The Value of Fidelity in Adaptation

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The adaptation of literary works into films has been almost completely neglected as a philosophical topic. I discuss two questions about this phenomenon:

1. *What do we mean when we say that a film is faithful to its source?*
2. *Is being faithful to its source a merit in a film adaptation?*

In response to (1), I set out two distinct senses of fidelity: story fidelity and thematic fidelity. (There are, of course, other senses of fidelity as well.) I then argue, in response to (2), that thematic fidelity, but not story fidelity, is an aesthetic merit in a film adaptation. The key steps in this argument involve showing that merely preserving the story from one medium to another does not typically involve an aesthetically significant accomplishment, whereas preserving a theme across different media does.

When the Coen brothers film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, 2000) opens, a title card quotes the opening lines of Homer's *Odyssey*: 'O Muse! / Sing in me, and through me tell the story / Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending, / A wanderer, harried for years on end ….' However, beyond a few general similarities in regard to incident and character (e.g. the protagonist of the film is called 'Ulysses' and his wife is 'Penny'), the two works tell very different stories. The Coen brothers admit that they had never read the *Odyssey* and they didn't originally intend their film as a genuine adaptation of Homer's poem.[1] The film tells the story of populism and racism in the American south during the great depression, and prominently features the folk music of that era. One of the themes of the film is the intersection between popular music and politics. While some elements of Homer's poem can be found in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (both consist of a journey home and a few incidents along the way are alluded to), the film does not much resemble its ostensible source.

Wolfgang Peterson's film *Troy* (2004) is also announced as an adaptation of one of Homer's poems: the *Iliad* (though it also incorporates plot elements from Virgil's *Aeneid*). The film mostly follows the sequence of events in Homer's epic, with omissions (the cast of characters is vastly reduced) and some significant changes and additions (most significantly, a romance between Achilles and Briseas). But the principal events and characters are the same. Thematically, the film emphasizes the vice of pride and the importance of being remembered after one dies. There is a palpable attempt to capture both the plot and the thematic ideas from Homer's epic poem. And some scenes and events are rendered in ways that closely resemble scenes from the poem.

It is tempting to say that Peterson's film is more *faithful* to Homer's *Iliad* than the Coen brothers' film is to Homer's *Odyssey*. But few would dispute that *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is a *better film* than *Troy*. This raises two related questions.

1 Jonathan Romney, 'Double Vision', *The Guardian* (19 May 2000) <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2000/may/19/culture.features> accessed 6 January 2018.

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1. What do we mean when we say that a film is *faithful* to its source?
2. Is being faithful an aesthetic merit in a film that is an adaptation of some work of literature?

My view is that there are several different kinds of answers to the first question, including, importantly, story fidelity and thematic fidelity. In response to the second question, I argue that some kinds of fidelity, especially thematic fidelity, merit aesthetic praise, while others do not.

1. Background

Relatively little has been written on the topic of adaptation in Anglophone aesthetics.[2] This is surprising. After all, adaptation is a dominant cultural phenomenon—most films are based on pre-existing sources—and one with a long and rich history. Short stores are adapted into plays; plays into films; films into operas; songs into poems; and on and on, backwards and forwards. More important, adaptation poses important and interesting philosophical problems that bear on and interact with some of the most discussed problems in philosophical aesthetics today.

There is, however, a large and vibrant literature on the topic of adaptation outside the field of philosophy, with dozens of books, thousands of articles, and at least two academic journals dedicated to the field of 'Adaptation Studies'*: Adaptation: The Journal of Literature on Screen Studies* and *Film/Literature Quarterly*.[3] Those working in Adaptation Studies seem to come primarily from English departments, but also from film, theatre and other arts programmes. This extensive literature, furthermore, is almost uniformly opposed to the use of *fidelity* as a critical criterion. By 'fidelity' is meant the critical issue of the degree to which the film captures the significant aspects of the original work. The consensus in the adaptation literature is that we should dispose of the concept of fidelity. Here are some representative remarks:

> Unquestionably the most frequent and most tiresome discussion of adaptation (and of film and literature relations as well) concerns fidelity and transformation.[4]

> The field is still haunted by the notion that adaptations ought to be faithful to their ostensible source texts.[5]

2 Exceptions include: J. E. Gracia, 'From Horror to Hero: Film Interpretations of Stoker's Dracula', in W. Irwsin and J. E. Gracia (eds), *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 187–214; Paisley Livingston, 'On the Appreciation of Cinematic Adaptations', *Projections* 4 (2010), 104–127; Henry James Pratt, 'Making Comics into Film', in Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook (eds), *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2012), 147–164; Tamir Zachi and Greg Currie, '*Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood*, and the Idea of a Reflective Adaptation', forthcoming in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Of these, only Livingston's article, discussed below, offers a general theoretical approach to adaptation. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing me towards Livingston's essay.

