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Introduction

The interface of film and literature, as well as film and history, is an important site of theoretical and cultural reflection in American studies, making it a worthwhile subject for reconsideration. At the intersection of history and literature, life-writing provides another rich source of material for film, with its first-hand stories and accounts of individuals as well as their relationship with society through biography, autobiography, letters, diaries, journals, and eye-witness accounts. Turning life and literature into film poses challenging questions for scholarship across disciplinary borders and critical approaches. Film studies, film theory, theory of adaptation, and comparative literature are some of the fields most involved in this cross examination, themselves affected by major theories and disciplines such as semiotics, philosophy, feminism, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism.

If at the beginning of the twentieth century the new medium of film appeared as an innovative language for representing and understanding the complexity of modern life, at the beginning of the twenty-first century film continues to interrogate and interpret the American present and past, to influence and be influenced by other media, and to be considered a work of art as well as part of popular culture. In "Mapping American Popular Culture," Leonardo Buonomo rightly stresses how movies are considered a hybrid form in which creativity and commerce are profoundly interconnected (11). Involved inextricably with the commercial aspects of the entertainment business, film struggled to affirm its own aesthetic claims and now faces new challenges to adapt to and compete with other media and its delivering devices.

When film borrows from literature, history, or other written sources, there still seems to be a residue of deeply-rooted prejudice against the hybrid art of cinema. Adaptation theory has convincingly argued against this prejudice

and tried to correct the view of the subaltern status of adaptation, moving away from comparative evaluations and what has been called "fidelity fallacy." In a seminal essay, Robert Stam identifies some of the reasons for the hostility toward adaptation, e.g.: the general historical seniority of literature to cinema and the specific priority of novels to their cinematic adaptation; a platonic depreciation of images against words (iconophobia vs logophilia); a class prejudice that sees cinema as popular culture and adaptations as vulgarization or as parasitical of literature. He has also demonstrated how new theoretical perspectives have contributed to subverting many of these prejudices and hierarchies: the intertextuality theory of Kristeva and the "transtextuality" theory of Genette, stressing the endless permutation of textuality; the dismantling of hierarchies of "original" and "copy" by deconstruction; cultural studies' interest in exploring cultural productions as part of a broad discursive continuum; or narratology's focus on narrative in general as opposed to literary narrative alone. Moreover, in the digital era, innovations in film technology have had a strong impact on the production and reception of films, on the one hand further undermining the notion of original and copy by making everything reproducible, and on the other making film viewing closer to reading a novel (Stam 3-13).

Along these lines, the field of adaptation studies has expanded considerably, with the creation of specialist journals, such as the *Literature/Film Quarterly*, founded as early as 1973, and, more recently, *Adaptation*, "a journal devoted to the academic study of literature on screen in the broadest terms,"[1] and *The Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* (2008). The publication of important works by scholars such as Robert Stam, Linda Hutcheon, James Naremore, Julie Sanders, and Thomas Leitch, who seriously engage with theoretical issues, has broadened the perspective of adaptation beyond the literature/film relation. Hutcheon in particular has developed the notion of adaptation to include opera, television series, video games, pop music, and theme parks, considering the practice of adapting a part of the story-telling imagination and stressing the concept of intertextuality. She argues that all texts are somehow connected to a network of existing texts and art forms, and adaptations are created and received in relation to a prior text: they are a form of intertextuality both as a process of creation that involves re-interpretation and recreation, and

as a process of reception: "we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (Hutcheon 8).

While theorists have insisted on the multiple sources of adaptation, the cinematic adaptation of literary works remains a widespread practice and a privileged object of analysis, probably because of the persisting canonical position of literature and, to a certain degree, of cinema itself. This is a well established area of research, initiated by the landmark book by George Bluestone *Novels into Film* (1957), continued by Brian McFarlane's *Novel to Film* (1996), and further developed and systematized by the work of Deborath Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (1999, 2007) and Barton Palmer (2007). Many other books and essays offer excellent analyses of specific works, case studies with a variety of approaches, and close readings of a film in relation to its source text in a comparative way or as an autonomous text that can be interpreted and valued as such.

