

Dialogism's radical texts, and the death of the radical vanguard critic

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Dialogism's radical texts, and the death of the radical vanguard critic

It is not only artworks that can be grouped into historical and cultural contexts such as Sumerian or Anglo-Saxon epic poetry, Yoruba or Olmec statuary, Baroque *chiaroscuro* or Mughal miniature painting, Ming or Attic vases, the French *nouvelle vague* or Brazilian *cinema novo*. Academic interpretation of art, too, is located within historically specific networks of thought in which any one form of understanding art interacts in complex ways with prior and overlapping forms of understanding. This is true of all arts disciplines, but it has been particularly instrumental in relation to the study of adaptation. In part, this is no great revelation for the field. Because of certain consequences of its historical development, relating to the comparative valorisation of its intersecting media, adaptation studies has a strong record of historical self-analysis. The long domination of a fidelity based model, which attempted to account for how filmmakers might 'faithfully' negotiate what Jack Jorgens (1977:17) calls the "expressive possibilities of shifting relations between words and images", eventually ushered in a new theory which critiqued fidelity analysis by locating it within a historically specific context. But the precise form of the model which displaced fidelity analysis is not subject to the same historical explanation. That is not to say that its intellectual roots are not thought of historically. The new model is usually called dialogism because of the way that it principally draws on early 20th century Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's idea that all works of art are constantly informed by and informing other works of art, so that adaptations are just more acute examples of this dialogue between texts. There are specific historical reasons, however, why it should be dialogism, rather than some other methodology which might make a similar criticism of fidelity analysis, that replaced fidelity as adaptation studies' new orthodoxy at around the turn of this century.

The reasons why it would be dialogism that critiqued and usurped fidelity analysis are located within the intellectual histories of the field's intersecting parental disciplines; film studies and literary studies. Film studies, from its outset in the early 20th century, defensively strove to define its subject matter as legitimately artistic in relation to the older, more established arts. Attempts were made to define *Film as Art*, as Rudolph Arnheim's (1957) influential panegyric would have it, as a specific, unique and, for Sergei Eisenstein (1949: 233), "unprecedented art", in which the film artist must "consciously stress the peculiarities of his medium" (Arnheim 1957: 35). Early film scholars were loath to compare their medium with another lest it be found wanting. Meanwhile, throughout most of the 20th century, literary scholars who looked at adaptations were yet to be convinced that film as of itself was a worthy subject of study, and their analyses of filmic adaptations wavered between Robert B. Ray's (2000: 44) argument that, under the dominance of undertheorized mid-20th century New Criticism, "scholars could only persist in asking about individual movies the same unproductive layman's question (How does the film compare to the book?), getting the same unproductive answer (The book is better)", to George Bluestone's (1957: xi) claim that a successful adaptation can "accomplish the dual purpose of accommodating both its [the original's] meaning and its structure in filmic terms". This undertheorized literary bias, then, favoured a perceived fixed authorial meaning in the valorised 'original', against which an adaptation might or might not be successfully judged.

This partly explains why theoretical inquiry into the study of adaptation was delayed, so that when, in the final third of the 20th century, its disciplinary parents waged epistemological warfare over the likes of Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Saussure, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and Althusser, the atavistic field of adaptation studies, as Colin MacCabe (2011: 7) has

eloquently (and dialogically) put it, “rather like Don Quixote, continue[d] to fight the day before yesterday’s battles”. This still does not explain, however, why it was specifically dialogism that emerged from the field’s undertheorized past.

In part, adaptation studies’ dialogic turn was informed by the specific criticism of undertheorized fidelity analysis which preceded it. There were two main elements to this criticism, both of which point somewhat towards a dialogic solution. Firstly, fidelity was thought of as being located within a Kantian understanding of aesthetics, in which “both the making and the appreciation of art were conceived as specialized, autonomous, and transcendent activities having chiefly to do with media-specific form” (Naremore 2000: 2). In problematizing the notion of different media’s essential properties, this criticism facilitated a dialogic focus on the complex interrelationships between and across various media and texts so that, as Robert Stam (2005a: 45) puts it, “[a]daptations in a sense make manifest what is true of all works of art – that they are all on some level ‘derivative’”. The second broad criticism of fidelity analysis was its valorisation of the text within one (‘original’) medium at the expense of another. James Naremore (2000) links fidelity analysis’ propensity to think along these lines with the hierarchical cultural tradition exemplified in Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), which valued high over mass culture, and tradition over innovation. This criticism, too, partly points to a dialogic solution, so that instead of Arnold’s textual binary of worthy ‘original’ and vulgar ‘copy’, Thomas Leitch (2005: 239) argues that adaptation studies should think of art as existing within a more symbiotic and less hierarchical context which encourages us to understand “all texts as intertexts, all reading as rereading, all writing as rewriting”. Adaptation’s grounding within “the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture” (Stam 2000a: 64) means that Arnoldian claims to moral, political or aesthetic hierarchies are open to question.