3 My colleague Sally Sutherland first introduced me to the field of Adaptation Studies and I am greatly indebted to her for introducing me to this literature.

4 Dudley Andrew, 'Adaptation', in James Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 28–37, at 31.

5 Thomas Leitch, 'Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads', *Adaptation* 1 (2008), 63–77 at 64.

> In fact, one might reasonably have assumed that the 'fidelity' factor no longer needed to be addressed in writing about film and literature. By this I mean not only fidelity as criterion but also the very notion that this battle needs to be refought.[6]

The standard view, voiced by each of these authors, is that it has long been established that fidelity is both a bad criterion and a harmful one. Fidelity is thought to be harmful because it crowds out other, more fruitful lines of inquiry. Further, fidelity is often associated with another troublesome assumption that has plagued the academic study of film since its beginning: the privileging of the written word (particularly 'high' literature) over pictorial storytelling (of which films have often seemed like the lowest form). The exasperation comes from the sense that ordinary people, critics, and academics—who should know better!—nonetheless persist in talking about fidelity.

In his paper 'On the Appreciation of Cinematic Adaptations', Paisley Livingston offers a strong defence of the fidelity criterion against these sorts of objections. He begins by defining cinematic adaptations:

> I propose that a cinematic adaptation is a film intentionally and overtly based on at least one, specific anterior 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.[7]

His argument for fidelity builds on this definition. The argument, in outline, is: (1) to appreciate an adaptation *qua* adaptation requires a comparison between the adaptation and its source; and (2) an adaptation, according to the definition, must include some intentional adoption of elements of the source; so, (3) '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'.[8] The idea is that adaptations are intentionally related to their sources; so, critical studies of adaptations must compare the two, asking in what senses and to what extent the adaptation is faithful to the source.

Livingston's argument establishes that fidelity is a necessary, and cogent, critical approach to understanding and appreciating adaptations as such. However, we should note two important features of his view that require further discussion. First, Livingston does not attempt to argue that fidelity is (or even usually or normally is) a *merit* in adaptations. In his view, in some cases, fidelity improves a work; in others, it harms it. Livingston discusses in some detail one of the latter cases, Roman Polanski's 1979 film *Tess*, an adaptation of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Ubervilles*. In his film, Polanski departs from the source material in the way it depicts Tess' discovery that her letter to Angel Clare has not been read. Livingston writes:

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6 Brian McFarlane, 'Reading Film and Literature', in Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 15-28, at 15.

7 Livingston, 'On the Appreciation of Cinematic Adaptations', 105.

8 Ibid., 112.

> 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.[9]

According to Livingston, fidelity is always *relevant* as a critical criterion, but it is not always *desirable*. Nor does he attempt to tell us *when* fidelity is a merit and when it is a de-merit.

Second, Livingston claims that fidelity is not one thing. There is, he argues, no such thing as 'global' fidelity. No film could be faithful to its source in every respect because adaptations, by their nature, include departures (at a minimum, those necessary to the change of medium) from the source. But he does not take this point further; he does not explore what some of these different kinds of fidelity are. It is to this latter question—the different types of fidelity—that we should now turn.

2. Fidelity Disambiguated

Perhaps the most common use of the fidelity criterion is in relation to story. Films are often judged as faithful to their sources or not depending to what extent they retain some of the details of the story mentioned above: events, character names and traits, dialogue, etc., of the fictional world of the original work. By this standard, Robert Mulligan's 1962 film *To Kill a Mockingbird* is often judged to be a reasonably faithful adaption of Harper Lee's novel. In this sense *Troy* seems faithful to the *Iliad*, whereas *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* can seem unfaithful to the *Odyssey*. We can think of this sense of fidelity as story fidelity, and we might attempt to define it this way:

> SF: A film is a faithful adaptation of a literary work to the degree that it *tells the same story* that the novel does.

