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On the Appreciation of Cinematic Adaptations

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Abstract

This article explores basic constraints on the nature and appreciation of cinematic adaptations. An adaptation, it is argued, is a work that has been intentionally based on a source work and that faithfully and overtly imitates many of this source's characteristic features, while diverging from it in other respects. Comparisons between an adaptation and its source(s) are essential to the appreciation of adaptations as such. In spite of many adaptation theorists' claims to the contrary, some of the comparisons essential to the appreciation of adaptations as such pertain to various kinds of fidelity and to the ways in which similar types of artistic goals and problems are taken up in an adaptation and its source(s).

Keywords

adaptation, aesthetic experience, appreciation, comparisons, evaluation, fidelity, film and literature, Jean Mitry, The Count of Monte-Cristo, Fellini-Satyricon, The Human Stain, The Remains of the Day, Tess, Vanity Fair

To appreciate a work of art is, at least in part, to assess it as an artistic accomplishment. As various artistic and aesthetic properties of a work can only be determined in relation to the artistic category to which a work belongs, assessments of a work as an artistic accomplishment require knowledge of this category.¹ Informed evaluative judgments of a work also rest on such knowledge. To appreciate a comedy, for example, one must recognize it as a comedy and know something about the standard features of comedies; someone who assesses a comedy as a horror film is likely to draw the wrong conclusions, complaining, say, that there were no frightening or gruesome moments in the film. This article explores the implications of this basic insight for the appreciation of cinematic adaptations. My task here is conceptual spadework, not historical analysis. I do not attempt a survey of the sprawling literature on adaptation, although I do square off against what I take to be some of its salient confusions. My central question is this: What are some of the fundamental constraints on the appreciation of cinematic adaptation?

Which Films Are Adaptations?

Uncontroversial examples of films aptly designated by the term 'adaptation' include *Tess*, *The Human Stain*, *Fellini-Satyricon*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *The Remains of the Day*. What do these rather different works have in common, and what makes them jointly different from works

that no one would be warranted to classify as adaptations? My answer to these questions emerges from a careful consideration of some relevant contrast cases. Consider first a film and a novel that have very similar plots and characterizations. If the makers of this film were perfectly oblivious to the existence of the novel, the film should not be counted as an adaptation. Yet if they were aware of the novel and had effectively designed the film as an overt imitation of this model, then the result would rightly be classified as an adaptation. Suppose, now, that the novel the filmmakers were intent on adapting was, unbeknownst to them, itself an adaptation of an earlier work. As it would be misleading to say, that in adapting the one novel, the filmmakers were unwittingly making an adaptation of that novel's source, it can be concluded that the adaptation relation is intransitive (just as it is non-reflexive). Adaptations are similar to translations in this respect: although a translation of a translation can inform someone about the contents of the source, it is not responsibly presented as a translation of that source.

It follows from these observations that being an adaptation is not a property or feature of a completed audio-visual display (or 'filmic text', for those who find that term appropriate) taken as a kind of detached item. Instead, a work's status as an adaptation is a relational property of the audio-visual display, where the relations in question involve contextual and historical factors, including the intentions and beliefs of the filmmakers.

With this point in mind, I propose that a cinematic adaptation is a film intentionally and overtly based on at least one, specific anterior work (normally, but not necessarily, a literary or cinematic work). For a work to be an adaptation, many of the distinguishing and characteristic features of this source, such as the title, setting, main characters, and central elements of the plot, must be expressly adopted and imitated in the new work. As adaptations are distinct from mere copies or reproductions, they must also be intentionally made to diverge from the source in crucial respects, and their purpose is not to function as a mere surrogate or stand-in for the source (as when we show students a reproduction of a picture because we cannot take them to the Uffizi). Yet in the absence of an imitative carrying over of many characteristic and distinguishing properties of the source, a work falls outside of the category of adaptations.

According to this proposal, the term 'adaptation' names a vague concept, if only because there is no precise determination regarding the number and kinds of features that must be taken over from the source if a work is to be an adaptation and not merely a work loosely inspired by an anterior work. Vagueness does not, however, imply that a concept cannot be reliably applied in many cases. Whereas Ingmar Bergman was inspired by August Strindberg's *The Stronger* in the making of *Persona*, and adopted some elements of the plot and characterizations, the film is clearly not an adaptation of the dramatic work. And despite the many differences between the film and the novel, beginning with a massive discounting of Rebecca Sharp's villainy, Mira Nair's *Vanity Fair* is

an adaptation of Thackeray's book. Inept attempts at highly faithful adaptations count as adaptations, but so do at least some works that retain many core features of the source while diverging wildly and intentionally from some of its other characteristic features. I say a bit more about such cases, and the relation between adaptation and satire, below.

No doubt many spectators have greatly enjoyed cinematic adaptations while remaining oblivious to the existence of the sources. For some purposes, there is nothing wrong with this kind of enjoyment in which an adaptation is not recognized as such. Yet for other purposes—for example, if one's concern is to appreciate the film as an artistic achievement—the rules of the game change. In order to elaborate and justify this point, in the next section I identify two truisms about the appreciation of adaptations, and illustrate and support these truisms by referring to a few examples.

