

BOOKS IN MOTION. ADAPTATION, INTERTEXTUALITY, AUTHORSHIP

Mireia Aragay (ed.)

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Many things have changed in the studies of film adaptation since the 1950s, when the notion of fidelity was presented as the main criterion for measuring the success of a book's "translation" into film. As Mireia Aragay shows in her introduction to *Books in Motion*, this view was finally debunked in the 1990s when the binary opposition between "original" and "copy" was finally replaced with more fluid concepts of intertextuality and dialogism, allowing for a freer dialogue between both media. *Books in Motion* is clearly inscribed within this trend, supporting the ideas of recent criticism on film adaptation which sees this practice as a form of "intertextual dialogism" (25) and proposes a "reciprocally transformative model" (30) between literature and film.

Yet, in spite of most critics' agreement on the unsuitability of the fidelity criterion for measuring the quality of film versions of written texts, it is striking how this debate, far from waning in importance, still constitutes the core of most research on contemporary film adaptation, including Aragay's compilation. Even though the book's subtitle is "Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship", it might as well be called "The Fidelity Debate", since most contributors to the volume reflect at some point on this question, making it at times the central thesis of their chapters. Although tackled from different (and sometimes, very original) perspectives, the notion of fidelity constitutes a recurrent issue throughout the book, thus becoming its main unifying principle.

Of course, this concern with fidelity is not inappropriate in a compilation which deals with the relationship between literature and film. What catches the reader's attention is the book's insistence on the issue despite critical agreement on the shortcomings of the fidelity criterion and the inappropriateness of pursuing this debate further: if this is such an outdated concept, why do the contributors to the volume go back to it over and over only to reach the same conclusion? This may be an indication that, despite claims to the contrary, the fidelity debate is far from exhausted. In the end, the general conclusion that can be drawn from this compilation may be better summarized by a quotation of Robert Stam's which is frequently cited by the contributors of *Books in Motion*: "Film adaptations [...] are caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation and transmutation, with no clear point of origin" (2000: 66).

In an effort to organize the authors' contributions, *Books in Motion* is divided into four sections which sometimes feel somewhat arbitrary, since the inevitable disparity between many of these chapters make it very difficult to turn them into a coherent, well-integrated whole. The first section, "Paradoxes of Fidelity", tackles head-on with the issue of faithfulness to the source text and its interest lies in its will to take this debate further. In fact, it is taken so far that traditional notions of fidelity are radically reversed by Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan's chapter on *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001) and John Style's article on *A Tale of Two Cities* (1958). These authors propose quite daring (though sometimes problematic) positions in arguing that a film's excess of attention to the original may undermine its quality, as is the case of *Harry Potter*, or that a film may be more faithful to the "original" than the original text itself, as Style suggests. Less polemical but equally original is Sara Martin's chapter on Peter Kosminsky's *Wuthering Heights* (1992), which throws light upon an aspect of film adaptation largely forgotten by critics, namely, the adaptation of character, which is usually subordinated to a preoccupation with the successful adaptation of plot.

The focus of "Authors, Auteurs, Adaptation", the next section of the book, is on the connection that is established between auteurism and contemporary notions of film adaptation, such as the lack of reverence towards the original and the non-hierarchical relationship between literature and art. These new views in the field of adaptation enable the "birth" of a new kind of auteur: a decentred author, exemplified in this volume by Doris Dörrie. Margaret McCarthy's study of her authorial figure contains a paradox: Dörrie's double condition as writer and filmmaker render her an interesting figure in the contemporary panorama of adaptation studies, but McCarthy's analysis pays too much attention to her work and too little to the specific issue of film adaptation. Current adaptation theory's disregard for faithfulness to the original is also tackled by Karen Diehl's article,

which cleverly links notions of adaptation and auteurism by analysing the meaning of authorial appearances in *Le temps retrouvé* (1999), *Shakespeare in love* (1999), *The Hours* (2002) and *Adaptation* (2002). This revival of the author seems to place him/her as origin and master of his/her writing, but it can also have the opposite effect: depending on the film's use of authorial narrative techniques the author may be presented as a disempowered figure. Since being faithful to a text implies fidelity to its author (Diehl 2005: 103), these films' critique of the authorial figure as immutable origin and unifying principle of the text means a questioning of the need to be faithful to that text. Lastly, the figure of the auteur in connection with adaptation is further explored by Thomas Leitch, who wonders why some adapters remain metteurs-en-scène while others like Hitchcock, Kubrick or Disney achieve the status of auteurs. There are several reasons for this but Leitch highlights the creation of a public persona capable of being turned into a recognizable trademark as the indispensable factor in the achievement of auteur status.¹

