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Forum Prompt

Adaptation Studies

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At first glance, one might assume that adaptation studies is the study of adaptations. That is true, to a certain extent, but it is more accurate to say that adaptation studies is a way to understand texts, generally, rather than the study of a particular kind of texts. At its most basic level, an adaptation studies approach to texts is fairly simple. Any attempt to understand a text requires that we compare it to what we already know. A biographical approach to a literary text, for instance, demands that we interpret based on what we know of the author's life. A Marxist approach stipulates that texts, as well as the characters and events they portray, function within socioeconomic systems. Understanding those systems, thus, allows us to understand texts. Adaptation studies functions in a similar way, but in the case of adaptation studies texts are understood in relation to other texts. It is, in short, a comparative method.

If I want to understand a new film titled *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, it pays to have a working knowledge of Jane Austen's 1813 novel. With their title, the filmmakers have provided a warrant, and even an invitation, for viewers to compare the two texts. The same would be true if the film were

titled *Bride and Prejudice*, or *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. In each case there is a suggestion that there is a special relationship between Austen's novel and the new text. We typically identify this as a hypotext/hypertext relationship, where one text (the hypotext) has clearly been a major source or influence for another (the hypertext).

But an adaptation studies approach need not always be warranted by such a clear invitation. I have argued, in fact, that a relationship perceived by a reader or viewer is sound justification for an adaptation studies approach. Consider, for example, Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*. The title certainly does not encourage readers to compare this novel (or the later film) to other texts. But someone who had recently finished reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* might see clear analogs between the two texts. Both novels have as characters well-meaning and brilliant, but naïve, scientists who seem more concerned with *if* and *how* a thing can be done, and less concerned with the question *should* it be done. Both novels have man-made monsters, created from the parts of other creatures, and in both cases these creatures achieve some level of agency, and begin to run amok. In both novels family members of the creators are put at risk by the creation.

Notice what I've done there. I've *abstracted* the plots of both novels in a way that emphasizes their similarities. Abstraction is a key move any time you approach text as adaptation. It is fairly straightforward to recognize the BBC's *Sherlock* as a series of adaptations based on Conan Doyle's works, but it does not take too much abstracting to see Fox Network's *House* as an adaptation, too. Notice the similarity in the names, the genius who has trouble relating to normal people, the solving of mysteries, and the bumbling companion (or in the case of *House* the series of bumbling companions). The ability to abstract plots, ideas, and characters is a necessary step in an adaptation studies approach to a text. But one has to be careful. We can abstract too much, simplify too completely. I'll discuss that more later on. But to return to Michael Crichton for a moment, there's another good reason to believe that he might have been influenced by Shelley. Crichton also wrote *The Andromeda Strain*, *Congo*, and *Prey*—each of which has a similar plotline. Crichton seems thoroughly entangled with Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In short, once we establish an abstract relationship, it is useful to have corroborating data, in this case the fact that Crichton has written several novels with similar plots.

It is worth noting that an adaptation studies approach is not limited to plot or characters. It might even apply, as scholars have recently shown, to tone or style. Consider the Netflix series *River*. It has the look and feel of a Nordic Noir like *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* or *The Bridge*, and even stars the Nordic Stellan Skarsgard in the title role. But the plot does not seem to be adapted from any particular Nordic police procedurals. In this case it is merely the Nordic Noir style that has been adapted.

While most of the examples I've cited above involve different kinds of media, that is not a requirement for an adaptation studies approach. The novels of Cormac McCarthy, for instance, have been studied as adaptations of the novels of Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. So one might take an adaptation studies approach to intra-medial adaptations (novel to novel, for instance), or to "adaptations" that seem to cross even more interesting media boundaries. A novelization, for instance, may be studied as an adaptation. As could a video game that becomes a novel and film series, or an amusement park ride that generates no less than five increasingly bad films.

I have avoided, up until that last sentence, the old saw, "The original was better." But the idea of evaluation brings up the most important question we might ask of an adaptation, or a perceived adaptation. That is, so what? So what if Michael Crichton has adapted *Frankenstein* five or six times in the course of his long career? A few answers spring to mind from this example. The first is that an adaptation studies approach might allow scholars to say something about the pattern of an author's career. That would certainly be worthwhile. But what if, in addition to the similarities we note in an adapted work, we also notice significant differences. Cormac McCarthy might have Ahab-like and Ishmael-like characters in his *Blood Meridian*, but his new characters are also significantly different from Melville's. These differences allow us to see McCarthy not simply as someone remaking *Moby Dick*, but as someone in conversation with Melville and *Blood Meridian* as a novel in conversation with *Moby Dick*. It is genuinely rewarding to recognize how McCarthy responds to the questions of agency or good and evil posed by Melville in *Moby Dick*, or, as noted earlier, to the questions of romance, sacrifice, and intercultural relations posed by Ernest Hemingway in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

A second "so what" has to do with the different ways texts are adapted over time. In addition to the possibilities already mentioned, consider that

adaptations, particularly when they have reoccurred over long periods of time, are kind of like the study of tree rings. More clearly than original productions, they offer excellent ways to measure the cultural and literary climates of the times when they were made. A quick example can be found in the many filmed adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Each new adaptation is a kind of bug preserved in amber (if you'll forgive the Michael Crichton joke), a particular moment frozen in history. Because we still have Shakespeare's script (more or less) we may more easily notice how each new iteration does slightly different things. Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948) offers insights into the post-WWII world and the rise of Freudianism. Mel Gibson's *Hamlet* (1990) emphasizes the oedipal elements of the play, and *Hamlet 2000*, starring Ethan Hawke, stresses the role technology might play in the narrative. Perhaps just as interesting is the fact that since the age of film hypertexts also persist. Any new production of *Hamlet*, therefore, exists in the context of all the still-available *Hamlets* that have come before. All of this suggests that the choices made by writers, directors, and actors, as well as those made by editors, publishers, reviewers, producers, censors, and studios are a little easier to recognize and identify in adaptations because the hypotexts continue to exist alongside the hypertexts.

As long as we're discussing *Hamlet*, how should we deal with a play/film like Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*? It clearly has something in common with Shakespeare's play, but it's also more than a straightforward adaptation. Most viewers would consider it a parody. But like an adaptation, many of the jokes, and nearly all of the serious content to be found in a parody is only available or visible in the context of the original text. Thus the tools of adaptation studies are completely applicable and perhaps necessary to anyone wishing to understand parody. Even more important is the fact that studying a parody like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* might allow me to gain a new understanding of *Hamlet*, a text that has been studied for more than 400 years.

So how does one begin writing about adaptations? Below I've made a list of possible steps when approaching texts as adaptations. These steps are suggestions, however, rather than hard rules. The main thing to remember is that studying the relationships between texts often highlights unexpected and productive aspects of both hypotexts and hypertexts.

- Recognize a relationship between texts. These relationships can be acknowledged (*Bride and Prejudice*) or unacknowledged (*Jurassic Park*).
- Compare the two (or more, if you are brave) texts. How are they different? How are they the same? I often find it useful at this point to make a series of lists.
- Look for supporting evidence. It would be valuable, for instance, to find an interview where Michael Crichton says that Mary Shelley is his favorite author. Of course, this kind of thing isn't always available, but it is quite useful when it is.
- Look for the "so what?" Does one text make the other more understandable, richer, or unexpectedly interesting?
- Write. Note that the process of writing is reflexive, and you'll likely return to the first four steps several times before you are finished.
- Get published.
- Become famous.
- Make a large donation to the university's English department.