Two Truisms about Appreciating Adaptations

The two truisms I have in mind have to do with the appreciation of the adaptation as an artistic achievement, yet they have different strengths (in the logical sense of 'strength'). The weaker or less demanding of the two truisms holds that in some cases, optional knowledge of an adaptation's source can make a valuable contribution to the artistic appreciation of the adaptation. Simply put, this means the comparison helps us recognize the merits or demerits of the work.² The stronger, more demanding truism holds that with regard to some questions related to the appreciation of a work, comparisons between source and adaptation are not merely optional. This is the case because the appreciator who is oblivious to the source and can draw no such comparison manifests a blind spot pertaining to artistically essential features of the adaptation. More specifically, such an appreciator cannot evaluate the adaptation as an adaptation, where adaptations are understood as entailing the intentional imitation of artistic features of the source.³ To avoid confusion, I refer to the first truism, which holds that knowledge of the source is optional but sometimes of value to appreciation, as the "weak" truism. By the "strong" truism I refer to the thesis that knowledge of the source (which means knowledge that there was a source, as well as knowledge of its identity and relevant features) is necessary to a thorough, apt appreciation of an adaptation. Although some might be tempted to add that direct acquaintance with the source work is also required, I think this is too strong, as certain kinds of testimony could be sufficient.⁴

The first truism can be defended by providing examples of critical appreciation involving comparisons between the adaptation and its source, where these comparisons make a positive (but optional) contribution to the project of appreciation. Consider, for example, the filmic adaption of Philip Roth's 2000 novel, *The Human Stain*. The protagonist in the film (portrayed by Anthony Hopkins) is Oxford-trained Dean Coleman Silk, professor of Classics at a prestigious university in

Massachusetts (Figure 1). At one point in the story, Professor Silk converses with a non-academic friend, the aspiring novelist Nathan Zuckerman, who asks him the following question: “What’s the moment called in Greek tragedy, you know the one when the hero learns that everything he knows is wrong?” Without hesitation, the professor replies: “It’s called peripetio, or peripeteia, take your pick.” This glaring error, which is wholly out of character for a distinguished classicist, can be interpreted in two basic ways. Either the scriptwriter mistakenly believed that he was having the professor answer Zuckerman’s question correctly, or the scriptwriter has intentionally slipped the mistake into the professor’s dialogue in a subtle effort to undermine his reliability for that part of the audience that knows that the correct answer is anagnorisis (discovery) not peripeteia (reversals). In *The Poetics* (1927: 1450a, 17) Aristotle does, of course, yoke these two together as two of the most important elements contributing to tragedy’s emotional effects, and though he adds that the finest form of discovery is one attended by peripeties, the latter term is a misnomer for the moment when the character passes from ignorance to knowledge (1927: 1452a, 4).

Figure 1. The distinguished classicist in his office: Anthony Hopkins as Dean Coleman Silk.



It strikes me that viewers who notice this mistake in the film may be curious to know whether it is best understood as an instance of sloppy scriptwriting, or as a strange attempt to undermine the authority of a character who is otherwise characterized as an authority in his field. At least for those viewers who take an interest in the central questions raised by the film’s characterization of the classicist, a question that arises is whether there is any similar undergraduate error about *The Poetics* in the novel on which the script of the film is based. One might reason as follows: if Roth already included such a blunder in the novel, it is likely that some corresponding error in the film was meant to be taken as a revealing error on the part of the professor. In fact, there is no such thing in the novel, which may be taken as lending some support to the supposition that it is the author of the screenplay, and not the classicist, who was in a muddle about Aristotle’s terms. As it

is hard to see how it could be successfully argued that this sort of thinking about the film is completely irrelevant to the appreciation of its artistic qualities, the example supports the weak truism. It would be misleading, however, to argue that anyone who fails to notice this detail cannot have arrived at any adequate appreciation of the movie, so this example is not presented as supporting the stronger truism.

To support the strong truism about appreciation, we must identify cases where any appreciator who is blind to the nature of the source cannot adequately understand and assess some of the adaptation's important artistically relevant features, where the standard regarding what counts as adequate appreciation is not set unreasonably high. As was stated at the outset, this argument depends on a basic (and in my view well-warranted) thesis about one of the conditions on adequate appreciation: if one is successfully to arrive at an artistic evaluation of a work of art that belongs to a given artistic category, one must recognize it as belonging to that category.

Are there in fact cases where the appreciator's identification of features of the source is necessary to a successful, or at least non-defective, assessment? Imagine, for example, an interpreter of Fellini-Satyricon who somehow overlooks or remains clueless regarding the line in the credits that reads "a free adaptation of the Petronius classic." Such a viewer is either unfamiliar with the work by Petronius or somehow fails to think about how the features of Fellini's film stand in relation to those of the source. Such a viewer cannot understand that the film was intentionally given a gappy or interruptive quality in imitation of the Petronius fragment on which the script of this film was loosely based. Presumably such a viewer could notice that there are gaps in the story and that it ends quite abruptly, but the uninformed interpreter's manner of understanding or explaining these salient features of the film would be defective. Such a viewer might, for example, interpret these features as blunders and try to explain them in terms of the filmmakers' incompetence or lunacy. The upshot would be a basic incapacity to appreciate Fellini's work as an adaptation, which is not the same, by the way, as saying that apt appreciation entails any particular judgment regarding the merits of the work. One might duly take note of Fellini's various relations to his source while having any number of severe criticisms of this particular adaptation as a work of art. For example, it could be observed that the film is sensational in ways that even a Petronius might have found distasteful or astounding. Note, then, that the constraint on appreciation corresponding to the strong truism is a necessary and not a sufficient condition on appreciation

