

Adaptation Studies

New Approaches

Edited by
Christa Albrecht-Crane
and Dennis Cutchins



Madison • Teaneck
Fairleigh Dickinson University Press

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Associated University Presses
2010 Eastpark Boulevard
Cranbury, NJ 08512

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Adaptation studies : new approaches / edited by Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Cutchins.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-8386-4262-7 (alk. paper)

1. Film adaptations—History and criticism. 2. Motion pictures and literature.
I. Albrecht-Crane, Christa, 1967– II. Cutchins, Dennis R. (Dennis Ray), 1963–
PN 1997.85.A319 2010
808.2'3071—dc22

2009045506

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Converting the Controversial: Regulation as “Source Text” in Adaptation

Richard Berger

IT IS A TRUISM THAT WHILE OUR VISUAL MEDIA IS GENERALLY HEAVILY regulated, both in the United States and in the United Kingdom, literature is not. This paper is an attempt to broaden the range of adaptation studies to include the institutional influences that can affect an adaptation. This paper will explore the relationship between adaptation and the censorship and regulatory regimes of both the US and the UK. I will suggest here that the history of adaptation and the history of censorship are closely intertwined. Indeed, many controversial “taboo busting” films—as I shall show—have been adapted from literary sources. So, this examination of adaptation and censorship also throws a light on the elitism that surrounds perceived “high art” forms, as opposed to lower ones. Furthermore, this paper explores the history of adapting controversial novels for both film and television, and examines the ways in which adaptors have treated the most transgressive elements of their source texts. In this way, these adaptations can therefore be read both as a commentary on, and a response to, the novels they are based on.

Adaptation studies have largely been concerned with the relationship between texts (both source and target) and notions of authors. Adaptation theorists have deployed an array of comparative, and latterly medium specific, approaches to understand the relationship between source and target texts. However, current adaptation theorists, notably Sarah Cardwell, Julie Sanders, and Linda Hutcheon,¹ are recognizing the impact an adaptation can have on its source materials. Both Hutcheon and Sanders recognize that an adaptation can “oscillate” with its source material, and that adaptations are dependent on their source material. Both propose a relationship of dependency between an adaptation and its source, and both argue that adaptations should be viewed (and studied) as adaptations.

Similarly, Cardwell argues that an adaptation can “reconfigure” the source material.² These studies move us beyond binary notions of

source and target texts, and it’s this argument I want to build on here, by adding an institutional framework to this sphere of influence between texts and their adaptations. I want to combine industry analysis with an approach that recognizes the interplay and relationship of exchange between adaptations and their sources.

Any such study also serves to illustrate the hierarchy that often exists between cinema and literature. As I have pointed out, literature is not classified or rated, and I want to suggest that if a text is considered “classic literature,” as opposed to “popular fiction,” then more can be “got away with” it seems. Attempts have been made to ban literature, most notably with the trial regarding D. H. Lawrence’s novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, for obscenity in the UK in 1959. The trial judge famously asked the members of the jury if this was a novel that they would be happy for their servants to read. The author himself, D. H. Lawrence, described the censors as “morons.” J. D. Salinger’s 1951 novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, was also marked as being controversial, and was singled out as being an influence on Mark Chapman’s murder of John Lennon in 1980. So, there is an implicit elitism inherent in how different texts, from different media are treated by regulators.

The introduction of the Production Code (often called the “Hays Code” in the US) is probably the most significant date in the history of film censorship. This code was established by the then Motion Pictures Association, overseen by former postmaster, Will Hays. The MPA became known as the Hays Office, as it was run very much in line with Hays’s own moral conservatism. In the UK, the British Board of Film Censorship (now Classification) was established in 1913, but it was the Hays Code and the Hays Office that dominated cinema regulation on both sides of the Atlantic, from 1924, right up until the 1960s. Tom Dewe Mathews describes the Hays Office as being “largely moral” and the BBFC as “political.”³

The Hays Code stipulated that no thigh of a female body may be shown “between the garter and the knickers”; intimate relationships between black and white races was forbidden; if two people were seen on a bed, both must have at least one foot on the floor; no double-beds were to be shown, ever; and forty-three words including “Broad,” “Tom-cat,” and “Cripes” were banned outright.⁴

The Hays Office was very powerful, and studios were pressured into dropping some stars, such as Mae West, because of her film, *She Done Him Wrong* (1933). (Notably, in that same year, the Catholic League of Decency was established, and had over ten million Americans signed up as members.) There had been street protests regarding *She Done Him Wrong*, and Hays vowed to “do better.”⁵ The Office went

so far as to place observers on the set of Mae West's next film, *It Ain't No Sin* (1934).

