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Active Adaptations: Killing the Girl with the Dragon Tattoo.

This paper develops the idea of the 'active adaptation' - that is an adaptation where the source material is still in the recent memory of the audience. Traditionally there has been a significant time-lag between the creation of a text and its subsequent adaptation, sometimes many decades. This time-lag between source and adaptation has shortened in recent years, as the translation between source and target has moved from asynchronous to synchronous adaptation. Coupled with this is the fact that contemporary authors are living in an era dominated by visual media, and adaptors are working in an industry obsessed with prequels, sequels, remakes, re-imaginings and re-workings.

An adaptation is always 'active' for the adaptor, but for audiences it is more often than not 'inactive'. Audiences make think they 'know' a work, but this familiarity is also mediated by other adaptations and versions. Fidelity positions regarding source texts have flourished in the gaps which exist between 'active' and 'inactive' adaptations. By focusing on the recent European and US adaptations of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy* and the US remake of the television series, *The Killing*, this paper argues that a new mode of adaptation has emerged, one which directly *assumes* that the audience is familiar with previous versions. The 'active' adaptation then both celebrates and exploits an audience's prior knowledge of novels, films and television shows.

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This paper develops an idea I'm working on at the moment: the 'active adaptation'. This to me is an adaptation (or remake) where the source material (or source materials) are still in the recent *conscious* memory of the audience.

Traditionally there has been a significant time-lag between the creation of a text and its subsequent adaptation, sometimes many decades. I am convinced that this can alter and shape the perception and reception of an adaptation: for example, we may feel that we really 'know' Sherlock Holmes, even if we haven't read any Conan Doyle for sometime; audiences may still think the eponymous consulting detective exclaims "elementary my dear Watson" a great deal, but he doesn't. Nor does he wear a deerstalker hat or smoke a huge bowl pipe: these were all things 'imposed' on the narrative of Sherlock Holmes by its subsequent theatrical adaptations and the later Basil Rathbone films of the 1940s – and copied ever since. These changes become cultural 'memes' over time.

So, time-lags between source (or sources) and adaptations have shortened in recent years, partly to do with the high-speed nature of the contemporary fiction publishing world; movie rights are now often bound up in publishing rights. So, the translation between source and target has moved from 'asynchronous' (a significant time-lag between versions) to 'synchronous' (virtually simultaneous) adaptation. It is becoming increasingly likely that an author is working on a novel while the adaptation is

being made; this is particularly true of long book series in the fantasy/sci-fi genre, as we have seen with J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* stories and more recently George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* books. In the latter example, George R. R. Martin is writing some episodes of the *Game of Thrones* TV series himself.

Even if authors are not as heavily involved in the adaptation of their work as Rowling and Martin, we can still confidently say that contemporary authors are living in an era dominated by visual media, and adapters are working in an industry obsessed with prequels, sequels, remakes, re-imaginings and re-workings. In this era, adaptation has become very much a heightened aspect of contemporary cultural production. In this paper I'm going to use two examples to further explain this.

The Swedish human rights journalist, Stieg Larsson, planned a ten-part series of *Millennium* crime novels all featuring his enigmatic misanthropic computer-hacker, Lisbeth Salander, and her friend (and sometime lover) crusading journalist Mikael Blomkvist (loosely based on Larsson himself).

Manuscripts for the first three volumes – and an incomplete fourth volume – were submitted to a Swedish publisher in 2004, however Stieg Larsson died before they were published. The three complete volumes were posthumously published as *The Millennium Trilogy* in quick succession between 2005-2007, and were an almost instant phenomenon, worldwide. By May 2010, the novels had sold 27 million copies; by December 2011, 65 million copies had been sold – helped in part by the successful adaptations.

In the first novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, a rich businessman, Henrik Vanger, hires Mikael Blomkvist to investigate the disappearance of his great-niece, Harriet, who vanished during a parade many years before in 1966. Vanger believes that Harriet was murdered by another member of his family. Blomkvist is aided in this search by a mysterious computer hacker, Lisbeth Salander, who herself is being blackmailed by her legal guardian. The subsequent novels continue the story of the two protagonist's strange relationship and in particular Lisbeth's murky family past.

The Swedish film adaptations began production in 2006, and the first film, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, was released in February 2009, with *The Girl Who Played with Fire* in September of that same year and *The Girl Who Kicked a Hornet's Nest* following hard on its heels in the November. The films featured the Swedish actors Michael Nyqvist as Mikael Blomkvist and Noomi Rapace as Lisbeth Salander.