A second example that supports the strong truism involves Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and its cinematic adaptation. The novelist unfolds his tale uniquely by means of a deeply unreliable first-person narrative couched in the language of the butler James Stevens. Confronted, then, with a very skillful and successful instance of a specific kind of artistic strategy—the unreliable controlling narrator—we should ask what narrational strategy the cinematic adaptors

have opted to employ in its place. The correct answer to that question is very clearly that they have opted not to attempt any functionally equivalent species of cinematic narration. (Although the film relies on flashbacks, there is no evidence supporting an interpretation according to which what is shown and heard in these sequences is only the distorted and misleading memories of James Stevens.) The next question that arises regarding the filmmaker's narrational strategy is whether it was a good idea to eschew an attempt at some kind of properly cinematic first-person unreliability. Arguably the right response to that question is that given the notorious difficulty of bringing off any such thing in a film, Ivory et alia are to be congratulated for having sidestepped disaster and for shifting their artistic efforts to dimensions of a James Stevens characterization quite distinct from his singularly distorted manner of describing the world in which he has lived. Should one happen to believe that the only thing of any real artistic or literary interest in the Ishiguro novel is its extended deployment of first-person unreliability, one might take the filmmakers to task for attempting to adapt a "one-note" work without even making an attempt at sounding that very note. The case for such a criticism is, however, far from compelling. I shall not pursue such issues here, as what matters for my more general argument is that this is a case where an adequate appreciation of the adaptation as such requires a comparison of the source and adaptation with regard to their respective narrational strategies. More specifically, it requires a recognition of ways in which the adaptors have deliberately deviated from some of the most artistically salient features of the source. To overlook this dimension of the film is to fail to appreciate it as an adaptation

The strong truism can be supported, then, by specific examples of comparisons that are necessary to the adequate appreciation of a given adaptation as such, where such an appreciation requires an understanding of the work's most salient artistic features, including those by virtue of which it belongs to the category of adaptations. More generally, support for the truism derives from the fact that in some cases, only knowledge of the features of the source allows the appreciator to recognize artistically relevant ways in which the adaptation follows or deviates from the source, where such followings and deviations are of direct relevance to an assessment of the artistic merits and demerits of the adaptation.

What does not follow from the strong truism is the thesis that for every cinematic adaptation, and for every kind of critical approach, detailed knowledge of, and reference to the source is necessary in the sense that nothing worthwhile can be known in its absence. But given that informed comparisons are a necessary condition on successful appreciation of an adaptation as such, the practice of making informed comparisons emerges as the bestwarranted general policy with regard to the appreciation of works belonging to this category.⁵

If it is accepted that the truisms are, in fact, true, and that comparisons between sources and

adaptations are in some cases necessary to successful appreciation, a question that immediately arises is how well-informed these comparisons need to be. Sometimes we have only vague and schematic memories of a novel's stylistic features and contents while watching a film based on it. Such a situation stands in sharp contrast to one in which the appreciator can perform a detailed analysis by directly consulting the literary text in relation to features of an audio-visual display that can be re-examined via DVD playback. If the goal is just enjoyment or some kind of haphazard appreciation of the movie, analysis of the latter sort is surely unnecessary, but if a thorough and well-founded appreciation is the goal, the argumentative context is constituted by the totality of evidence relevant to the work taken as an artistic accomplishment.

Comparisons, Identity, and Fidelity

It follows from the truisms about adaptation that artistic appreciations of adaptations standardly rest on comparisons, yet more must be said about the nature and point of such comparisons. It is my impression that a lack of clarity on these issues is a significant shortcoming of the theoretical literature on adaptation, but I limit myself to briefly evoking rather than systematically documenting this point in what follows.

A first clarification is ontological, and mobilizes a standard philosophical distinction between numerical and qualitative identity.⁶ Two functionally equivalent DVD copies of Roman Polanski's *Tess* are qualitatively identical in that they are instances of the same type of product. Yet the different disks on the shelf are not numerically identical: they have separate spatio-temporal locations, and one of them could be destroyed without the others thereby ceasing to exist. Note as well that although the disks are qualitatively identical in some respects, there are other ways in which they are not qualitatively identical. For example, they are not identical with respect to the precise configuration of minute scratches visible on their surfaces. Similar routine classificatory judgments are quite common with regard to other media. Two copies of the 1912 edition of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* are numerically distinct, yet qualitatively identical qua copies of the same text, even if the pages of one of them are more worn than those of the other copy. As there are significant textual variations across editions of *Tess*, it can be accurate and important to classify copies of two of these different editions as qualitatively different items, each of which may have a number of qualitatively identical tokens.

The more general point to retain here is that while judgments about qualitative identity can be accurate or inaccurate, they are so only relative to some type, kind, or category. Numerical identity, on the other hand, requires total qualitative identity, that is, qualitative identity in all possible respects. Questions about the relation between source and adaptation do not normally have anything to do with whether the two works are numerically identical. The distinction

between numerical and qualitative identity pertains not only to works of art taken as wholes, but to artistically relevant features or properties of works. Accordingly, questions about the relation between source and adaptation do not generally have to do with whether some particular feature, F_1 , of some work, W_1 , is numerically the same as feature F_2 of work W_2 . Yet questions about qualitative sameness and difference are often cogently raised. This is a matter of asking whether some feature, F_1 , of W_1 is accurately and relevantly classifiable as belonging to the same type of feature as some F_2 of W_2 . One may wonder, for example, whether a character in a source has the same type of personality and attitudes as the character bearing the same proper name in the adaptation. If it is recognized that a sufficient degree of qualitative identity is achieved, people may be inclined to say broadly that the source and the adaptation are “the same” (the implicit qualification being: at least in this respect).