The early 1930s also saw the emergence of a new genre of movie: horror films. Movies such as *Dracula* (1931) and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Frankenstein* (1932) were all controversial, and all adaptations. The BBFC had banned *Nosferatu* in 1922, but that was because the widow of Bram Stoker, the author of the novel *Dracula*, threatened to sue for copyright.

In 1936, Will Hays travelled to London to visit the offices of the BBFC, and the collaborative relationship between the two censorship boards was further entrenched. After WWII, a steady liberalization began, but the Hays Office still kept a tight grip on regulation. So much so, that screenplays were often submitted to the Hays Office for approval before even a single frame of a movie had been shot. So, in a sense, the Hays office was predominantly censoring what was arguably a *literary* form—the screenplay—throughout the 1930s and 1940s. In the UK, 80 percent of film screenplays were being submitted to the BBFC for approval during this time.

Many novelists at this time adapted their own work for the big screen. Arguably, many writers were influenced by cinema, and their work framed the “utterance” of film in many respects. The novelist Franz Kafka claimed that he was more influenced by cinema than literature, for example. In a sense, these writers adapted many cinematic styles and techniques into their writing, but the cinema also seemed to adopt literary practices: Sergei Eisenstein claimed he got his ideas for *montage* straight from the pages of Charles Dickens.⁶ Many have pointed out the “camera tricks” employed by Virginia Woolf.⁷ Another very visual and cinematic writer was Graham Greene. He adapted his own novel *Brighton Rock* in 1947. The novel was based on newspaper reports of the “Battle of Lewes,” when organized crime first came to the attention of the British public. The screenplay went through a number of revisions because of the Hays Office and the BBFC, before a frame was shot. However, scene cuts from the script were reinstated in the shooting scripts, and subsequently, the finished film was heavily criticised for its violence and its portrayal of gang culture on the UK's south coast.

Often, in the UK, the BBFC would quietly suppress a film until the public outrage had died down. Frank Rooney's short story, “The Cyclists' Raid,” was adapted as *The Wild One* in 1954 (starring Marlon Brandon), but it didn't get a classification in the UK until 1967. So, adaptations often made for the most controversial of films. The script for Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1962) was continually submitted to the BBFC for approval. The film was

adapted by Vladimir Nabokov himself, and the character of Lolita had to be made older—in the novel she is twelve-and-a-half, and in the film she is played by the fourteen-year-old Sue Lyon. The film also dispensed with the “unreliable narrator” device used in the novel, making for a much starker and more “closed” text. Kubrick's adaptation was then rendered far more palatable for the mainstream cinema audiences of the early 1960s, which was the prime directive of the Hays Code. A controversial novel was now a more straightforward melodrama in this cinematic incarnation.

By the late 1950s, the impact of the 1948 anti-trust legislation had finally seen off the studio system, and the power of the Hays Office and the BBFC declined. However, adaptations were still breaking cinematic taboos, again perhaps highlighting the elitism inherent in the relationship between cinema and literature. The British censor John Trevelyan later regretted passing two adaptations of Ian Fleming's spy novels at this time, as the films were so misogynistic: *Dr No* (1962) and *From Russia with Love* (1963).

An adaptation of Julio Cortázar's short story, “The Droolings of the Devil,” was the basis for Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* in 1966, which contained full-frontal female nudity for the first time in mainstream cinema, and scenes of group sex. An adaptation of James Joyce's multi-layered novel, *Ulysses*, was passed uncut in 1967, so mainstream cinema audiences were exposed to the word “fuck” for the first time in movie theaters. It did seem that if the film was based on a prior work that had some prestige and cultural value, then it was allowed its moment of “safe” and “contained” transgression. Just as transgressive, but more mainstream fare, tended to be cut or banned altogether by the Hays Office and the BBFC; in the UK town of Beaconsfield, the local authority owned the cinema and banned The Beatles' film, *Yellow Submarine* (1968) because it was “rubbish.”