While judging an adaptation's merit by its closeness ("fidelity") to its literary source has long been discarded as an appropriate critical approach, the relationship of film to its source text can and has been studied from different perspectives with more rewarding results in terms of cultural and visual codes. Moreover, film adaptations are now considered to have more than a single source, and are better read in terms of intertextuality, with references to previous films as well as other literary and visual texts. If, as Hutcheon authoritatively stated, "the idea of fidelity should not frame any theorizing of adaptation today" (7), it should be remembered that early studies, such as Bluestone's, already insisted that adaptations are autonomous works that can be valued in and of themselves, claiming the freedom of film to interpret, alter, add, or cut, so that comparing novel, script, and film does not imply any evaluation on the basis of fidelity, but becomes a useful critical analysis and appreciation of both. A film can depart from its literary sources for a variety of reasons; it can attempt to suggest a new interpretation of a literary text, or it can adapt it to a new historical context, across national and cultural borders.

Another major critical approach, best represented by McFarlane, is concerned with analyzing formal aspects of film adaptation through narratological lenses that help examine the narrative strategies of literature

on screen and the ways in which, for example, narrative voice is translated into cinematic codes. This is based fundamentally on the idea of cinema as a narrative art, as a way of telling a story: film shares with the novel a capacity for narrative. Other developments in adaptation studies concentrate on cinema as a visual art form and explore the ways in which the written page is transcoded into images. Linda Cahir speaks of literature-based films as intersemiotic translations, which generate completely new texts, materially different entities. What Angela Delle Vacche calls the "visual turn in classical film theory and art history," as the title of her 2002 book reads, no doubt has its influence on adaptation studies as well, bringing attention to visual culture and the interface among film, painting, and photography. Other critics, while not denying the importance of formal analysis, emphasize the social and historical context of film production and reception. They reject working within a formalist approach that divorces films and literature from history and culture, to focus on the economic and political aspects of adaptation, highlighting how a text is constructed for a specific audience and ideological purpose.

Many of the issues raised so far about the adaptation of literature into film recur in similar ways when examining the relation of film to history, with some disciplinary peculiarities based on the concept of history itself and its methodology. Zagarrio eloquently traces many of the variables involved in the relation between history and film, based on the current theoretical debate on the changing definitions of history and historiography. Hutcheon speaks of an ontological shift "from the real to the fictional, from a historical account or biography to a fictionalized narrative or drama" (8), and argues that in ontological shifts it makes little sense to talk about adaptations as "historically accurate" or "historically inaccurate" (18). She takes *Schindler's List* as an example, which "is not *Shoah* … in part because it is an adaptation of a novel by Thomas Keneally, which is itself based on survivor testimony. In other words, it is a paraphrase or translation of a *particular* other text, a particular interpretation of history. The seeming simplicity of the familiar label 'based on a true story' is a ruse: in reality, such historical adaptations are as complex as historiography itself" (18). While arguing that history and fiction cannot be neatly separated on ontological grounds, Winfried Fluck arrives to a similar conclusion: "fictional texts,

including films and, more specifically, historical films, will always distort, just as the predecessor of the historical film, the historical novel, distorted history and still does" (216). He considers fiction a functional category with the "freedom to lie" and points out that "a lack of historical veracity in a fictional text may provide an interesting and valid point of analysis, but it is not a point that endangers the text's legitimacy" (217). In fact, as in the case of fidelity for the adaptation of literary texts, the question of the accuracy of historical representation in films, with the necessity felt on the part of historians to unmask false versions of historical sources, has lost its priority in favor of a study of how adaptations of history work.