It is a Wittgensteinian commonplace that whenever we engage in comparing two different items, the interests motivating this cognitive process determine which kinds of qualitative similarities we attend to. One kind of interest could yield a comparison stressing one set of similarities (and contrastive differences), while another type of interest could prompt and orient a comparison that turns up a different set of similarities (and contrastive differences). Nor is there a single, overarching interest that makes possible something like the definitive comparison of the two items. A well-defined, piece-meal comparison could be definitive if it successfully accounted for all of the features relevant to the given perspective or interest, but it is simply not obvious that all such comparisons can be integrated into a meaningful, overall account (which is not to say that the various, interest-relative comparisons would have to be logically incompatible).

These observations may help to explain why the topic of the fidelity of an adaptation to its source is inevitable and appropriate, but also why this same topic is somehow deeply frustrating and has given rise to many criticisms and polemics in the literature on adaptation. When the question of fidelity is construed as a request for a definitive and global statement concerning an adaptation’s total or overall fidelity, a skeptical reply is warranted, because this is like asking for the comparison between some x and some y , where multiple and divergent, interest-relative comparisons between any two items are possible.⁷ Yet when the question of fidelity targets specific types of qualities or features, it may be possible to provide a well-justified and accurate response corresponding to the specific sort of interest that motivated the question in the first place.

Given the analysis of the category of adaptations sketched above, it follows that questions pertaining to fidelity are inevitable in any appreciation of adaptation as such: the very category of adaptations designates works that are meant to retain recognizable elements of a literary source. It follows that if a given adaptation is to be appreciated as a successful instance of adaptation, we should ask in what sense it has (and has not) remained faithful to the source, at least in the sense

of presenting characteristic features belonging to the same type as those of the source. It may be added that once the unrealistic ideal of numerical identity or perfect equivalence has been set aside, fidelity can be understood as raising not one, but many different possible questions about relations between source and adaptation. Broad theoretical arguments against the cogency of these questions founder when specific examples of perfectly sensible questions about the fidelity of an adaptation are raised, as I shall demonstrate in the next paragraph.

Alexandre Dumas' novel *The Count of Monte-Cristo* (1844–1846) is superficially a tale of revenge, but anyone who reads the sprawling text through to the end can observe that one of the central points made by the novelist is not that revenge is a dish best consumed cold (as the French saying would have it), but that it is a deeply mistaken and wrong way of responding to someone else's wrongdoing. Dumas is at pains to show his reader that Edmond Dantès learns to give up on his vengeful project and forgive his enemies. On this key thematic point, an adaptation of the novel can turn out to be faithful to a greater or lesser degree. A case in point is the 2002 cinematic adaptation in which the protagonist's central vengeful scheme is blunted when he learns that one of his primary targets is in fact the son he unknowingly fathered with his beloved Mercedes prior to his imprisonment (in Dumas, there is no such son). This, I take it, is an important and significant departure from the source. A man who recoils at the prospect of murdering someone because he has learned that the target is his biological offspring would be a poor representative of a moral epiphany concerning the error of violent revenge.

In this and countless other cases, specific questions about whether an adaptation is faithful to the source can be raised, and, in some instances, plausibly answered. It does not follow, of course, that all such questions are equally relevant, or that a solid answer is always within reach. Consider, for example, the question whether Polanski's adaptation of Hardy's *Tess* is faithful with regard to the characterization of Angel Clare. Given a schematic enough description of the character, a broad, affirmative answer can be defended. Polanski leaves a lot out (such as Clare's somnambulism), but what he gives us is largely compatible with Hardy's text. Yet a more fine-grained approach to the question leads to various problems. Consider the fact that a shot in Polanski's *Tess* lingers on the book on a table next to Angel Clare's bed, revealing its title to be *Capital: Capitalist Production* (Figure 2). Is this faithful to Hardy's characterization of Angel Clare? In a 1979 interview Polanski commented: "In fact, the episode of Tess finding the Marx book next to Angel's bed wasn't in the novel, though he does order a book from the village bookshop which upsets the father. Though we're never told what book it is I interpreted it as being Marx, as the period made this feasible" (Cronin 2005: 83). Polanski's interpretation of Hardy in this regard is at least logically consistent with Hardy's explicit textual indications, but there is no strong evidence supporting the conjecture that Clare was reading Karl Marx. Although there were late nineteenth-century English translations of *Das Kapital*, I have not found any evidence of one bearing the shortened subtitle

“Capitalist Production,” and suspect that Polanski had an easily legible cover of a fake edition fabricated for the purposes of the shot. In the novel, what Clare says to his father about the controversial book he has purchased reads as follows: “It is a system of philosophy. There is no more moral, or even religious work published.” To which his father replies: “Yes—moral enough; I don’t deny that. But religious!” ([1891] 1994:148). Hardy is not likely to have thought of a translation of Marx’s *Das Kapital* as the sort of moral treatise Clare would have ordered, and if he had anything particular in mind, it was probably an explicitly atheistic work in moral philosophy by John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, or Leslie Stephen (especially the latter’s 1882 *The Science of Ethics*, a likely choice given Hardy’s personal relation to Virginia Woolf’s father).⁸ Yet even if Hardy did settle on a specific title in his imagining of the novel’s content, we have no decisive evidence indicating what it was, and thus this question about the fidelity of the adaptation remains in one sense unanswerable. At the same time, however, it does seem correct to say that although Polanski may have wanted to use the hypocrisy of Angel Clare to score a point about the hated Marxists, no such motivation was likely to have animated the pen of Thomas Hardy.