It's fair to say that getting three adaptations based on work by one single author in one year is quite unusual. In 2010, the three films were shown in an extended version as a six-part TV series in Sweden and Denmark.

In that same year, David Fincher announced he would be directing his own version of the trilogy. In December 2011 his adaptation was released, starring Daniel Craig as Blomkvist and Rooney Mara as Lisbeth. Fincher plans to be involved in the other two films in the series.

So, a range of adaptations, from different creators, based on the same source material – at a time when that source material is a literary sensation – were all available *simultaneously* for readers and audiences. This made comparative strategies inevitable, but not in a way bound to myopic fidelity approaches; audiences seemed to enjoy experiencing a range of texts, all intimately connected to each other, at the same time, making the adaptations of the *Millennium* novels 'active'.

Sarah Cardwell (*Adaptation Revisited*) suggests that adaptations should be compared to other adaptations; Linda Hutcheon and Julie Sanders (*A Theory of Adaptation; Adaptation and Appropriation*) both argue that adaptations are somewhat dependent on some prior knowledge of the source material and Tim Corrigan (*Film and Literature*) goes as far as saying that these comparative approaches have interesting things to say about the relationship between different media, and I would agree.

David Fincher was keen to point out that his versions were adaptations of the novels and not remakes of the Swedish films, but it didn't really matter. Stieg Larsson was a journalist, and not a prose stylist. His books

are very journalistic and descriptively visual: the whole plot of the first novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, hinges on visual clues hidden in old photographs. The adaptations allow us to 'see' these visual clues in the old family photographs in a way a medium such as a novel cannot realise. Some novels almost seem to 'ask' to be adapted and Larsson's work seems to be one of those in this analysis.

The subsequent success of the *Millennium Trilogy* and the following series of Swedish and American adaptations just served to make the novels even more popular.

As often happens, other publishers and adaptors sought to find their own Steig Larsson, as the term 'Swedish Noir' was starting to be used by critics and commentators to describe a distinct canon of fairly bleak crime novels set in contemporary Northern Europe: Henning Mankell's *Wallander* detective novels are probably the most well known, but the most recent example of this is perhaps Jo Nesbø, who had a critically acclaimed movie based on one of his novels, *Headhunters*, released in April 2012.

However in 2007 in Denmark a new TV series aired which would satiate later the appetite of UK audiences who wanted more grim tales from the cold and icy region of Europe which had given birth to Lisbeth Salander in 2004. In the first series of *The Killing*, the plot followed the police investigation of one specific case, day-by-day. Each one-hour episode covered 24 hours in the time of the police investigation.

The central character is as enigmatic as Lisbeth Salander. Her name is Detective Inspector Sarah Lund (played by Sofie Gråbøl). *The Killing* begins as she is looking forward to her last day with the Copenhagen police department. She is due to move to Sweden with her fiancé and transfer to the Swedish police force, however everything changes when a 19-year-old woman, Nanna Birk Larsen, disappears only to be found raped and brutally murdered.

Along with her colleague, Detective Inspector Jan Meyer, Sarah Lund is forced to lead the investigation as it soon becomes clear that she is chasing a very intelligent and dangerous suspect. Over a span of 20 days, suspect upon suspect is sought out against a backdrop of political intrigue and violence. The series was highly praised in Denmark for its realistic and bleak portrayal of a murder investigation, and in particular how the murder affects every member of a family.

Due to the popularity of the *Millennium* books and adaptations, and the successful *Wallander* TV adaptations, the BBC in the UK bought the rights to the series and screened it in full between January – March, 2011 on BBC4 – a channel which usually gets quite a small audience share. *The Killing* became the series to watch. There were lots of newspaper articles about the central character, Sarah Lund, and fans quickly became fascinated by the Faroese sweater she wore, which became a sought after fashion item. The series won a BAFTA and was nominated for an Emmy.

In America the Fox network bought the rights and remade the series at the same time it was airing in the UK. In the UK, a rival broadcaster to the BBC, Channel 4, aired the US remake in April 2011 - just one month after the original Danish version had finished its run on the BBC. To further confuse things – or not – the second Danish series of *The Killing* aired on the BBC in the UK in November 2011, directly after the American remake of the first series had aired in the UK. So, in theory, you could have watched an episode of *The Killing*, of one version or another, every week for virtually the whole of 2011.

Unlike the Swedish and American adaptations of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* – which had marked differences between them - the US remake of *The Killing* was fairly faithful to the plot and tone of the original Danish TV series, despite being set in a different city, Seattle (although it was actually filmed in Vancouver). The name of the central character was changed from Sarah Lund to Sarah Linden, and the name of the murdered woman from Nanna Birk Larsen to Rosie Larson though.

