they appear.

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