Figure 2. Polanski’s conjecture about Angel Clare’s bedside reading.



In arguing that questions about fidelity are essential to the appreciation of adaptations, I am not also arguing that they can always be answered with any high degree of accuracy and certainty. Nor is it my intention to suggest that achieving some kind of fidelity is the sole point or artistic value of adaptations. Instead, what is needed is a finer-grained perspective on the kinds of fidelity that are and are not targeting by filmmakers undertaking adaptations of literary and other sources. Subcategories of adaptations can be distinguished in terms of optional artistic strategies adopted with regard to fidelity and other artistically relevant issues. For example, it is important to take note of a category of adaptations designed to flout the very idea of aiming at certain types of artistic fidelity to the source. In works in this category one kind of fidelity is achieved by intentionally retaining many core elements of the source (such as a title and obvious features of the plot), thereby making it possible to recognize the film as an adaptation. At the same time, various intentional deviations, such as a transposition to a radically different setting, are introduced with an eye to achieving certain effects, such as transgressive laughter or an ironic commentary on the

historical gap between the socio-cultural contexts in which the source and adaptation were made. An example that falls within this subcategory of adaptations is Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, which appropriates central elements of the novel by the Marquis de Sade. However, it brings them into a radically different fictional context and with quite a different polemical intent, part of which is a second-order commentary on Sade's writings and their critical legacy, especially by the French theorists whose works are listed in the "Bibliografia essenziale" shown in the opening credits: Barthes, Blanchot, De Beauvoir, Klossowski, and Sollers

Another example worth mentioning in this context is Aki Kaurismäki's sarcastic *Hamlet Goes Business* (Figure 3), which retains a number of obvious elements of the Hamlet story, but which is not meant to be taken as an attempt to provide a straightforward adaptation of Shakespeare (or any of the other historical sources). One of the points of this movie and the source of the pungent humor it expresses, would seem to be to contrast an incredibly base and ugly twentieth-century business society to the bygone worlds where tragic works were created and made sense. Adaptation, then, converges on satire and parody—a conclusion that is only troublesome if one has assumed that the genre must be lacking in divergent sub-genres. Pastiche and satire, it is true, sometimes fail to satisfy the condition whereby an adaptation is an overt imitation of a specific work, as opposed to a derisive imitation of features characteristic of a loose category or collection of works, and when this is the case, they fall outside the genre of adaptations as I have delineated it.

Comparisons and Value

Among the various comparisons that can be conducted, one salient and potentially problematic category is the global, evaluative one: Which is better, the adaptation or the source? "Why," it is often asked, "do some bad novels make great films, while many good ones get turned into bad films?"⁹ It has often been contended that there is something deeply wrong-headed about all such evaluative questions and judgments, and this even when such judgments are not driven by the notion that the only way in which an adaptation can be valuable artistically is through some kind of overarching fidelity to a source.

Figure 3. Pirkka-Pekka
 Petelius as Hamlet in
 Hamlet Goes
 Business.



On what basis might one argue for a principled rejection of evaluative comparisons between adaptations and sources? A total skepticism about evaluation as such is an option in theory, but as this is not in fact a line adopted in the literature, I will not pause to evoke and then refute it here. A more salient option would seem to be some sort of claim involving a radical axiological incommensurability. Roughly, the basic proposition could take the following form: items in category C_1 have features that give rise to and determine a corresponding type of value V_1 , that is profoundly different from V_2 , the type of value had by items in category C_2 . This profound difference is why attempts to make evaluative comparisons between the items in C_1 and C_2 fail. For example, work W_1 has great literary value, and W_2 has great cinematic value, but these are not the same kind of value, and there is no “transferring” the one to the other. Belief in such a transfer is the mistake made by the adaptation industry, and asking about its success or failure in particular cases is the corresponding error on the part of popular critics, and in some cases, academics.

One way to contest an incommensurability argument of this sort is to reject the assumptions about aesthetic and artistic value on which it is based. Although those assumptions are rarely stated or defended explicitly, they appear to involve the idea that genuine artistic value is entirely determined by and derived from the formal properties of works. Given this (controversial) assumption, along with the idea that the formal properties of works in different art forms are highly divergent, it follows that the values will also be highly divergent. Yet this argument, the various steps of which are far from obvious, is based on an excessively narrow idea of artistic and aesthetic value. Familiar criticisms can be raised against narrow types of formalism according to which considerations of content—moral content, for example—have no place in our assessment of a work of art’s value as a work of art. What is more, a broader and more viable notion of aesthetic value can be set forth as an alternative. That notion is an experiential and axiological one: aesthetic experience is a kind of experience that has a predominantly intrinsic (as opposed to instrumental) value for the subject (Livingston 2003a). For example, the spectator watches the film for the sake of

the immediate enjoyment that this experience occasions, and not only in order to bring about some extrinsic goals or objectives that might be pursued by this means. An object, such as an artwork or other artifact, is said to have aesthetic or inherent value to the extent that it is capable, under the right circumstances, of giving rise to intrinsically valuable experiences. And artistic value overlaps with this inherent value of a work because one kind of artistic value (but not the only kind!) is the capacity to give rise to aesthetic experiences.