But what is meant by 'telling the same story'? A first approximation might go something like this:

> TTSS: Two artworks tell the same story iff each makes exactly the same propositions true in their respective fictional worlds.[10]

This cannot be quite right, though. If two narratives present the same events in a different order (perhaps through flashbacks and flash-forwards, reverse or scrambled chronologies), they would count as having the same story on this view. But the order in which stories are told seems to make a difference to story fidelity. In other words, we want to capture not just the fictional events, but the narrative telling of those events.

So we could try:

9 Ibid., 120.

10 There is a great deal of disagreement about how to make sense of the phrases 'true in the fiction' and 'fictional world'. I'm putting those questions aside for the purposes of this paper. For a recent discussion, see Stacie Friend, 'The Real Foundations of Fictional Worlds', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95 (2016), 29–42.

> TTSS′: Two artworks tell the same story iff the story unfolds in such a way in each work as to induce the audience to imagine the same fictional propositions *in the same order* as they take in each artwork.[11]

Clearly on this view, fidelity will be a matter of degree. No adaptation could be perfectly faithful to the source, but one adaptation could be much more so than another. As an account of fidelity, it does capture one important sense of the word.

Let us now consider another sense of fidelity that makes use of Monroe Beardsley's distinction between thesis and theme.[12] According to Beardsley, a work's thesis is a proposition (or a sentence expressing a proposition), which is either true or false. Themes and theses are closely related: a theme like 'the importance of forgiveness' can easily become a thesis when the work is thought of as asserting that 'forgiveness *is* important'. The key difference is that the theses are put forward for truth-evaluation, whereas themes are not.[13] A work's theme is a subject, neither true nor false. Here we will stick to theme, rather than thesis because a theme assumes less than a thesis does and so it is often easier to agree on what the themes of a work are than on what its theses are. In the final section of the paper, we will also see that focusing on theme rather than thesis will help us respond to some objections.

According to Beardsley, a theme must be *abstract*, by which he means that it should not merely fail to be concrete, but that it should also be *general*. An artwork's themes are the subjects that it takes up that might be of larger interest to audiences because they extend beyond the particularities of the narrative. So, one other sense in which a film can be faithful to its source is to preserve the *themes* of the original work.

Consider Joe Wright's 2007 adaptation of Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*. This is quite a faithful film by the standards of story fidelity. The main events and characters, while simplified, are preserved—even much of the dialogue survives unchanged. However, the themes of the novel are not similarly preserved. A. O. Scott focuses on this in his review in *The New York Times*:

> This is not a bad literary adaptation; it is too handsomely shot and Britishly acted to warrant such strong condemnation. 'Atonement' is, instead, an almost classical example of how pointless, how diminishing, the transmutation of literature into film can be. … The main casualty of the film's long, murky middle and end sections is the big moral theme—and also the ingenious formal gimmick—that provides the book with some of its intensity and much of its cachet. As the title suggests, 'Atonement' is fundamentally about guilt and the attempt to overcome it, and about the tricky, tragically imperfect power of art to compensate for real-life crimes and misdemeanors.[14]

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11 I am grateful to the audience at the University of London for a lively discussion about this definition.

12 Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd edn (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1981), esp. 403–409.

13 Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. ch. 13, 'The Propositional Theory of Literary Truth', 321–338.

14 A. O. Scott, 'Lies, Guilt, Stiff Upper Lips', *The New York Times* (7 December 2007), E1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/07/movies/07aton.html> accessed 6 January 2018.

What Scott is talking about here ('"Atonement" is fundamentally about guilt and the attempt to overcome it') is exactly what Beardsley meant by theme. Scott's view is that the film adaption of *Atonement* preserves the story but loses the themes that the story had in the original.

We could define thematic fidelity this way:

> TF: A film is a faithful adaptation of a novel to the degree that it preserves the story's themes.

Notice that the two kinds of fidelity may be at odds. Given the medium-specificity of how *Atonement*'s theme is worked out in the novel—Briony is a writer who attempts to use her writing to work through her guilt and the novel itself (or part of it) is part of that process—it might have been easier to preserve the theme by making the character into a filmmaker rather than a writer. If the film version of *Atonement* (or some part of it) had been presented as if it were a student film made by the fictional character Briony Tallis (rather than Joe Wright), we might at least get a better acquaintance with the theme of using an artistic medium as atonement for a wrong. This would, of course, mean a departure from the original *story*, however.