In spite of the third part's title, "Contexts, Intertexts, Adaptation", the first two chapters could have been included in the section on fidelity. Manuel Barbeito's article constitutes a detailed analysis of John Houston's adaptation of Joyce's *The Dead* (1987), tracing the differences between literary and filmic text and focusing on the illuminating power of these differences, which he analyses lucidly. Lindiwe Dovey's article also deals with the fidelity debate, and her chapter constitutes a very valuable contribution because it widens the book's perspective by paying attention to non-western literature and film. Her analysis of *Fools* (1997) suggests that the mechanisms of fidelity work differently in a continent marked by a traumatic history, since "unfaithfulness" to the original text has a different meaning in the case of African adaptations, in this case a political function.

The next two chapters are more in sync with the title: dealing with filmic versions of Shakespeare and Jane Austen's works, two of the most frequently adapted authors of all time, these articles explore the complex intertextual network built around them and suggest that the absorption of the originals into this dialogic web of intertextuality necessarily casts a new light upon the source texts. José Ángel García Landa deals with film adaptations of *Henry V* and Mireia Aragay and Gemma López tackle two versions of *Pride and Prejudice*: the mini-series for the BBC and the *Bridget Jones* films and books. What both articles have in common is the foregrounding of the complexity of these authors' situation, which goes beyond the usual relationship between original and adaptation because of the great amount of cultural baggage they carry with them. Ultimately, both articles argue in favour of "interpretative" film adaptations and a non-hierarchical relationship between discourses.

Two of the three articles in the last section, "Beyond Adaptation", deal *again* with fidelity. Celestino Deleyto's chapter on *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and *High*

Fidelity (2000) constitutes a remarkable exception in this respect, since it is one of the very few chapters in the book which leaves aside questions of fidelity in order to focus on a yet unexplored aspect of the relationship between film and literature: the figure of the narrator. Deleyto's approach finally shows that there is more to film adaptation than the fidelity debate. The inclusion of more articles like this one (concerned with different or unusual aspects of adaptation other than fidelity) would have enriched the scope of this volume considerably, throwing light upon less hackneyed issues. This does not mean, of course, that the rest of the authors' approaches are unoriginal. Belén Vidal, for instance, introduces for the first time in the book a feminist perspective by dismissing traditional notions of fidelity in favour of a dialogic reading of the past which allows the inscription of present-day feminist consciousness into nineteenth century narratives. With this purpose she examines *Mansfield Park* (1999) and *The Governess* (1998), a film based on an original script, which feels a little inappropriate for analysis in a book about film adaptation.

Lastly, Pedro Javier Pardo García's article also deals with issues of fidelity and intertextuality but it constitutes one of the most interesting chapters in this compilation, not only because of his brilliant analysis of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994) but, more importantly, because his is the most extensive and lucid contribution to the thesis supported by most of the chapters but only tackled in detail by a few: that present-day adaptation should be redefined as cultural intertextuality. His ideas are all the more convincing as they are conveniently borne out by textual evidence, since this article shows how Kenneth Branagh's film adapts the myth of Frankenstein as much as it does the original book, which has become just one more version of the myth. The conclusions he draws about film adaptation may well serve as general conclusions for the whole volume, since most contributors seem to agree on the need to replace the concept of fidelity with that of intertextuality. This "replacement" deviates from traditional ideas about film adaptation in three main aspects: firstly, reproduction of the original source is given as much importance as transformation and interpretation; secondly, the cultural context in which adaptation originates (including the strategies of adaptation active in that system) is taken into account; and lastly, the intertextual network is widened in order to include not only previous film versions of the original text but also other discourses within the cultural context. All these propositions allow for a more accurate (and realistic) account of contemporary practices of film adaptation which do not involve a straightforward relationship between original and adaptation but a much more complex interplay of sources best defined by the concept of intertextuality.

Even though *Books in Motion* could have widened its scope by including articles dealing with a greater variety of topics (for instance, it could have devoted a chapter

to exploring how texts are adapted cross-culturally), its consideration of popular culture texts instead of an exclusive focus on canonical works, and its keeping up to date with the latest theories of film adaptation make it a very valuable contribution to this critical field of study. A field which is by no means exhausted since, as *Books in Motion* shows, general critical agreement on the death of the fidelity criterion does not mean the death of the debate, which seems to be alive and well... if only to be reversed.

Notes

¹. Even though it is not explicitly mentioned by Leitch, his view of what constitutes auteurism nowadays is closely connected with Timothy Corrigan's, who defends the reduction of the contemporary auteur to a mere commercial strategy, a brand name dependent on the filmmaker's public persona (1991).

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Works cited

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