Treating Adaptations *as Adaptations*

To deal with adaptations *as adaptations* is to think of them as, to use Scottish poet and scholar Michael Alexander's great term (Ermarth 2001: 47), inherently "palimpsestuous" works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts. If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly. When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works. It is what Gérard Genette would call a text in the "second degree" (1982: 5), created and then received in relation to a prior text. This is why adaptation studies are so often comparative studies (cf. Cardwell 2002: 9). This is not to say that adaptations are not also autonomous works that can be interpreted and valued as such; as many theorists have insisted, they obviously are (see, for example, Bluestone 1957/1971; Ropars 1970). This is one reason why an adaptation has its own aura, its own "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin 1968: 214). I take such a position as axiomatic, but not as my theoretical focus. To interpret an adaptation *as an adaptation* is, in a sense, to treat it as what Roland Barthes called, not a "work," but a "text," a plural "stereophony of echoes, citations, references" (1977: 160). Although adaptations are also aesthetic objects in their own right, it is only as inherently double- or multilaminated works that they can be theorized *as adaptations*.

An adaptation's double nature does not mean, however, that proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis. For a long time, "fidelity criticism," as it came to

be known, was the critical orthodoxy in adaptation studies, especially when dealing with canonical works such as those of Pushkin or Dante. Today that dominance has been challenged from a variety of perspectives (e.g., McFarlane 1996: 194; Cardwell 2002: 19) and with a range of results. And, as George Bluestone pointed out early on, when a film becomes a financial or critical success, the question of its faithfulness is given hardly any thought (1957/1971: 114). My decision not to concentrate on this particular aspect of the relationship between adapted text and adaptation means that there appears to be little need to engage directly in the constant debate over degrees of proximity to the "original" that has generated those many typologies of adaptation processes: borrowing versus intersection versus transformation (Andrew 1980: 10–12); analogy versus commentary versus transposition (Wagner 1975: 222–31); using the source as raw material versus reinterpretation of only the core narrative structure versus a literal translation (Klein and Parker 1981: 10).

Of more interest to me is the fact that the morally loaded discourse of fidelity is based on the implied assumption that adapters aim simply to reproduce the adapted text (e.g., Orr 1984: 73). Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication. And there are manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying. Adaptations such as film remakes can even be seen as mixed in intent: "contested homage" (Greenberg 1998: 115), Oedipally envious and worshipful at the same time (Horton and McDougal 1998b: 8).

If the idea of fidelity should not frame any theorizing of adaptation today, what should? According to its dictionary meaning, "to adapt" is to adjust, to alter, to make suitable. This can be done in any number of ways. As the next section will explore in more depth, the phenomenon of adaptation can be defined from three distinct but interrelated perspectives, for I take it as no accident that we use the same word—adaptation—to refer to the process and the product.

First, seen as a *formal entity or product*, an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. This "transcoding" can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre

(an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation. Transposition can also mean a shift in ontology from the real to the fictional, from a historical account or biography to a fictionalized narrative or drama. Sister Helen Prejean's 1994 book, *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*, became first a fictionalized film (directed by Tim Robbins, 1995) and then, a few years later, an opera (written by Terrence McNally and Jake Heggie).

Second, as *a process of creation*, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation; this has been called both appropriation and salvaging, depending on your perspective. For every aggressive appropriator outed by a political opponent, there is a patient salvager. Priscilla Galloway, an adapter of mythic and historical narratives for children and young adults, has said that she is motivated by a desire to preserve stories that are worth knowing but will not necessarily speak to a new audience without creative "reanimation" (2004), and *that* is her task. African film adaptations of traditional oral legends are also seen as a way of preserving a rich heritage in an aural and visual mode (Cham 2005: 300).

Third, seen from the perspective of its *process of reception*, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation. For the right audience, then, the novelization by Yvonne Navarro of a film like *Hellboy* (2004) may echo not only with Guillermo del Toro's film but also with the Dark Horse Comics series from which the latter was adapted. Paul Anderson's 2002 film *Resident Evil* will be experienced differently by those who have played the videogame of the same name, from which the movie was adapted, than by those who have not.

In short, adaptation can be described as the following:

- An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works
- A creative *and* an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging
- An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work

Therefore, an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing.