These basic observations about aesthetic experience and aesthetic value provide a way of explaining why the values of the source and the adaptation are not strictly incommensurable: sources and adaptations can be assessed as means of giving rise to intrinsically valued experiences of a certain kind (namely, those corresponding to artistic appreciation). Note that because the qualities that allow one work to give rise to intrinsically valued experience can diverge significantly from the qualities that allow a different work to give rise to another experience that also has intrinsic value (even a similar kind of affective or cognitive value), recognition of the commensurability of value does not require us to look for a one-to-one correspondence between the features of the two works. However, when the kind of appreciation that is undertaken is an assessment of the specifically artistic qualities of the works, the intrinsically valued, aesthetic experience has certain kinds of objects, such as the skill and ingenuity manifested in the artist's accomplishment, or the artist's manner of coming up with interesting solutions to specific artistic problems or challenges. People find it intrinsically rewarding, or, in other words, aesthetically valuable, to contemplate highly skillful artistic accomplishments, such as the creation and conveying of an innovative and cleverly designed story having engaging characterizations and an emotionally stirring course of events. For those who have enjoyed an intrinsically rewarding experience of a particular work with these qualities, it is not unusual to hope that another work that draws on the same kinds of artistic features and qualities will in turn have a high degree of experiential or aesthetic value. From these premises we can derive a justifiable, properly aesthetic interest in adaptations.

It may be retorted that the sort of aesthetic and artistic comparisons I have just evoked overlook the real problem with cinematic adaptations of literary and other sources, as well as the corresponding problems with evaluative comparisons. This is the case because I have focused on issues in relation to which differences of media are inessential. Should we turn to specifically cinematic elements, we are likely to find that the evaluative comparisons evoked above prove spurious. One way to respond to this sort of complaint is to assail the very emphasis on the topic of medium specificity (Carroll 2003; see also Smith 2006). Such a response can be developed along several different lines, one highlighting the problem of accurately isolating the essences of the cinematic and other media, another challenging the over-emphasis on medium-specific contributions in overall artistic appreciations of works, and a third contending that such a

complaint is simply question-begging in a debate over the interest of trans-media adaptations. Although I believe all three lines of argumentation can be successful, in this context I explore yet another way of responding to this complaint, which is simply to propose examples that support the idea that a kind of artistic problem confronted in the making of a work in one medium can be solved in an adaptation in a different medium. The subtending assumption here is that the appreciation of such solutions, which requires evaluative comparisons between source and adaptation, is of aesthetic and artistic relevance.

My central example here is taken from Polanski's *Tess*. The point of departure is a problem faced by the author of the source. Specifically, Hardy creates a specific artistic problem for himself by introducing an episode in which Tess writes a letter to Angel Clare recounting the events in her past. She fears, with good reason, that when he learns about the rape and illegitimate birth he may change his mind about wanting to marry her. She slides the letter under his door, and when she sees him the next day and wrongly assumes that he has read the letter, she is overjoyed by what she takes to be his forgiving and loving attitude. Yet when he at no point mentions the contents of the letter, she begins to wonder whether he has actually read it, and on the morning of her wedding she finds the unread letter under the edge of the carpet at his door. Hardy's problem here is how to characterize Tess's reaction to this deeply upsetting reversal. "With a feeling of faintness she withdrew the letter. There it was—sealed up, just as it had left her hands. The mountain had not yet been removed. She could not let him read it now, the house being in full bustle of preparation; and descending to her own room she destroyed the letter there.... She was so pale when he saw her again that he felt quite anxious" ([1891] 1994: 269).

I think that it ought to be acknowledged that the novelist's solution to this particular problem is not one of his greatest moments. What the narrator has to give us here is a description of the moment when the horrible dread of losing Angel suddenly returns to Tess with all its force. Hardy's curt reference to a "feeling of faintness" hardly seems adequate. "The mountain had not yet been removed" verges on cliché and seems less than accurate, either as a report on Tess's thoughts or as an objective declaration by the narrator.

Figures 4–10. Tess
(Nastassja Kinski)
finds the unread
letter.



Polanski's solution to the analogous artistic problem is, by contrast, nothing short of brilliant (Figures 4–10). As Tess moves back from the door holding the letter, the camera shifts to capture her against the sun rising on the horizon, so that a searing flash of blinding illumination fills the frame; at the same instant, a brief, dissonant, ascending orchestral glissando underscores Tess's painful realization that she was wrong to have thought her problem solved. In her anguish, Tess clutches the letter—once her source of hope—and destroys it immediately. Polanski's genial solution of this artistic problem qualifies as a specifically cinematic device on any reasonable understanding of what counts as cinematic. Camera movement, lighting, and the sound track work perfectly together to provide a striking and inventive evocation of Tess's distressing reversal.

This example illustrates the interest of focused, source/adaptation comparisons in which issues pertaining to medium-specificity, fidelity, and artistic value combine. Taking up a specific narrative problem arising within Hardy's story, Polanski finds a wonderful cinematic solution—one that compares very favorably to the straightforward yet banal treatment given to the matter in both of the more recent audio-visual adaptations of *Tess*. While this aspect of Polanski's film does not exemplify perfect fidelity to the source—Polanski in fact diverges from and surpasses Hardy here—it does exemplify the pertinence of source/adaptation comparisons that focus on how different artists tackle the same kind of problems while using different media. Polanski's *Tess* is in many respects a great film, and part of its artistic value resides precisely in its interesting relation to Hardy's text. Although there are many differences between the stories conveyed by the novel and film, Polanski is at bottom faithful to key aspects of Hardy's tale, and, in particular, to his sympathetic perspective on Tess as a victim of the men who desire and manipulate her. How this aspect of the film should be weighed in relation to other, obvious departures from the source remains a controversial topic. If we look for a global or overall comparison, we are not likely to come up with a sharp answer, unless it is the stunning conclusion that the novel and its several cinematic adaptations are not numerically identical.¹⁰

