

Headhunting: adaptations of least resistance.

The 'blurb' on the back cover of the 2011 American paperback edition of the 2008 Swedish novel, *Headhunters*, states that, "With *Headhunters*, Jo Nesbø has crafted a funny, dark and twisted caper story worthy of Quentin Tarantino and the Coen brothers". So here a novel – a piece of literature – is being compared to three auteur filmmakers, igniting immediately in the consciousness of the discerning book-buying public a text which is perhaps something caught between *Pulp Fiction* and *Fargo* via *Blood Simple*.

In his book, *Show Sold Separately*, Jonathan Gray makes a case for studying what he calls, "paratexts"; these texts can be the advertising, promotion or even just the hype which often surrounds the release of a major motion picture, or the airing of a big budget television drama:

"If we imagine the triumvirate of text, audience and industry...then paratexts fill the space between them, conditioning passages and trajectories that criss-cross the mediascape, and variously negotiating or determining interactions among the three" (Gray, 2010: 23).

In calling for an "off-screen studies" to take these allied texts into account, Gray argues that:

"[T]o be able to call an adaptation 'good' or 'bad' requires an audience member or community to have developed a notion of the ideal and proper text...[p]arotexts play as much of a role as does the film or television program itself in constructing how different audience members will construct this ideal text" (ibid: 11).

If the scope is widened to also take in literature, then we can see how different texts, in different media, are connected. It also gives in insight into how popular criticism can regulate the interactions between the "triumvirate" which Gray describes.

It is perhaps problematic then that the pull cinema has had on literature for over 100 years has largely been ignored by modern adaptation scholarship; the novel is surely a very different medium by virtue of that fact is has been constantly 'remediated' by cinema; today's novelists are writing in an era when visual media are the more dominant, at the cost of more literary ones. It should not come as too much of a surprise then to note that literature is shot through with the 'utterances' of cinema; and with cinema, comes an increasingly peculiar form of 'predictive' film criticism.

Jo Nesbø's novel was published in the author's native Sweden in 2008. Nesbø himself is viewed very much as part of the 'Nordic-noir' or 'Scandi-lit' canon of novelists; a group of modern crime writers who set their tales in contemporary Norway, Sweden and Denmark. This loose collection also includes Henning Mankell's *Wallander* crime novels and Stieg Larsson's *Millenium* trilogy, all of which have been adapted into television and film versions respectively. To this we can also add the television dramas, *The Killing*, *Borgen* and *The Bridge*, which have no defined literary source, it is true, but do share many of the characteristics of the genre.

An interesting phenomena to note here is how quickly the novels are being adapted in various ways, for different audiences: the three *Millenium* volumes were published in Sweden between 2005-2007, and all were adapted into Swedish language films which were released in the same year, 2009. In 2010, the films were exhibited as a six-part television series, and then at the end of 2011, David Fincher released his English-language adaptation of the first novel in the series, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

Although claiming that it was an adaptation of the novel and not a remake of the Swedish filmed version, it is clear that Fincher's film owes a great deal to both as sources, in particular the central performance of Noomi Rapace as Lisbeth Salander. 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 alike.

Similarly, in 2011, the BBC in the UK aired a 2007 Danish television series, *The Killing*. This series painstakingly followed an investigation into the disappearance, rape and murder of a young woman. *The Killing* was an immediate hit with audiences eager for more 'Nordic-noir' and in that same year the American version was also aired, also to great critical acclaim. To confuse things slightly – 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. In theory at least, this meant that UK audiences could have watched an episode of *The Killing*, of one version or another, every week for virtually the whole of 2011.

Jo Nesbø was by now already a writer whose popular Swedish crime novels featuring a detective named Harry Hole, were a great success. On the back of huge sales for Nesbø's *The Snowman*, it was his 'stand alone' novel, *Headhunters*, which was the first to be adapted into film and released in April 2012 by Yellowbird; the same production company behind both the *Millennium Trilogy* film adaptations and both the Swedish and English-language *Wallander* TV series. One of the writers of *Headhunters'* film script, Ulf Ryberg, had previously worked on the *Wallander* adaptations. So, the 'Nordic-noir' DNA ran very smoothly in the veins of the *Headhunters* movie.

While the marketing for the paperback edition of *Headhunters* had already established the novel's cinematic credentials – as well as directly mentioning both Stieg Larsson and Henning Mankell - reviewers of the film, perhaps unwittingly influenced by the speed at which other Nordic crime thrillers had been adapted and remade, were presciently casting the remake: of the central marriage in the film, *The Independent* newspaper asks us to "imagine Steve Buscemi married to Heidi Klum"; *The Daily Mail's* Christopher Tookey describes the main protagonist, "With his coiffed blond hair and poached-egg eyes, he looks like a cross between the young James Spader and Steve Buscemi" whereas *The Scotsman* thinks the same character, "looks like Christopher Walken's shorter, more ginger brother". This review also references the Cohen's *Blood Simple* and *Fargo*. It can be no surprise then that an English-language version was already in production while the first Swedish adaptation was being made.

As *Headhunters'* reviewers seemed to eager to cast their own imagined remakes or adaptations of Nesbø's novel, it suggests perhaps that adaptation is ultimately a very natural process; the means by which we understand the world. It is almost as if an adaptation which has not yet been made, can have a profound influence on the critical reception of a novel, or a film, even if that adaptation is entirely speculative. We have to add these imagined adaptations to Gray's list of paratexts, as they clearly have some influence on critical discourses, and perhaps even the reception of a film.

Adaptation then, if it is a natural phenomena, must be part of the process of reading; adaptation is how we 'meet' literature, as the very act of reading a novel asks us to cast characters, dress the film sets and scout the locations of our imaginations. We have been used to reading through the lens of previous versions of a text, but now we are moving into a period where we read through the lens of a future version. A study of the paratexts which surround the publication, adaptation and reception of novels, reveals how audiences and critics almost pre-empt an adaptation, before it has even been made, let alone released. In an era of heightened adaptation, and a very fast-moving, promiscuous and fluid relationship between different media, adaptation seems now to be the path of least resistance.

## References.

Gray, J., 2010. *Show Sold Separately: promos, spoilers and other media paratexts*. New York: New York University Press.

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