There are other kinds of fidelity as well. Sometimes we may be concerned with fidelity to character: how similar is a character's inner life and even, sometimes, outer appearance. Ian Fleming so admired Sean Connery's portrayal of his character James Bond in the 1962 film adaptation of his novel *Dr No* (dir. Terrence Young), that in a later novel, *You Only Live Twice*, Fleming gave Bond Scottish ancestry.[15] Or we might be taken by the question of mood or affect: does the piece engender the same sense of foreboding or joy as the original piece? For example, Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995), despite many important differences, has a sense of humour and irony reminiscent of Jane Austen's *Emma*.[16] These forms of adaptation can be related to one another, of course. An adaptation might be thematically consonant with its source partly because it captures the mood of the source, and it might have the mood that it does partly because of how the story is structured.

I am not sure how many different senses of fidelity there are; my purpose is not to taxonomize. In what follows I focus on just two of these senses of fidelity: story fidelity and thematic fidelity.

3. Is Fidelity Good?

The argument of this part aims to show that thematic fidelity, but not story fidelity, is a merit in a film adaptation. That is, being faithful to the story of the original work is not a quality that counts in favour of the film's artistic merit, but preserving the themes of the source does. This is because thematic fidelity requires a kind of skill and excellence on the part of the adapter—the ability to preserve a theme in a novel medium—that deserves our aesthetic admiration. Story fidelity does not. It may well be that other kinds of fidelity—fidelity to character, or to mood, or something else—are also aesthetic merits in adaptation. I do not explore those issues here.

Here is the argument, in summary:

15 Ian Fleming, *You Only Live Twice* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964).

16 I am grateful to Ned Markosian for this example.

1. Qualities of artworks that manifest certain kinds of human achievement count as aesthetic merits of those works.
2. Some types of fidelity, including story fidelity, typically do not manifest significant human achievement.
3. Some types of fidelity, including thematic fidelity, typically do manifest significant human achievement.
4. So, story fidelity typically does not count as a merit in artworks, but thematic fidelity typically does.

The first premise is supported by arguments made by Denis Dutton and Stephen Davies, among others, that one of the things that we rightly value in art is that we see it as a significant accomplishment.[17] Artworks often manifest human achievement, and that is part of why we care about them so much: we discern craft, practice, intelligence, and hard work in the creation of artworks and we value the works insofar as they exemplify these qualities. Dutton's and Davies' views do, of course, oppose traditional Kantian aesthetics, in particular Kant's notion of 'pure beauty' (rather than dependent beauty). But the claim here is not that the manifestation of human accomplishment is the only, or even the main, reason we have for valuing artworks: just that it is one legitimate reason for doing so.

In support of the second premise, we should note that in many cases, the task of transposing a *story* from a work of literature to a film is relatively straightforward. One feature that films and literary works have in common is their ability to convey a narrative—to set out events unfolding in time in a relatively clear way. The task has two main parts. First, a literary work is adapted into a screenplay; second, the screenplay is a critical element in making the film.

The question is whether successful completion of either of these steps typically requires a significant aesthetic achievement simply in order to preserve the story from literary work to finished film. Let us begin with the transition from literary work to screenplay.[18] In many cases, the chief difficulty in adapting the story of a work of literature into a screenplay is length. Feature films are normally restricted to a length between 90 and 180 minutes or so. Most novels and plays take far longer to act out. (Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film adaptation of *Hamlet* is the only film adaptation of that play that includes all of the dialogue. It was just over four hours long.) So often the chief challenge of adapting the story of a literary work into a screenplay is deciding what to cut (or, in the case of adapting short stories, what to add). This is not to say that we do not, or ought not, admire the writing of an adapted screenplay at all, but that the part of that larger task that is simply

17 Stephen Davies, 'Non-Western Art and Art's Definition', in Noël Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 199–216; Denis Dutton, 'Kant and the Conditions of Aesthetic Beauty,' *BJA* 34 (1994): 226–239. Livingston in 'On the Appreciation of Cinematic Adaptations' also endorses this view.

18 I do not mean to here suggest that screenplays cannot be works of literature. Ted Nannicelli argues that they can be works of art in his 'Why Can't Screenplays Be Artworks?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69 (2011), 405–414. In his *A Philosophy of the Screenplay* (New York: Routledge, 2013), esp. 139–162, he further argues that a screenplay is a work of *literature*. We do not need to answer these questions here.

concerned with adapting the story of the source text is itself not a particularly praiseworthy aesthetic achievement.