An Unsuccessful Critique of Adaptations

Various theoreticians writing about adaptation have contended that it is an error to hold that the artistic value of the source could be somehow cashed out or carried over by an adaptation. The corresponding error among critics and spectators would be to prize adaptations for their supposed fidelity to the source.¹¹ One contention in this vein, which is sometimes presented as a knockdown argument, is the thesis that it is impossible for a film adaptation to represent the imaginings spurred by the reading of a novel (Boss and Petrie 2008: 430; McFarlane 2007). Reasonable doubts can be raised, however, about this contention. As Kristin Thompson (2007) has demonstrated in her extensively researched study of the *Lord of the Rings* adaptations, the question of fidelity was

crucial to both the making and reception of the project. Thompson convincingly argues that Peter Jackson and his team went to great lengths to try to make films that Tolkien fans would experience as being in some sense faithful to the novels. Some Tolkien fans were relentless in their critical documentation of ways in which the story conveyed by the movies diverged from the events recounted in the literary sources; others have been vociferous in their defense of the idea that the films convey an authentic version of the story. Thompson cites spectators' enthusiastic claims about the films' fidelity to the novel—claims that in some cases directly contradict the conclusions reached by many film theorists. For example, some fans praised these films for having literally “captured their own mental images of Middle-Earth” (Thompson 2007: 88).

There are, of course, other sorts of arguments against adaptations in the literature. One influential and relatively early example is Jean Mitry's contention that adaptation faces a kind of fundamental and ruinous dilemma (1965: 330–368): either be faithful to the letter of the literary text, and end up violating its spirit, or be faithful to a work's spirit while giving up on literal fidelity. Either way, the filmic “translation” betrays the original work. It may manage to illustrate many of the fictional events evoked in the novel, thereby showing some kind of fidelity to the letter or literal content of the story, but in so doing it will fail to reproduce the text's other literary qualities or its artistic spirit. Conversely, if the filmmakers opt to make a freer adaptation that successfully captures the deeper artistic character of the source, they will inevitably make changes to the story and thereby betray the letter of the text. Cinematic adaptation, Mitry concludes, is “a false problem” because the idea of a faithful cinematic translation of a literary work is “absurd.”¹²

Mitry's overall argumentative goal in this context is to establish that the literary adaptation is not a viable strategy for the making of films having great artistic value. Along the way he allows that films can provide a vivid illustration of settings and events related in a novel or play, but in so doing must leave behind other, crucial literary elements. Adaptations that do not provide this kind of faithful, vivid illustration of the story may have other virtues, such as conveying some of the fundamental ideas expressed in a novel. However, they fail to meet the standard of literal fidelity and thereby reveal the limitations of adaptation as a strategy for creating films that are artistically innovative in ways that draw upon the resources specific to the cinematic medium. Mitry traces this erroneous strategy back to early attempts to legitimate the cinema in a context where it was associated with crass and immoral popular forms of popular entertainment. By imitating legitimate theatrical works, for example, early filmmakers tried to give their products a kind of artistic warrant or, as Mitry put it, *un gage esthétique*. Yet the attempted transfer of artistic value is illusory and in fact betrays the actual artistic potential of the cinematic medium.

One problem with Mitry's discussion of our topic is that fidelity is couched, not as a matter of degree, but as an absolute; the question of fidelity is thought of as pertaining uniquely to global

assessments of a work as a whole, and not to local aims and judgments related to specific elements or aspects.¹³ This is no doubt why the several seemingly major concessions Mitry makes along the way do not appear to have counted in his mind as problems for his overall argument against adaptation. As I have already noted, Mitry allows that a film can convey many of the same ideas, events, situations, and feelings conveyed by the novelistic source.¹⁴ Although it might seem strange to belittle such accomplishments (some viewers wish for nothing more!), for Mitry the point to retain is that the overall result can never be total and perfect fidelity to the source. All adaptations succumb to the dilemma, and so the global complaint against them holds true.

My response to Mitry's dilemma argument (and analogous contentions in the literature) involves three steps. The first step is to concede that the question of the total fidelity of adaptation to source is specious in that it is obvious that the adaptation is a different work. The second step is to point out that it is not always the case that comparisons between the features of an adaptation and its source are driven by the thought that the only source of value to be uncovered is the similarities. Finally, specific examples amply support the conclusion that in some cases, and with respect to specific types of artistic problems and features, similarities correlated with aesthetic or artistic value can be identified. If there are other, more devastating arguments in the literature against the kinds of appreciative comparisons under scrutiny here, I have not been able to find them.

Conclusion

I have been at pains in this article to limn some of the most basic constraints on the appreciation of adaptations. A principled account of sufficiency conditions on apt appreciation is not in the cards, but it has been possible to uncover necessary conditions on appreciation, conditions entailed by elementary constraints on apt generic classification. This emphasis on truisms pertaining to basic constraints is compatible with the acknowledgement that other issues remain wide open. Given that adaptation names a vague concept, there will be borderline cases where decisive, principled judgments are impossible.