A book like Peter C. Rollins's *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*, illustrates different aspects of film and history and includes essays that examine documentaries and movies as interpreters of history, as influences upon history, as historical documents, and as institutional history. Other critics focus less on context and more on the structural and ideological features of film. Robert Rosenstone focuses on the way in which film constructs its own historical world. In his introduction to *Revisioning History*, a collection of essays edited in 1995, he claimed film is "the space to *contest* history, to interrogate either the meta-narratives that structure historical knowledge, or smaller historical truths, received notions, conventional images" (8). In *History on Film/Film on History*, a landmark book in the field, he argues that film should be regarded as a form of history in its own right with its own codes and conventions that are different from, not inferior to, those of academic history, and he examines how different filmic modes adopt different conventions for representing history, including both formal components and ideological structures. James Chapman considers this postmodernist approach limited and brings into the picture the "New Film History" scholars (Sue Harper, Jeffrey Richards, and Anthony Aldgate) and their combination of contextual and textual analyses to show how the finished film "is the outcome of the various decisions taken and compromises made during its production." In his review essay, Chapman gives a useful overview of the debate on history and film as argued over the years. He shows how in the 1970s historians were primarily looking at documentary films as sources for the study of contemporary history, and how in the 1980s attention shifted to feature film and the extent to which it reflected historical

conditions and societies, so that the historical film came to be analyzed "for its mobilization of the past for propaganda, for its role in the emergence of national cinemas, and for its contested place in 'taste wars' between the views of middle-brow critics on the one hand and popular preferences of cinema audiences on the other."

Film scholars approach the debate from a different angle. They usually do not consider historiography as the main point of reference for understanding historical films. Above all, they look at historical film as film, not as an alternative way to 'do history'. The debate between academic historians and film critics is not over, but more and more critical works try to examine the variety of ways to render historical moments, events, or characters on the screen and what sort of historical world a film constructs.

The contributors to this special issue of *RSA Journal* on "Life and Literature into Film" are well aware of the debates within adaptation theory and studies and take up the challenge of investigating film adaptations both as autonomous work and as forms of multiple intertextuality. They offer intellectually stimulating essays that suggest the new and exciting directions being taken by scholars working in the field of film studies, adaptation studies, cultural studies, and American studies. When they compare a film to its literary, historical or biographical source, they do not ask the fruitless question of fidelity, rather, they use comparative approaches to enhance the pleasure of multiple readings and interpretation. And they do not necessarily subordinate cinema to literature or history, but they raise productive questions on the texts analyzed and on the theory of adaptation. Theoretical implications can be inferred from the actual readings of textual examples with different methodologies.

Vito Zagarrio's essay provides a compact introduction, from the perspective of a film studies scholar, to the contemporary theoretical debate on the relations among cinema, literature, and history in the context of the digital era. His discussion of the different concepts of history and their necessary impact on the interplay with film is particularly illuminating in terms of the complexities involved in any critical approach to the topic. The same theoretical sophistication is involved in his revisiting of the intersection of literature and cinema, both in the direction of adaptations of novel into film and of film into novel, a more recent development

linked to the commercial features of entertainment, which reverses the traditional relation between source text and adaptation. His discussion of how history is now turned immediately into cinema, without any apparent need of critical distance, highlights exemplary war films set in Iraq and the Middle East, and finally focuses on *American Sniper*, a film directed by Clint Eastwood in 2014 and based on the autobiography of Chris Kyle. This case study is investigated through a close reading of both the autobiography and the film, in a comparative analysis that examines the original text, the media permutation, the cultural permutation, and the linkage between them. When Zagarrio ponders the question of fidelity, he does so not in evaluative terms to measure the merit of the film under examination, but as a descriptive term to discuss the relationship between the two companion works. He is much more concerned with film aesthetics and technique, with the influence of television and video games, and with the complex interaction with ideology. The question of "true" and "false" in the movie is addressed in all its intricacy, bringing into the picture technological warfare and the war movie genre, hyper-realism and virtual reality, life-writing, photography, and documentary material.

Stefanelli's essay is an example of how a case study can reveal a deep concern with contemporary theory, specifically in its intersection with visual studies. In her analysis of Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*, an adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenides' novel, she focuses on what she calls a "painterly approach to storytelling" and on the process of showing rather than narrating. She concentrates on the visual qualities of the film (more than on a traditional comparative analysis of novel and film) in its connection with figurative art, both painting and photography. In a certain way this essay exemplifies the current emphasis on the visual impulse of cinema, which signals an interesting return to its origins and its recognized power of making images seen. It convincingly engages with the intervisual scheme of the film, foregrounding references to a number of paintings, from Constable to Pre-Raphaelite artists such as John Everett Millais and Edward Burne-Jones, to Henry Matisse, and comparing them with clips from the film. The analysis shows how Coppola's film adapts not only a literary text, but revises and re-imagines other works of art, in an intricate web of visual juxtapositions and intertextual frame. It is a fruitful investigation of the specific forms and visual techniques used to

draw "old paintings out of the archive of memory and make them interact with modern images."