Consider, by comparison, the practice of abridging a novel. While this is a common practice (or, at least, it was in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it has somewhat fallen out of fashion in recent decades), no aesthetic praise is generally attributed to professional abridgers. Abridgement clearly requires real skill—the ability to shorten long novels while retaining the same general story and events requires careful reading and judgement—but abridgement is not generally thought to be a significant *aesthetic* accomplishment. Professional abridgers are often not credited and work anonymously.

Here is another example. Stanley Kubrick simply used the novel *A Clockwork Orange* as the working screenplay while on set, having broken the book up into discrete scenes for shooting. Kubrick's own screenplay does not much deviate from the original novel. (The novel is quite short—almost a novella—so there was not actually much to cut out. The famous final chapter, whose omission Burgess decried, was not included in the American edition that Kubrick used.) The narration in the novel became stage directions; much of the dialogue was left unchanged. While a few scenes were cut for time, and a number of minor changes were made, the story of the book was adapted more or less straightforwardly into a screenplay. Kubrick himself downplayed the 'inspiration' or 'invention' involved in adapting novels into screenplays. In an interview with Michel Ciment, Kubrick said:

> When you can write a book like [Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*], you've really done something. On the other hand, writing the screenplay of the book is much more of a logical process—something between writing and breaking a code. It does not require the inspiration or the invention of the novelist.[19]

So the first step in story adaptation—preserving the story of a literary work in the form of a screenplay—does not in itself seem to be of aesthetic significance. But what about the second step?[20] The screenplay, after all, is not yet the film, and perhaps the task of transforming the story from screenplay to film is a worthy aesthetic achievement.

Before we can answer this question, we first need to clarify what we mean when we talk about a screenplay. What are sometimes called 'shooting' scripts are the screenplays that the director, actors, et al., all refer to while making the film. The final, or 'continuity' scripts, however, are the screenplays that reflect the changes made to the screenplay while shooting and editing the film. (Sometimes continuity scripts are produced by transcribing the finished film.) For example, if a line of dialogue appears in the shooting script, the actor may improvise an alternative, or the director may decide to cut the line after shooting it. So the screenplay itself is normally altered to some degree or other during the making of the film. And of course these alterations may alter the story being told—in some cases, entire subplots and characters are eliminated or created during shooting. So

19 Michel Ciment, *Kubrick*, trans. Gilbert Adair (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Wilson, 1983), 157.

20 I am grateful to an anonymous referee for making this point.

the question before us is not about the shooting script, but the continuity script. We want to know whether the task of preserving a story from the finished, continuity script to the finished film is a significant aesthetic achievement.[21]

Screenplays vary in how much detail they specify. Ordinarily, they specify the beginning and ends of scenes, significant actions and events that occur, and dialogue. (Screenplays for silent films are an interesting case. Some silent screenplays actually include a story synopsis. Others give highly detailed descriptions of the characters, their actions, and the *mise-en-scène*.[22]) So the question is how significantly one could alter the story without affecting the screenplay in any way. Of course, it is easy to imagine that one could alter the mood or the themes in translating the screenplay into a film.

Perhaps one might object as follows. As Ted Nannicelli puts it, screenplays, unlike play scripts, are not work-determinative. Any theatrical production that uses Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest* script is thereby a production of *Mad Forest*. However, this does not seem to be the case with films. Two films that are produced using the same screenplay are not thereby the same film—in fact they could not be. There are, in fact, very few examples of the same finished screenplay being used more than once. Even if a remake uses the same shooting script as the original, the final script is often quite different. Even Gus Van Sant's 1998 critically reviled shot-for-shot remake of Hitchcock's *Psycho* alters the dialogue in a number of places. Another remake, Richard Thorpe's 1952 version of *The Prisoner of Zenda* uses nearly the same screenplay (with only minor alterations) as that of the 1937 James Cromwell film of the same name. But in both cases, the remake is clearly a different film than the original.

However, it does not follow from the fact two films are distinct artworks that the two films tell different stories. In fact, the stories—the sequence of events that the audience is prompted to imagine—in these cases (the two *Psycho*s and the two *Prisoners of Zenda*) are virtually the same. And it is hard to see how it could be otherwise. So there is normally no reason to think that merely adapting the story from literary work to film is an aesthetic achievement.