Literary adaptations were not always given a free ride, and some directors spent their career fighting for the integrity of their work on both sides of the Atlantic. Ken Russell is a British filmmaker very much influenced by literature, and his adaptation of D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* proved problematic for censors in 1968. Full frontal male nudity was clearly a step too far, and Alan Bates and Oliver Reed's nude wrestling scene had to be darkened. A few years later, Russell loosely adapted Aldous Huxley's *The Devils of London* as *The Devils* (1971), and the BBFC insisted on a great many cuts; the scenes showing masturbating nuns and the administration of an enema to a nun on an altar were both considered unacceptable. The director himself was (then) a devout Catholic, and insisted that his film was about

the way in which religion can be corrupted for selfish ends. The footage cut from the film has only recently been found and restored.

Frank Marcus's play, *The Killing of Sister George*, was adapted for film in 1969, and portrayed a lesbian relationship for the first time in mainstream cinema. This was just a year after homosexuality was decriminalized in the UK. In the same year, the US finally got its cinema regulator, the Motion Picture Association of America. The Hays Production Code that had existed before this was now largely ineffective due a spate of taboo-busting films, in particular Alfred Hitchcock's adaptation of Robert Bloch's pulp novel, *Psycho* (1960) and the aforementioned *Ulysses*. The MPAA quickly adopted a new series of classifications, mirroring the BBFC in the UK. Regulators, however, were not the only ones banning films. Stanley Kubrick ended up banning his own adaptation of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) after several incidences of so called "copycat" violence were reported in the UK media. This moment was probably the most effective incidence of censorship in film history.⁸ The film remained banned in the UK until after Kubrick's death in 1999.

Banning films became more complex with the advent of the VCR. Nicholas Roeg's interpretation of a Daphne Du Maurier novella, *Don't Look Now*, in 1973, caused a stir when it was suggested by some reviewers that the sex scene between Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland was real. But new exhibition technologies had loosened censorship in both the UK and the US and put the reception of such controversial scenes in the home for the first time. The late 1970s saw the domestic video recorder (VCR) become the fastest-adopted media platform in history, and caused a new headache for both the MPAA and the BBFC. New legislation was introduced to combat the new "folk devil," the "video nasty."⁹ Some films, which were previously released for cinema, were effectively banned on video, such as William Friedkin's adaptation of William Peter Blatty's novel, *The Exorcist* (1973).

At this point I want to suggest that a new generation of adaptors and filmmakers was moving away from adapting "classic" or highly regarded literature to more contemporary, and often more controversial (and therefore transgressive) novels. Cinema, at this time, largely due to the cultural cachet of the *Nouvelle Vague* and the New Hollywood movement in the US, had thrown off its attempts to gain some of the status of literature. In a celebrated essay published in the *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1954, François Truffaut had attacked cinema's reliance on adaptation.¹⁰ So, throughout the 70s and 80s a new generation of filmmakers, influenced by the *Nouvelle Vague*, seized upon contemporary literature. For example, besides adapting Mario Puzo's *Godfather*

novels, Francis Ford Coppola used two of S. E. Hinton's tales of teenage gang violence as source material for the underrated films, *The Outsiders* (1983) and *Rumble Fish* (1983). In a sense, contemporary fiction took its cue from cinema, and attempted to be as "taboo-busting" and genre defining.

So, in the next section of this essay I want to sketch out a framework where we can see the adaptation acting against the source material. These films seem to be not just "oscillating" alongside literature, as Linda Hutcheon and Julie Sanders both suggest, but reconfiguring the work in some way, as Cardwell argues. A novel then, is almost legitimized by virtue of having been adapted, and as Giddings and Selby highlight, many authors become "canonical" writers because their work has been adapted so often:¹¹ would Stephen King be as well-known or as admired if his novels and short stories hadn't been such rich source material for cinema? I'm proposing here that an adaptation of a controversial and contemporary novel can make that novel "safe" and "contained" within a sphere of influence that could include a whole range of texts.