There is nothing deterministic, however, about these dialogic remedies to the problems inherent in fidelity analysis' biases. They are, rather, dependent on specific historical and cultural conditions. It is true that there is a logic to the way that adaptation studies responded to the field's fallacies, as Leitch (2003) has put it, by replacing media specificity with a focus on what all art forms share, and by replacing Arnoldian moralistic and aesthetic binaries with an understanding of texts as complex and conflicting cultural artefacts. There are, however, other possible responses to the problems of fidelity analysis which share the criticism but which might formulate different remedies. It is telling, in this context, that Naremore (2000: 2) notes that fidelity analysis is "constitutive of a series of binary oppositions that poststructuralist theory has taught us to deconstruct", because dialogism has a very different understanding of the relationships between texts and readers/spectators than the poststructuralism which Naremore sees as the 'teacher' of this critique of fidelity. There are a number of specific historic reasons why poststructuralism has been thought of as part of the diagnosis of, but not part of the remedy to, fidelity analysis' limitations.

The chronological delay of adaptation studies' shift from fidelity analysis is central to this. The poststructuralism which Naremore sees as a critique of fidelity's binary biases was enormously influential in both film studies and literary studies in the 1970s and into the '80s. Never a single unified methodology, it was composed of various strands of politically informed semiotics, Marxism, psychoanalysis and feminism. Although David Bordwell's (1996: 8) characterisation of these methodologies within film studies as "subject-position theory" is reductive, it serves as a useful categorisation here because it emphasises the understanding that "cinema constructs subject positions as defined by ideology". Subject-position theory was concerned less with the vagaries and subtleties of texts, and more with

the unconscious interactions between text, cinematic apparatus and subject-spectator. Both text and apparatus were conceived as acting to deceive and constitute the subject-spectator. Only politically engaged theory and theoretically informed avant-garde filmmaking could expose the deception of realist cinema. Variations of this theory were influential in both literary studies, so that, for Frank Lentricchia (1983: 15), “it is the task of the oppositional critic to re-read culture so as to amplify and strategically position the marginalised voices of the ruled, exploited, oppressed, and excluded”, and in film studies, in which Claire Johnston (1973: 4) argued that a non-hegemonic form of cinema necessitated “a revolutionary strategy which can only be based on an analysis of how film operates as a medium within a specific cultural system”.

But, as has already been discussed, because of the particular historical reasons why adaptation studies laboured under Kantian and Arnoldian approaches to its respective media whilst its disciplinary parents engaged with theory which dispensed with these approaches, no substantial poststructuralist account of adaptation was ever articulated. Such an approach would have repeated, albeit with a very different political intention, one of Leitch’s (2003: 150) *Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory*, fidelity’s fallacy that “[d]ifferences between literary and cinematic texts are rooted in essential properties of their respective media”, since the focus of a poststructuralist film critic like Johnston (1973: 4) is “an analysis of how film operates *as a medium* within a specific cultural system” (my emphasis). But adaptation studies was temporarily impervious to theoretical trends which were sweeping across the rest of the humanities. By the later 1980s and ‘90s, as adaptation studies was drawing closer to a substantial criticism of its fidelity biases, the primacy of poststructuralism was questioned and then displaced. Bordwell has written extensively about the reasons for poststructuralism’s decline, which he partly puts down to the efficacy of

philosophical criticisms of its *a priori* philosophical premises (1996: 8-9), and partly puts down to the failure of the radical left to achieve meaningful revolution in the world at large, and the failure of leftist philosophy like poststructuralism to offer a solution to this failure.

Thus, he gives the example that poststructuralism encouraged feminists

to adopt the sexist Freud and Lacan strategically, as analysts of patriarchy. This theory, articulated in the wake of lost battles of the 1960s, was more diagnostic than prescriptive. It arose at a period when explaining why revolutions fail had a higher priority than showing how successful rebellion might occur.