We must allow, however, that there are some exceptions. In some cases, the story of a literary work poses special kinds of challenges. Sometimes a literary work offers contradictory or highly compressed descriptions of events. A straightforward adaptation that seeks to preserve the presentation of the original's events will need to make inventive choices. Because of the medium-specific differences between films and works of literature, including the temporal, visual, and sonic elements of films, in order to get audiences to know the same fictional propositions *in the same order*, great imagination and creativity are sometimes required. For example, Buck Henry's screenplay for the film version of *Catch-22*, while significantly un-scrambling the jumbled chronology of Heller's original novel, nonetheless conveys the key information to the reader about the main storylines (particularly Yossarian's growing understanding of his predicament and his decision to follow Captain Orr and escape to Sweden) in the same order as we learn them in the

21 Noël Carroll makes a similar point in his *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 68–69.

22 The screenplay for Michel Hazanavicius' 2011 silent film *The Artist* is available on-line <http://www.pages.drexel.edu/~ina22/splaylib/Screenplay-Artist,_The.pdf> accessed 6 January 2018.

book.[23] In cases like this, the task of adapting the story may rightly be seen as a significant aesthetic achievement. Nonetheless, I think, such cases tend to be the exception rather than the rule. In most cases, simply adapting the *story* from one medium to another is not itself a significant accomplishment.

The argument for the third premise has already been hinted at. Transposing a theme from one medium to another is never an obvious or straightforward matter. The transposition of a theme into a screenplay poses a very different set of challenges than transposing a story. In the latter case, the main challenge is preserving the audience's experience of the sequence of fictional events. In the former case, the goal is to preserve the audience's experience or the thematic ideas presented by the literary work. How one might do this depends on what the themes are, and the way themes are expressed in literary works are generally not optimal for expressing those themes cinematically. Thematic transformation may occur either at the step of converting a literary work into a screenplay, or at the step of turning the screenplay into a finished film.

Consider Christopher Nolan's screenplay for his film *Memento* (2000), which was based on his brother Jonathan's short story 'Memento Mori'.[24] (Oddly, 'Memento Mori' was not published until after the film was released; the film was based on an unpublished draft of the story.) 'Memento Mori' is a very short story; it only has three or four scenes, and no named characters other than the protagonist (whose name is Earl in the short story and Leonard in the film). The screenplay vastly expands the scope and events of the original story, adding a number of major characters and most of the events. The screenplay also adds an ingenious structural element: the main storyline is told backwards, with the 'last' scene being shown first. An earlier storyline is told forwards, and is intercut with the main storyline. However, despite these many changes, the screenplay explores the same themes as the short story: the connection between memory and agency, and the idea of manipulating one's own future agency are central to both. From a thematic point of view, the screenplay is very faithful to the short story. (On the other hand, the story is almost unrecognizable.)

Sometimes the thematic work is done not at the stage of the screenplay but during shooting itself, using cinematic choices not necessarily specified in the screenplay. When Alfred Hitchcock adapted Patricia Highsmith's novel *Strangers on a Train* into a film of the same title (1951), he preserved the themes of double-crossing, duplication, and betrayal through the use of lines and movement crossing one another in the frame, a technique obviously unavailable to Highsmith.[25] (It is also perhaps worth noting that Hitchcock did not worry much about preserving Highsmith's story, which he changed rather dramatically.) In the novel, Highsmith is able to use techniques like free indirect discourse to convey these themes, but in order to faithfully preserve these themes across different media Hitchcock had to make creative, artistic use of the distinctive features of the film

23 Buck Henry, *Catch 22: Screenplay* (Paramount, 1970).

24 Jonathan Nolan, 'Memento Mori', *Esquire* (March 2001). <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/a1564/memento-mori-0301/> accessed 6 January 2018.

25 While the use of Hitchcock's visual criss-cross metaphors in the film is hardly a secret, I want to acknowledge my colleague Robin Blaetz, who first introduced me to this case many years ago in a wonderful public lecture.

medium. Successfully preserving a theme across different media, therefore, is an accomplishment deserving of our praise and attention.

Notice that this premise does not assume a much stronger claim about medium-specificity. We need not assume that there is a fixed set of distinctively 'filmic' qualities or 'literary' qualities that hold true across all films and all works of literature, respectively. Films can be animated, live-action, silent, black and white, 3-D, and on and on. Literature is an even broader category encompassing concrete poetry, comic books, oral sagas, some works of history, and more. We do not need to assume that there is some set of medium-specific features that apply across all cases. All we need is to note that there are, in general, differences between particular works when a literary work is adapted into a film: Patricia Highsmith's novel is not illustrated and so does not depict any of its events or characters visually; Hitchcock's film does.