There is some apparent validity to the general statement that adaptation "as a concept can expand or contract. Writ large, adaptation includes almost any act of alteration performed upon specific cultural works of the past and dovetails with a general process of cultural recreation" (Fischlin and Fortier 2000: 4). But, from a pragmatic point of view, such vast definition would clearly make adaptation rather difficult to theorize. My more restricted double definition of adaptation as process and product is closer to the common usage of the word and is broad enough to allow me to treat not just films and stage productions, but also musical arrangements and song covers, visual art revisitations of prior works and comic book versions of history, poems put to music and remakes of films, and videogames and interactive art. It also permits me to draw distinctions; for instance, allusions to and brief echoes of other works would not qualify as extended engagements, nor do most examples of musical sampling, because they recontextualize only short fragments of music. Plagiarisms are not acknowledged appropriations, and sequels and prequels are not really adaptations either, nor is fan fiction. There is a difference between never wanting a story to end—the reason behind sequels and prequels, according to Marjorie Garber (2003: 73–74)—and wanting to retell the same story over and over in different ways. With adaptations, we seem to desire the repetition as much as the change. Maybe this is why, in the eyes of the law, adaptation is a "derivative work"—that is, one based on one or more preexisting works, but "recast, transformed" (17 USC §101). That seemingly simple definition, however, is also a theoretical can of worms.

Exactly What Gets Adapted? How?

What precisely is "recast" and "transformed"? In law, ideas themselves cannot be copyrighted; only their expression can be defended in court. And herein lies the whole problem. As Kamilla Elliott has astutely noted, adaptation commits the heresy of showing that form (expression) can be separated from content (ideas)—something both mainstream aesthetic and semiotic theories have resisted or denied (2003: 133),

even as legal theory has embraced it. The form changes with adaptation (thus evading most legal prosecution); the content persists. But what exactly constitutes that transferred and transmuted "content"?

Many professional reviewers and audience members alike resort to the elusive notion of the "spirit" of a work or an artist that has to be captured and conveyed in the adaptation for it to be a success. The "spirit" of Dickens or Wagner is invoked, often to justify radical changes in the "letter" or form. Sometimes it is "tone" that is deemed central, though rarely defined (e.g., Linden 1971: 158, 163); at other times it is "style" (Seger 1992: 157). But all three are arguably equally subjective and, it would appear, difficult to discuss, much less theorize.

Most theories of adaptation assume, however, that the story is the common denominator, the core of what is transposed across different media and genres, each of which deals with that story in formally different ways and, I would add, through different modes of engagement—narrating, performing, or interacting. In adapting, the story-argument goes, "equivalences" are sought in different sign systems for the various elements of the story: its themes, events, world, characters, motivations, points of view, consequences, contexts, symbols, imagery, and so on. As Millicent Marcus has explained, however, there are two opposing theoretical schools of thought on this point: either a story can exist independently of any embodiment in any particular signifying system or, on the contrary, it cannot be considered separately from its material mode of mediation (1993: 14). What the phenomenon of adaptation suggests, however, is that, although the latter is obviously true for the audience, whose members experience the story in a particular material form, the various elements of the story can be and are considered separately by adapters and by theorists, if only because technical constraints of different media will inevitably highlight different aspects of that story (Gaudreault and Marion 1998: 45).

Themes are perhaps the easiest story elements to see as adaptable across media and even genres or framing contexts. As author Louis Begley said about the themes of his 1996 novel *About Schmidt* when the work was transcribed to the screen by Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor: "I was able to hear them rather like melodies transposed into a different key" (2003: 1). Many Romantic ballets were derived from

Hans Christian Andersen's stories simply, some say, because of their traditional and easily accessible themes, such as quests, magical tasks, disguise and revelation, and innocence versus evil (Mackrell 2004). Composer Alexander Zemlinsky wrote a "symphonic fantasy" adaptation of Andersen's famous "The Little Mermaid" (1836) called *Die Seejungfrau* (1905) that includes musical programmatic descriptions of such elements as the storm and musical leitmotifs that tell the story and its themes of love, pain, and nature, as well as music that evokes emotions and atmosphere befitting the story. A modern manual for adapters explains, however, that themes are, in fact, of most importance to novels and plays; in TV and films, themes must always serve the story action and "reinforce or dimensionalize" it, for in these forms, storyline is supreme—except in European "art" films (Seger 1992: 14).

Characters, too, can obviously be transported from one text to another, and indeed, as Murray Smith has argued, characters are crucial to the rhetorical and aesthetic effects of both narrative and performance texts because they engage receivers' imaginations through what he calls recognition, alignment, and allegiance (1995: 4–6). The theater and the novel are usually considered the forms in which the human subject is central. Psychological development (and thus receiver empathy) is part of the narrative and dramatic arc when characters are the focus of adaptations. Yet, in playing videogame adaptations of films, we can actually "become" one of the characters and act in their fictional world.