(Bordwell 1996: 11)

As a result of these broad theoretical transformations poststructuralism was no longer understood as the only radical solution to the inevitably ideological text. Those who still had hope for resistance to hegemony had to look beyond the confines of a narrow coterie of radical academics and esoteric avant-garde practitioners. This reorientation called for an understanding of the subversive potential of both texts and audiences. The turn, therefore, was away from textual deception and towards textual pluralism. Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, for example, could argue that

[i]n a climate where the notion of an elite vanguard group of intellectuals seeking mastery came to be seen as impossible and undesirable, Theory's authority could only decline. What was needed was not direction from and legislation by an elite supposedly in the know, but *radical democracy in which every voice could be heard in difference*.

(Lapsley and Westlake 2006: xii, my emphasis)

Dialogism's multiplicity of voices, in which there is no single authoritative authorial articulation, therefore stems from a wider epistemological turn towards pluralism. If subject-position theory had a tendency to characterise audience responses as monolithic, new studies attempted to investigate pluralistic audience responses. In film studies, analysing audience reception was one way to do this, and this allowed scholars to construct what Tony Bennett (1983: 5) calls reading formations, each of which is "a set of intersecting discourses that productively activate a given body of texts and the relations between them in a specific way". Importantly, these reading formations could resist a text's ideological potential. Jacqueline Bobo's study of black female responses to Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (1985), for example, led her to conclude that a film which "Tony Brown, a syndicated columnist and the host of the television program *Tony Brown's Journal* has called [...] 'the most racist depiction of Black men since *The Birth of a Nation* and the most anti-Black family film of the modern film era'" (1988: 90) could be used to "examine the way in which a specific audience creates meaning from a mainstream text and uses the reconstructed meaning to empower themselves and their social group" (1988: 93). A potentially regressive, conservative text could thereby be reclaimed by (certain) audiences in a progressive sense, without needing the intervention of the poststructuralist vanguard critic to facilitate that reclamation.

Dialogism shares this optimistic approach, but shifts the focus from the interpretation(s) of the audience *outside* the text to the act of interpretation(s) from the 'original' *within* the adapted text. Just as the study of the spectator-subject turned to the diversity of multiple and conflicting forms of audience reception, so too the study of the text-object turned to the diversity of multiple and conflicting forms of textual hybridity. Reception theory had borrowed its methodology from the broad subject of cultural studies, and specifically Stuart

Hall's (1980) notion of encoding/decoding, which held that although a text might encode ideological meaning, the audience's decoding of that text might involve negotiated and/or oppositional readings of it, as well as ideology's preferred reading. But cultural studies also suggested a way in which interpretations *within* the text-object might be thought of as oppositional in the way that reception theory understands an audience-subject response as potentially oppositional. John Fiske's 1989 account of popular culture was a critique of what Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (1972) called the culture industry which, much like the poststructuralist approach to art that was then coming under the kind of assault described above, saw ideology as a constraining force which could only be overcome by a vigilant academic and avant-garde vanguard. Dwight Macdonald, a proponent of Horkheimer and Adorno's Frankfurt School approach, characterised mass culture within this context as being "imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying" (Macdonald 1957: 60). For Fiske, this account fails to recognise how that which is imposed from above can be appropriated in counter-hegemonic contexts. Giving the example of how young people from various non-hegemonic subcultures customise and individualise an industrial product such as a pair of jeans, he argues that "[t]he creativity of popular culture lies not in the production of commodities so much as in the productive use of industrial commodities. [...] The culture of everyday life lies in the creative, discriminating use of the resources that capitalism provides" (Fiske 1989: 27-8). Fiske's distinction between production and productive use of commodities, which he called expropriation, could be thought of as a prelude to dialogism's focus on adaptation's productive uses of source texts, which one might call excanonation. Even if culture consists largely of an attempted ideological imposition from above, the product or text does not necessarily impose either Arnold's patronisation or the hegemony identified by the Frankfurt School. Just as Fiske

thought that capitalism's false choice between Levi and Wrangler jeans could be transcended by a personalising customisation of those jeans, so too dialogism thinks that canonical culture's false choice between, for example, Shakespeare and Dickens can be transcended by adaptation's dialogic customisation of those texts. There is a historically and culturally determined similarity, then, between Fiske's (1989: 28) analysis of how "popular forces transform the cultural commodity into a cultural resource, pluralize the meanings and pleasures it offers, evade or resist its disciplinary efforts, fracture its homogeneity and coherence" and Stam's claim that