However, just as with the *Millennium Trilogy*, both the Danish version and its American remake were very popular; audiences seemed to enjoy watching both versions and comparing them. The actress who played Sarah Linden, Mireille Enos, was widely praised and again her Faroese sweater became an unlikely fashion accessory. The second series of the US remake as of April 2012 is currently airing. Fox has stated that the series' creators now have the confidence – and audience – to develop the plot in a different

direction to the original Danish version. The third Danish season of *The Killing* will air in 2012 also.

This is interesting as it suggests a remake, or adaptation, of a successful series from any genre, needs to do it as faithfully as possible first of all, before then making deviations from the original: for example George R. R. Martin has been very clear that the *Game of Thrones* TV series – which has been a huge success, and critically praised for its ‘fidelity’ – will now take quite a departure from the original *Song of Ice and Fire* novels. This has already happened with the TV series based on *The Walking Dead* graphic novels – the first season was very faithful until the last episode, and the second season is a marked departure from the source material.

Nonetheless, despite the differences, or not, both versions of *The Killing* are intimately connected to each other, and owe their success (and creation) to Steig Larsson’s books and films, and the varied adaptations of Henning Mankell’s Swedish *Wallander* detective novels. In these, the titular character, Kurt Wallander, has been played by two different actors in the Swedish TV adaptations (Rolf Lassgård and Krister Henriksson). From 2008, the BBC has been adapting all of the novels in chronological order – which is something the Swedish producers chose not to do – and starring Kenneth Branagh as the permanently harassed Kurt Wallander.

In her book, *Now a Major Motion Picture*, Christine Geraghty warns about trying to come up with one model to fit all adaptations, and I’m not proposing such a model here. However, it is clear that there is a group of adaptations and remakes which can be described as ‘active’ adaptations because the myriad source materials are very much in the conscious minds and imaginations of the audience. Many will have read, are reading, or will go onto read the *Millennium* books, while watching the films at the same time; many US and UK fans of *The Killing* will seek out the original Danish television series; the adaptations are ‘synchronous’ with the source material, and are therefore ‘active’.

Metaphorically it is like looking through a telescope; the longer it is extended, the greater the range. An ‘active’ adaptation presupposes that the telescope is at its shortest length, whereas an ‘inactive’ adaptation is when the distance is greatest between the two lenses of the telescope: the adaptation is then ‘asynchronous’ with its source material. The value judgements of the fidelity approach seem to flourish in the gap between those two lenses.

However, there is a problem with this analysis: an adaptation is *always* going to be ‘active’ for the adaptor; he or she may have been working with the source material for a considerable period of time – see Peter Jackson’s continuing creative engagement with J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Middle Earth* stories.

However, for most audiences, adaptation is more often than not ‘inactive’, because we generally have an ‘asynchronous’ relationship with the source material; we may think we ‘know’ *Great Expectations*, but it may have been a long time since we read the Charles Dickens novel, and our knowledge of that book in all likelihood has been shaped by other adaptations and versions. Therefore, David Lean’s adaptation would ‘inactive’ in our consciousness.

An example of this is when Orson Welles adapted Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* in 1962, this was the culmination of a very personal relationship with the writer he had had for sometime; the opening of Kafka’s unfinished novel *The Castle* and the first scenes of Welles’ film *Citizen Kane*, mirror each other almost perfectly.

It is for me one of the greatest renderings of a novel on screen. But Welles was critically slaughtered and it took Harold Pinter’s very ‘faithful’ version just over 30 years later in the 1993, for people to appreciate the superior Welles’ version actually is, and what an astonishing adaptation it is. The problem was that the adaptation was ‘inactive’ for the audiences of 1962 – Kafka’s work had only been translated into English in the previous decade - but ‘active’ for its writer and director.

So, to conclude, audiences may think they ‘know’ a work, but this familiarity is also mediated by other adaptations and versions. This ‘assumed knowledge’ can shape how an adaptation is received.

Fidelity positions regarding source texts can flourish in the ‘gaps’ which exist between ‘active’ and ‘inactive’ adaptations.

By focusing on the recent European and US adaptations of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy* and the US remake of the television series, *The Killing*, it seems that perhaps a new mode of adaptation has emerged.

This new mode of 'active' adaptations directly *assumes* that the audience is familiar with previous versions. These 'active' adaptations both celebrate and exploit an audience's prior knowledge of novels, films and television shows.