The separate units of the story (or the *fabula)* can also be transmediated—just as they can be summarized in digest versions or translated into another language (Hamon 1977: 264). But they may well change—often radically—in the process of adaptation, and not only (but most obviously) in terms of their plot ordering. Pacing can be transformed, time compressed or expanded. Shifts in the focalization or point of view of the adapted story may lead to major differences.

[...]

Double Vision: Defining Adaptation

Given this complexity of what can be adapted and of the means of adaptation, people keep trying to coin new words to replace the confusing simplicity of the word "adaptation" (e.g., Gaudreault 1998: 268). But most end up admitting defeat: the word has stuck for a reason. Yet, however straightforward the idea of adaptation may appear on the surface, it is actually very difficult to define, in part, as we have seen, because we use the same word for the process and the product. As a product, an adaptation can be given a formal definition, but as

a process—of creation and of reception—other aspects have to be considered. This is why those different perspectives touched on earlier are needed to discuss and define adaptation.

Adaptation as Product: Announced, Extensive, Specific Transcoding

As openly acknowledged and extended reworkings of particular other texts, adaptations are often compared to translations. Just as there is no such thing as a literal translation, there can be no literal adaptation. Nevertheless, the study of both has suffered from domination by "normative and source-oriented approaches" (Hermans 1985: 9). Transposition to another medium, or even moving within the same one, always means change or, in the language of the new media, "reformatting." And there will always be both gains and losses (Stam 2000: 62). Although this seems commonsensical enough, it is important to remember that, in most concepts of translation, the source text is granted an axiomatic primacy and authority, and the rhetoric of comparison has most often been that of faithfulness and equivalence. Walter Benjamin did alter this frame of reference when he argued, in "The Task of the Translator," that translation is not a rendering of some fixed nontextual meaning to be copied or paraphrased or reproduced; rather, it is an engagement with the original text that makes us see that text in different ways (1992: 77). Recent translation theory argues that translation involves a transaction between texts and between languages and is thus "an act of both inter-cultural and inter-temporal communication" (Bassnett 2002: 9).

The idea of paraphrase (Bluestone 1957/1971: 62) is an alternative frequently offered to this translation analogy. Etymologically, a paraphrase is a mode of telling "beside" (para) and, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one of its first meanings is "a free rendering or amplification of a passage" that is verbal but, by extension, musical as well. John Dryden is quoted as defining paraphrase as "translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view …, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified."

[...]

Paraphrase and translation analogies can also be useful in considering what I earlier called the ontological shift that can happen in adaptations of an historical event or an actual person's life into a reimagined, fictional form. The adapted text may be an authoritative historical rendering or a more indefinite archive (see Andrew 2004: 200),

In ontological shifts, it makes little sense to talk about adaptations as "historically accurate" or "historically inaccurate" in the usual sense. *Schindler's List* is not *Shoah* (see Hansen 2001) in part because it is an adaptation of a novel by Thomas Keneally, which is itself based on survivor testimony. In other words, it is a paraphrase or translation of a *particular* other text, a particular interpretation of history. The seeming simplicity of the familiar label, "based on a true story," is a ruse: in reality, such historical adaptations are as complex as historiography itself.

[...]

Of course, there is a wide range of reasons why adapters might choose a particular story and then transcode it into a particular medium or genre. As noted earlier, their aim might well be to economically and artistically supplant the prior works. They are just as likely to want to contest the aesthetic or political values of the adapted text as to pay homage. This, of course, is one of the reasons why the rhetoric of "fidelity" is less than adequate to discuss the process of adaptation. Whatever the motive, from the adapter's perspective, adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new.

If this sounds somewhat familiar, there is good reason, given the long history in the West of *imitatio* or *mimesis*—imitation—as what Aristotle saw as part of the instinctive behavior of humans and the source of their pleasure in art (Wittkower 1965: 143). Imitation of great works of art, in particular, was not intended only to capitalize on the prestige and authority of the ancients or even to offer a pedagogical model (as the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* argued [I.ii.3 and IV.i.2]), though it did both. It was also a form of creativity: "*Imitatio* is neither plagiarism nor a flaw in the constitution of Latin literature. It is a dynamic law of its existence" (West and Woodman 1979: ix). Like classical imitation, adaptation also is not slavish copying; it is a process of making the adapted material one's own. In both, the novelty is in what one *does with* the other text. Indeed, for "Longinus," *imitatio* went together with *aemulatio*, linking imitation and creativity (Russell 1979: 10). Perhaps one way to think about unsuccessful adaptations is not in

terms of infidelity to a prior text, but in terms of a lack of the creativity and skill to make the text one's own and thus autonomous.