Despite new regulation to control what audiences could watch at home on their VCRs, the 1980s was still a "taboo-busting" decade. In 1986, Adrian Lyne shocked audiences with his adaptation of Sarah Kernochan's memoir *Nine 1/2 Weeks*, starring Kim Basinger and Mickey Rourke. In 1988, Martin Scorsese directed the adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis' 1951 novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Many were critical of the film's portrayal of Christ imagining a life with Mary Magdalene. The film garnered widespread protests, particularly in the US. In the UK, the then-head of the Roman Catholic Church, Cardinal Basil Hume, stated that it would be a sin if any practicing Catholic viewed the film. The BBFC screened *Last Temptation* to twenty-eight priests before issuing their "18" certificate. However, cinemas were picketed by Christians anyway. These instances highlight how an adaptation can draw fire away from a source text and take the flak of its source material. The protestors wanted the film banned, not the novel. They blamed the adaptation, and not the source text, a novel that had been in print for over thirty years.

Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg's adaptation of J. G. Ballard's novel, *Crash*, in 1996, caused huge problems for UK censors. The film was passed by the BBFC, but Alexander Walker of the *London Evening Standard*, called the film "pornography" and led a campaign to have it banned. The *London Evening Standard* and its sister publication, *The Daily Mail*, attacked the BBFC, and even published personal details of BBFC employees, implying that they weren't qualified to judge the suitability of films for public exhibition. Westminster

Council in London ignored the BBFC's classification, and *Crash*, to this day, remains the only film to have ever been banned in the West End of London. A year later, in 1997, Adrian Lyne directed another adaptation of Nabokov's *Lolita*. However, he came up against the same problems as Stanley Kubrick had in 1962. In the aftermath of the *Crash* Westminster ban, Lyne's eponymous heroine was played by the fifteen-year-old Dominique Swain, as a fourteen-year-old Lolita. The film was largely praised, though, for its successful treatment of Nabokov's acclaimed novel.

Sometimes, however, literature can shock, before the adaptive cycle had been completed, highlighting how close an adaptation can be to the publication of its source text. The adaptation of "classic literature" affords the distance of decades, even generations. Adaptation of contemporary fiction does not. So, transgressive texts have far more of a dialogical relationship to each other in this instance. For example, in 1991, Bret Easton Ellis's novel, *American Psycho*, shocked readers in the UK and the US. As a consequence, its distribution in Germany was heavily restricted and in Australia it was illegal to sell it to minors.

Any adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis's second novel was going to be controversial, and British filmmaker Mary Harron spent many years trying to get the project off the ground. The film was released in 2000, and was less controversial than the novel which is far more graphic—at one point the serial killer of the title, Patrick Bateman, murders a child at the zoo. Literature can convey some events that a film never would be capable of, and Harron's film was no different. However, the film acted against the novel, rendering it "safe" and "contained" within the adaptation. The film played on the idea that Bateman is mad or suffering from delusions. This is only suggested in the novel, notably in a scene where Bateman fears he is being followed by a park bench, but the film eschewed the violence in favour of portraying a deluded madman, much as both adaptations of *Lolita* had done with the viewpoint character, Humbert Humbert. In fact, both versions of *Lolita* and *American Psycho* are remarkably similar for their controversial content, taboo-busting nature, treatment of their respective source texts, and journeys to the big screen: any ambiguity and ambivalence is ironed out of the adaptation, making, to quote Roland Barthes, a "readerly" text out of a "writerly" one.¹² This, I would argue, in turn neuters the source material to an extent, almost defusing the controversial content, and "reconfiguring" the work, as Sarah Cardwell suggests.¹³

However, regulation which favors the source over the target text can cause problems when both the novel and the subsequent adaptation are considered to be "prestige" artifacts. Three quarters of Academy Awards for Best Picture have gone to adaptations and there is

even a category for Best Adapted Screenplay.¹⁴ Often, the adaptations that win these awards are based on prestigious source material, by prestigious "literary" writers. But what happens when both source and target texts contain elements that would be controversial to a mainstream audience?