[m]any revisionist adaptations of Victorian novels [...] 'de-repress them' in sexual and political terms; a feminist and sexual liberationist dynamic releases the sublimated libidinousness and the latent feminist spirit of the novels and of the characters, or even of the author, in a kind of anachronistic therapy or adaptational rescue operation. Postcolonial adaptations of colonialist novels [...] retroactively liberate the oppressed colonial characters of the original.

(Stam 2005a: 42)

This broad historical and cultural sensibility helps to explain both dialogism's historical emergence and its subsequent successes. Due to the long dominance of the Arnoldian and Kantian approaches to adaptation, by the time that adaptation studies understood these earlier methodologies as "constitutive of a series of binary oppositions that poststructuralist theory has taught us to deconstruct" (Naremore 2000: 2), it did not adopt the approaches of poststructuralism *tout court* because they had already been discredited within the then more epistemologically current disciplines of film studies, literary studies and cultural studies. Instead, adaptation studies both engaged with and foregrounded the era's shift from theory as

radical to the uses of texts as radical. If it was no longer possible to be optimistic about the interventions of the radical vanguard critic, then it was important to instead be optimistic about the possibilities of more widespread textual and interpretative radicalism.

Dialogism could then think of texts as replacing the radical function that theory had until then claimed only for itself. So, in the examples given by Stam (2005a: 42) quoted a moment ago, it is not the feministic critic who “de-represse[s]” the Victorian novel, or the postcolonial critic who “retroactively liberate[s] the oppressed colonial characters” of the colonial novel. Rather, it is the adapted text which is itself either feminist or postcolonial, and which makes this intervention *within* its text. Stam (2005a: 46) argues, therefore, that “[w]e can still speak of successful or unsuccessful adaptations, but this time oriented not by inchoate notions of ‘fidelity’ but rather by attention to [...] ‘readings’ and ‘critiques’ and ‘interpretations’ and ‘rewritings’”. Replacing the obsolete vanguard critic, “[a]daptations, then, can take an activist stance toward their source[s]” (Stam 2000a: 64). Dialogism, then, understands epistemology and text in a strikingly similar pluralistic emancipatory manner. Stam (2005b: 15) calls his simultaneous deployment of “literary theory, media theory, and (multi)cultural studies [...] a kind of methodological cubism” and likewise notes that “cinema can literally include painting, poetry, and music or it can metaphorically evoke them by imitating their procedures; it can show a Picasso painting, or emulate cubist techniques” (2005a: 24). The same pluralist, modernist, emancipatory art movement, cubism, is applicable to both adaptation and adaptation studies. Moreover, Stam also links this back to the broader turn which I have identified as facilitating the shift from radical criticism to radical texts, writing in the introduction to a film theory reader from the dawn of adaptation studies’ dialogic era, “*Film and Theory* offers a kind of cubist collage of theoretical grids” (2000b: xv).

This optimistic spirit is a defining feature of dialogism and, indeed, spreads beyond an optimistic account of texts' emancipatory potential into an optimistic understanding of how the until recently much maligned field of adaptation studies can move out from what Timothy Corrigan (2007: 30) calls the forlorn "gap" between literary studies and film studies. Both adapted text and adaptation studies are understood within this optimistic context. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan can thereby write, in their recent survey of the field, both about "the excitement of encountering in every site of adaptation an entirely new set of relations which allows us to draw promiscuously on theoretical tendencies in film and literary studies and to observe how, in that process of adaptation, something unique is produced" (2010: 22) and about their "increasing confidence in the space we [adaptation studies] occupy across the disciplines of literary, film and TV studies, and beyond" (2010: 9). Adaptation studies, then, emerged from its fidelity 'gap' at a historical and cultural moment which both facilitated its optimistic approach to textual hybridity and which legitimated that approach to textual hybridity to each of its parent disciplines. It could thereby go, in a short period of time, from "being stuck in the backwaters of the academy" (Leitch 2008: 63) to its rightful place "at the very center of intertextual – that is, of textual – studies (2008: 168).

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