For the reader, spectator, or listener, adaptation *as adaptation* is unavoidably a kind of intertextuality *if the receiver is acquainted with the adapted text*. It is an ongoing dialogical process, as Mikhail Bakhtin would have said, in which we compare the work we already know with the one we are experiencing (Stam 2000: 64). By stressing the relation of individual works to other works and to an entire cultural system, French semiotic and post-structuralist theorizing of intertextuality (e.g., by Barthes 1971/1977; Kristeva 1969/1986) has been important in its challenges to dominant post-Romantic notions of originality, uniqueness, and autonomy. Instead, texts are said to be mosaics of citations that are visible and invisible, heard and silent; they are always already written and read. So, too, are adaptations, but with the added proviso that they are also acknowledged as adaptations *of specific texts*. Often, the audience will recognize that a work is an adaptation of more than one specific text.

The Audience's "Palimpsestuous" Intertextuality For audiences, such adaptations are obviously "multilaminated"; they are directly and openly connected to recognizable other works, and that connection is part of their formal identity, but also of what we might call their hermeneutic identity. This is what keeps under control the "background noise" (Hinds 1998: 19) of all the other intertextual parallels to the work the audience might make that are due to similar artistic and social conventions, rather than specific works. In all cases, the engagements with these other works in adaptations are extended ones, not passing allusions.

Part of both the pleasure and the frustration of experiencing an adaptation is the familiarity bred through repetition and memory.

[...]

Modes of Engagement

A doubled definition of adaptation as a product (as extensive, particular transcoding) and as a process (as creative reinterpretation and palimpsestic intertextuality) is one way to address the various dimensions of the broader phenomenon of adaptation. An emphasis on process allows us to expand the traditional focus of adaptation studies on medium-specificity and individual comparative case studies in order to consider as well relations among the major modes of engagement: that is, it permits us to think about how adaptations allow people to tell, show, or interact with stories. We can be told or shown a story, each in a range of different media. However, the perspective, and thus the grammar, changes with the third mode of engagement; as audience members, we interact *with* stories in, for instance, the new media, from virtual reality to machinima. All three modes are arguably "immersive," though to different degrees and in different ways: for example, the telling mode (a novel) immerses us through imagination in a fictional world; the showing mode (plays and films) immerses us through the perception of the aural and the visual—the latter in a way related to that of Renaissance perspective painting and Baroque *trompe l'oeil* (Ryan 2001: 3); the participatory

mode (videogames) immerses us physically and kinesthetically. But if all are, in some sense of the word, "immersive," only the last of them is usually called "interactive." Neither the act of looking at and interpreting black marks—words or notes—on a white page nor that of perceiving and interpreting a direct representation of a story on the stage or screen is in any way passive; both are imaginatively, cognitively, and emotionally active. But the move to participatory modes in which we also engage physically with the story and its world—whether it be in a violent action game or a role-playing or puzzle/skill testing one—is not more active but certainly active in a different way.

In the telling mode—in narrative literature, for example—our engagement begins in the realm of imagination, which is simultaneously controlled by the selected, directing words of the text and liberated—that is, unconstrained by the limits of the visual or aural. We can stop reading at any point; we can re-read or skip ahead; we hold the book in our hands and feel, as well as see, how much of the story remains to be read. But with the move to the mode of showing, as in film and stage adaptations, we are caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving story. And we have moved from the imagination to the realm of direct perception—with its mix of both detail and broad focus. The performance mode teaches us that language is not the only way to express meaning or to relate stories. Visual and gestural representations are rich in complex associations; music offers aural "equivalents" for characters' emotions and, in turn, provokes affective responses in the audience; sound, in general, can enhance, reinforce, or even contradict the visual and verbal aspects. On the other hand, however, a *shown* dramatization cannot approximate the complicated verbal play of *told* poetry or the interlinking of description, narration, and explanation that is so easy for prose narrative to accomplish. Telling a story in words, either orally or on paper, is never the same as showing it visually and aurally in any of the many performance media available.

Some theorists argue that, at a basic level, there is no significant difference between a verbal text and visual images, that, as W.J.T. Mitchell outlines this position, "communicative, expressive acts, narration, argument, description, exposition and other so-called 'speech acts' are not medium-specific, are not 'proper' to some medium or another"

(1994: 160). (See also Cohen 1991b.) A consideration of the differences between the modes of engagement of telling and showing, however, suggests quite the contrary: each mode, like each medium, *has* its own specificity, if not its own essence. In other words, no one mode is inherently good at doing one thing and not another; but each has at its disposal different means of expression—media and genres—and so can aim at and achieve certain things better than others.