Through a comparative analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* and its film version by Mira Nair, Malandrino's essay explores one significant area of film adaptation in relation to postcolonial theory and context. Multiculturalism and globalization have had a notable impact on film adaptation, and critical approaches that examine movies through the lenses of postcolonial theory are quite frequent. One recent example is *Postcolonial Cinema Studies*, a book edited by Sandra Ponzanesi and Marguerite Waller, which offers a transnational perspective on the relation between cinema and postcolonial studies. Since the 1980s, the phenomena of literary transmigration have been defined by paradigmatic categories such as the postcolonial, diasporic, and transnational. Of relevance here is Salman Rushdie's famous statement, referring to migrant writers: "We are all translated men," in the etymological sense of the word, of being carried across, and at the same time using two languages. Jhumpa Lahiri is considered a successful translator of diasporic experiences as well as Mira Nair, who specializes in films for international audiences that act as "native informers" on Indian society. Both writer and director are intercultural interpreters who worked together on a critically acclaimed adaptation that has been received as cross-cultural and transnational. Malandrino examines the cultural and visual transcoding of the literary text into film language, highlighting the narrative mechanisms that accompany the protagonist's existential dilemma in the novel, and then the cinematic devices that convey the diasporic experience from the director's perspective. She discusses the reconfiguration of various issues in the different media, for example pointing out how the narrative flow of the novel seems to stress the spatial and temporal fractures between America and India, and how the film emphasizes continuity between these locations by juxtaposition and at the same time creates a sense of alienation and dislocation. The director explained that she shot the film as if Calcutta and New York were one city "because that's what it feels like to be between worlds." *The Namesake* is an interesting case study of adaptation and of transnational and global cinema. The essay convincingly engages with postcolonial issues as well as literary and cinematic techniques to show how both texts produce intertwined, juxtaposed narratives across linguistic, national, and generational divides.

Calanchi's essay is not a case study of the transposition of a particular text into film, but an examination of the early work of one of the pioneering Italian scholars in the field, Guido Fink, whose approach was always comparative, constantly intersecting literature and film, American and Italian culture, film theory, and reflections on history and society. She assesses his important contribution to the development of American film studies and American studies in post-war Italy. Much has been written about the early Italian discovery of American literature and culture in the period between the two world wars on the part of writers like Pavese and Vittorini, which, it should be underlined, included a strong interest in American cinema, often placed on the same level of discourse with literary texts. Less has been written on the post-war period and its contradictions, and on the difficult beginnings of American studies and film studies. Fink's articles published in the '50s are presented by Calanchi as ground-breaking work that established the bases for a multi-layered understanding of American culture and ideology, interfacing literature and cinema across disciplinary boundaries, which would later become characteristic of his methodology of research and influence new theoretical and critical perspectives. One interesting aspect consists in his creating a cross-national geography based on a symbolic juxtaposition of American and Italian cultures, in particular by comparing American and Italian cinematography, and intertwining Italian history and American literary imagination. It is an exceptional case study of intertextual methodology that deserves due attention because it illuminates the intellectual situation in post-war Italy and helps one understand the history of American studies in Italy in their strict connection with film studies.

Notes

[1] Cartmell, Deborath, Timothy Corrigan, and Imelda Whelehan, "Introduction to *Adaptation." Adaptation* 1.1 (2008): 2. The explicit goal of the journal is to facilitate a dialogue between the two disciplines, "not as Literature and Film, but as literature on screen and screen on literature, not demonstrating how the two arts are or are not similar, but how they contribute to and enrich each other through an understanding of the translation of one art into another and the commingling of the 'literary' and the 'cinematic' across both" (3).

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