Nor does this argument assume that a work is, in general, aesthetically better if it makes use of the medium's distinctive features.[26] That is a much stronger claim. The claim here is merely that adaptations that manifest significant achievements in transposing a theme from the particular distinctive features of the original literary work to the particular distinctive features of the film are to that extent aesthetically better.

However, one may object that there is nothing about thematic fidelity as such that makes the adaptive process count as an aesthetic achievement.[27] One can grant that there is significant value in transporting a theme from one medium to the other, but argue that such transportation need not be faithful in order to be valuable. Consider the example of Paul Verhhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (1997) written by Edward Neumeier, which (ostensibly) adapts Robert Heinlein's 1959 novel.[28] Heinlein's novel is a serious military drama that emphasizes the inevitability of violent struggle, and celebrates a culture of military might. Verhoeven's film, by contrast, is a satire of fascism and militant authoritarianism, which includes critical references to Nazism and Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Some of the themes are similar—both take up patriotism and militarism—the ways in which the themes are handled are wildly different. The theses of the two films are almost opposites. The book seems to say that militant patriotism in defence of foreign threats is a virtue; the film seems to say that it is a vice. And the film has a completely different mood than the book: the mood is dark yet funny, while the book is uplifting but sombre. Verhoeven and Neumeier's transformation of the themes of the novel seems to be an

26 For a critique of this claim, see Aaron Smuts, 'Cinematic', *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 23 (2013), 78–95.

27 I am grateful to Aaron Meskin for raising this objection and to Jamie Cawthra for the *Starship Troopers* example.

28 Robert A. Heinlein, *Starship Troopers* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959). One might wonder whether the film *Starship Troopers* really is an adaptation of Heinlein's novel. Verhoeven had apparently conceived of the idea for the film and written a script before learning about Heinlein's novel, and only later optioned the novel because of the similarities in the stories. He subsequently changed the names of many of the characters to match those in the novel. Verhoeven claims to have quit reading Heinlein's book after two chapters. If the film is not actually an adaptation after all, then the case is not a counter-example. While I do think that the question of when one work is an adaptation of another is a serious one, I do not think this constitutes a strong response to the objection. It is easy to imagine other similar cases in which a film is more clearly an adaptation of its source. See Adam Smith and Owen Williams, 'Triple Dutch: Paul Verhoeven's Sci-Fi Trilogy', *Empire* 278 (12 February 2014) <http://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/paul-verhoeven/ > accessed 6 January 2018.

aesthetic accomplishment that might be valuable in its own right, just as a faithful one might be. From this it seems to follow that any kind of thematic transposition can be valuable, whether faithful or not.

We should note first that cases like these are rare. The typical aim of adaptation is the preservation of a work from one medium to another, not the transformation of that work. Parodies are not typically counted as adaptations. For example the 1980 Abrams, Zucker, and Zucker farce *Airplane!* is technically a remake of the serious 1957 Hal Bartlett film *Zero Hour!* as it uses the same characters and storyline, but *Airplane!* is not generally thought of as a remake because it departs so radically from the tone and genre of *Zero Hour!* However, it does seem plausible that, even if such cases are rare, the transformation of theses, even the inversion of the theses, from a literary work to a film would constitute an aesthetic accomplishment deserving of praise. But it does not follow from this that thematic fidelity is not a virtue. What this shows is that there are other virtues that adaptations can display. It also does not show that just any kind of thematic transposition will count as aesthetically valuable: the transposition will need to show skill, accomplishment, effort, and so on. As is often the case in art, it is possible for a quality and its opposite (order and disorder, for example) to each count as excellences in particular works. Thematic fidelity is still a virtue in adaptation, even if in some cases thesis inversion can also be a virtue.

This conclusion also helps us explain why it is that the question of fidelity sometimes seems rather inconsequential and other times to matter a great deal. We care about fidelity—or at least some kinds of fidelity, like thematic fidelity—because we admire the artistic imagination and effort that go into the transformation. Other kinds of fidelity—like story fidelity—do not normally merit our aesthetic praise. Thus, one can happily concede that *Troy* does a good job of adapting the story of the *Iliad* without giving that fact any weight at all in one's overall aesthetic verdict. Fidelity in adaptation is important; it comes in different flavours and some, but not all, of these are in fact aesthetically significant.[29]

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