[...]

Stories, however, do not consist only of the material means of their transmission (media) or the rules that structure them (genres). Those means and those rules permit and then channel narrative expectations and communicate narrative meaning *to someone* in *some context*, and they are created *by someone* with that intent. There is, in short, a wider communicative context that any theory of adaptation would do well to consider. That context will change with the mode of presentation or engagement: the telling mode can use a variety of material media, as can the live or mediated showing mode, just as each medium can support a variety of genres. But media distinctions alone will not necessarily allow the kind of differentiations that adaptations call to our attention.

[...]

Framing Adaptation

Keeping these three modes of engagement—telling, showing, and interacting with stories—in the forefront can allow for certain precisions and distinctions that a focus on medium alone cannot. It also allows for linkages across media that a concentration on medium-specificity

can efface, and thus moves us away from just the formal definitions of adaptation to consider the process. These ways of engaging with stories do not, of course, ever take place in a vacuum. We engage in time and space, within a particular society and a general culture. The contexts of creation and reception are material, public, and economic as much as they are cultural, personal, and aesthetic. This explains why, even in today's globalized world, major shifts in a story's context—that is, for example, in a national setting or time period—can change radically how the transposed story is interpreted, ideologically and literally. How do we react today, for instance, when a male director adapts a woman's novel or when an American director adapts a British novel, or both—as in Neil LaBute's film version of A.S. Byatt's 1991 novel, *Possession*? In shifting cultures and therefore sometimes shifting languages, adaptations make alterations that reveal much about the larger contexts of reception and production. Adapters often "indigenize" stories, to use an anthropological term (Friedman 2004).

[...]

Even a shift of time frame can reveal much about when a work is created and received. Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novel, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, has been adapted many times for the stage and for the movie and television screens. (To get a sense of the whole range, see Geduld 1983.) The showing mode entails embodying and enacting, and thereby often ends up spelling out important ambiguities that are central to the told version—especially, in this case, Hyde's undefined and unspecified evil. Because of mode change, these various versions have had to show—and thus to "figure"—that evil physically, and the means they have chosen to do so are revealing of the historical and political moments of their production. In 1920, at the

start of Prohibition, we witness a sexual fall through alcohol in John Robertson's silent film; in the 1971 Hammer film, *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (directed by Roy Ward Baker), we see instead Britain's confused responses to feminism after the 1960s (see McCracken-Flesher 1994: 183–94). For economic reasons, adapters often rely on selecting works to adapt that are well known and that have proved popular over time; for legal reasons, they often choose works that are no longer copyrighted.

Because my focus is on modes of engagement rather than on two specific media or on "sources," different things have caught my attention. I was struck by the other obvious analogy to adaptation suggested in the film by Darwin's theory of evolution, where genetic adaptation is presented as the biological process by which something is fitted to a given environment. To think of narrative adaptation in terms of a story's fit and its process of mutation or adjustment, through adaptation, to a particular cultural environment is something I find suggestive. Stories also evolve by adaptation and are not immutable over time. Sometimes, like biological adaptation, cultural adaptation involves migration to favorable conditions: stories travel to different cultures and different media. In short, stories adapt just as they are adapted.

In his 1976 book on Darwinian theory called *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins bravely suggested the existence of a cultural parallel to Darwin's biological theory: "Cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution" (1976/1989: 189). Language, fashions, technology, and the arts, he argued, "all evolve in historical time in a way that looks like highly speeded up genetic evolution, but has really

nothing to do with genetic evolution" (190). Nonetheless, he posits the parallel existence of what he calls "memes"—units of cultural transmission or units of imitation—that, like genes, are "replicators" (191–92). But unlike genetic transmission, when memes are transmitted, they always change, for they are subject to "continuous mutation, and also to blending" (195), in part to adapt for survival in the "meme pool." Although Dawkins is thinking about ideas when he writes of memes, stories also are ideas and could be said to function in this same way. Some have great fitness through survival (persistence in a culture) or reproduction (number of adaptations). Adaptation, like evolution, is a transgenerational phenomenon. Some stories obviously have more "stability and penetrance in the cultural environment," as Dawkins would put it (193). Stories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments *by virtue of* mutation—in their "offspring" or their adaptations. And the fittest do more than survive; they flourish.