One outstanding issue that future theorists of adaptation might take up is whether there is a significant difference between appreciative norms related to the cinematic adaptation of different kinds of literary sources—more specifically, those literary and operatic works that were originally conceived as works to be staged or performed (for a straightforward elucidation of this kind of distinction, see Davies 2003). Although it is widely acknowledged that highly divergent stagings of a theatrical work can nonetheless count as performances of that work, it is unclear whether the same latitude carries over to the making of cinematic adaptations based on such performance works. When a few or even very many plot elements from a play or a novel are transposed into a wholly different context, is the film still classifiable as an adaptation? Are the constraints any

different when the source is a novel as opposed to a performance work? An example would be *The Claim*, which is very minimally based on Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Does the fact that the novel was not originally designed as a performance work make any difference? Is the difference in work ontology a sufficient basis for saying that this film is not an adaptation, while *Hamlet Goes Business* is?

Finally, an important avenue of investigation for theorists of adaptation concerns the kinds of artistic problems confronted by filmmakers undertaking an adaptation, including artistic problems that are and are not shared by the creators of literary sources. With reference to particular examples and subgenres of adaptation, theorists of adaptation can attempt to formulate guidelines concerning the striking variety of possible appreciative comparisons.

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Notes

¹ The thesis that categorization is a necessary condition on the appreciation of art has been articulated and defended quite often, ever since Benedetto Croce ([1902] 1992) pronounced his sweeping ban on any such thing. For an influential argument in analytic aesthetics, see Walton (1970). An early and under-acknowledged advocate of a "contextualist" aesthetics was Stephen C. Pepper (1937, 1945, 1955). For a historical overview of genre theory, with an insightful pragmatic proposal, see Schaeffer (1989). For a concise and insightful elucidation of appreciation, see Iseminger (1980).

² For readers who wince at such bullish talk about recognizing merits and demerits, my points about appreciation are compatible with relativist, realist, and relationist views on the status of value judgments in the arts and elsewhere; for some background on such positions, see Tatarkiewicz (1980).

³ A similar point is made in Hutcheon (2006), yet she does not say why this claim does not simply beg the question against the skeptic who thinks source/adaptation comparisons could be irrelevant to artistic appreciation.

⁴ Thanks to Andrea Sauchelli for raising this topic. For background on appreciation and testimony, see Livingston (2003b) and Budd (2008).

⁵ Thanks to David Bordwell for a query prompting me to clarify this point.

⁶ This distinction is a commonplace among contemporary philosophers (e.g., Lowe 2002: 23–24) and is often traced back to passages in Aristotle (especially *Metaphysics* [1952: 1052a, 32]) though

commentators disagree over how to interpret the philosopher's remarks about the different ways in which things can be "one."

⁷ Logically, for all x and all y , x is similar to y in an infinite number of respects and different from y in an infinite number of respects; x is, for example, similar to y in that both of them are not equivalent to q , r , s , t , and so on.

⁸ For background, see Schweik (1999). Michael Millgate (2004: 67) refers to an episode in which Hardy's friend, Henry Moule, was rebuked by his father for ordering a theologically objectionable book, Gideon Algernon Mantell's *The Wonders of Geology*. This episode may, as Millgate conjectures, have been an inspiration for the fictional event, but it is hard to see how *The Wonders of Geology* fits Angel's description of the controversial book as "a system of philosophy," so it seems safe to say that the novelist creatively reworked the actual event in devising his fiction.

⁹ See, for example, Arana (2008). Scholarly opinion on the maxim about good novels making bad films is critically surveyed by Elliott (2003: 12), who traces the idea, which she deems "a myth," back to Béla Balázs. As the title of her book suggests, Elliott raises objections to the way in which the discussion of adaptation has been framed, but I have been unable to arrive at a cogent paraphrase of her general positions on the topic, especially with regard to the proposed rethinking of the basic issues.

¹⁰ For example, see Harris (1981–1982) for a commentary that grants the basic point about the feministic themes, but argues that the film lacks fidelity to the novel in a number of important respects, beginning with the obvious lack of authentic locations.

¹¹ Prominent challenges in English to the idea of faithful adaptation include Bluestone (1957), Beja (1976), Hutcheon (2006), Stam (2000), and Wager (1975). For many other examples, and for documentation of the literature, see Bohnenkamp (2005), Cartmell and Whelehan (2007), Corrigan (1999), Stam and Raengo (2004).

¹² Mitry's discussion of the topic may seem dated to some readers, but in fact his basic arguments still merit discussion, partly because they reappear frequently in the contemporary literature. For background on Mitry, see Lewis (2009). Mitry's critique of cinematic adaptation draws on a number of earlier works, including books by Béla Balázs, Roger Caillois, Jean Dormarchi, and Henri Lemaître.

¹³ A similar failure to countenance the pertinence of local questions and piece-meal comparisons finds an extreme expression in a statement made in Andrew (1999: 269): "the study of adaptation is logically tantamount to the study of the cinema as a whole." Given any reasonable grasp of what logic entails, this statement is patently false: Andrew has studied adaptation without studying the cinema as a whole, and this without any violation of logic.

¹⁴ Mitry writes, for example: "Et il est bien vrai que certaines adaptations ont donné lieu à des œuvres qui, tout en se maintenant à un niveau cinématographique élevé, sont parvenues à traduire quelques-unes des idées fondamentales du roman adapté" (1965: 349). I translate this as follows: "And it is quite true that some adaptation projects have given rise to works that, while maintaining

a high level of cinematographic quality, manage to translate some of the fundamental ideas of the adapted novel."

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