Joe Wright's adaptation of Ian McEwan's 2002 novel, *Atonement*, is one such case. Ian McEwan is a Booker Prize-winning writer, whose work has been the subject of numerous adaptations, notably *The Cement Garden* (1993) and *Enduring Love* (2004). Joe Wright's version of *Atonement* is firmly set in the heritage vein, and the film garnered a host of award nominations. The novel centers on a tragic misunderstanding when a thirteen-year-old girl, Briony Tallis, reads and then delivers the wrong love letter to her sister, Cecilia. The letter contains an obscene phrase written half in jest by Cecilia's suitor, Robbie Turner. Briony's misunderstanding sets in motion a disastrous change of events, which catastrophically damages the lives of the two would-be-lovers. The novel, in a sense, is about *the novel*, as the viewpoint character, Briony, is an elderly and terminally ill novelist who is attempting to make up for her dreadful past mistake.

The problem for the filmmakers and the censors is that the obscene phrase in question contained two uses of the word "cunt," not something you would generally hear in a film aimed squarely at the sorts of audiences that enjoyed another adaptation of another Booker-Prize winning author's work, *The English Patient* (1996). However, the film again seeks to make "safe" and "contain" its own source material by appropriating the literary form entirely. In the novel we read the word twice, and it gains its power and shock value by its singular use in one short sentence, in a novel that has few expletives. In the novel, Briony is even described as spelling the word out loud, backwards, to her cousin Lola. In the film, Joe Wright makes us read the word too, as we see Robbie typing the letter. The word is never spoken, but we see it typed twice (in "Old Courier" font), the repetition reducing the word's shock value—in a sense, unhooking it from the narrative of the novel.

The "C-word" in the film is framed in a montage sequence where we cut between Robbie typing two aborted versions of his letter, before typing the one with the "C-word", and six scenes of Cecilia smoking, putting on her makeup and dressing for dinner. The last cut is from a sequence where Robbie laughs after typing the "C-word", before looking over his shoulder, "at" Cecilia—as the scene cuts there to Cecilia dressing.¹⁵ It's as if the two lovers are sharing an intimate moment together. So, the film uses this romantic device, expressed through montage, to neuter one of the greatest taboos in the English

language. This sequence in Joe Wright's *Atonement* is similar in construction to the controversial sex scene in Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now*, where the scene cuts between the sex and the couple dressing afterwards. In the novel the word is central, but in the film, it is not. This may be a result of Wright's own background. Wright is famously dyslexic, and didn't, for instance, read Jane Austen's novel for his adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (2005). It's possible that a similar situation existed in this adaptation. "Reading" a word in a novel is different from "gazing" at a word on screen—the latter is very much a collective experience—and this serves to defuse any controversy in the adaptation, and therefore, I would argue, reflect a sort of normalcy back on the novel also.

Why are adaptors and filmmakers drawn to such transgressive source material, knowing that they could fall foul of the regulatory frameworks that exist in the UK and US? I would argue that part of the answer lies in the fact that they are ultimately fans of the material, and I would also suggest therefore that directors of adaptations can often have a different relationship with their source material as a consequence. Ken Russell, for example, has made several adaptations of D. H. Lawrence's novels for both film and television, an author described as his "literary soulmate."¹⁶ We can also perhaps see two adaptive modes here: the first being that adaptations of "classic" literature are often attempted for heritage and nostalgic reasons, and the second is that adaptations of contemporary fiction are done precisely for transgressive reasons, as the adaptations and directors attempt to appropriate some of the cultural cachet of such works as *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *Fight Club*, and *Brokeback Mountain*. Some filmmakers, such as Joe Wright (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Atonement*) and Ang Lee (*Sense and Sensibility*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and *Lust, Caution*) seem to oscillate between these two positions.

It is for these reasons that adaptation studies need to perhaps broaden in scope, from narrow confines of texts, notions of fidelity and medium specificity, to taking into account institutional frameworks that act on any adaptation. The regulatory frameworks in the UK and the US can also serve to enforce self-censorship on an adaptation, with the filmmakers of *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2006) again taking their cue from Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita*, in increasing the age of the central character, Laure, from the age suggested in Patrick Suskind's novel. So, it is clear, then, that regulatory frameworks (which often begat self-censorship positions on adaptors and filmmakers) can be called "source texts" themselves.

The history of adaptation is the history of censorship and regulation, and vice versa, and broadening out adaptation studies to take into

account these institutional and cultural factors does offer up a new framework for analysis. This analysis highlights the elitism inherent in the relationship between literature and film, and it also shows the impact an adaptation can have on the receptions of its source material.

NOTES

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