

❖ **Linda Hutcheon — *A Theory of Adaptation***

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Adaptation seems always to have been a cause of anxiety for self-elected cultural gatekeepers: from the sad precedent of a Fitzgerald or Chandler schlepping westwards for the meretricious temptations of Hollywood before proceeding to dig their grave with a corkscrew, to their direct filmic descendent, the Coen Brothers' character Barton Fink (1991), reduced from dreams of an off-Broadway 'Theater of the Common Man' to churning out B-grade wrestling-picture screenplays in a rundown Los Angeles hotel. To this dolorous procession could be added John Hurt's character in *Love and Death on Long Island* (1997), a literary aesthete appalled by his own slaving attraction to a frat boy-flick piece of beefcake, and what may well prove the definitive incarnation of the anxious adaptor: Nicolas Cage's sweating, overweight, paralytically insecure screenwriter in Spike Jonze's self-deconstructing gem of a film, *Adaptation* (2002).

It is not a list to inspire confidence in the intellectual merit of studying adaptation. Until recently, the opprobrium in which adaptation is too often held by defenders of aesthetic hierarchies, was mirrored within academe. Here adaptation studies – insofar as it existed as a coherent discipline – seemed mired in a theoretical and methodological rut, endlessly producing comparative case-studies of paired novels and films. Against this background, Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* is abundantly welcome, especially in its explicit aim to theorise a field that has for too long been a refuge for those averse to theoretical self-reflection. Hutcheon's book is genuinely innovative in its structure: eschewing the usual comparative case-study logic, it instead opts for a series of thematically-organised chapters based around the 'what, who, why, how, when and where of adaptation', which allows the author to investigate the fascinating phenomenon of adaptation from a variety of angles (xiv). Similarly innovative is Hutcheon's opening out of the field from merely comparing novel and film adaptations to factor in the full gamut of cultural texts – opera, theatre, ballet, television, comic books, computer gaming, musicals and theme-park rides – to explore what Hutcheon memorably terms 'this ubiquitous palimpsestic form' (139).

There is evident continuity here with the author's well-established reputation as a literary theorist with a penchant for intertextuality in all its guises (specifically parodic, post-modern and post-colonial), and also with Hutcheon's more recent monographs on opera (in collaboration with her husband, medical academic Michael Hutcheon). Biting off a far broader range of cultural texts offers Hutcheon a way out of the stale, dead-end formalist preoccupations with medium specificity which have dogged adaptation studies, allowing her instead to explore more generalised, experiential 'modes of engagement' – 'telling', 'showing' and 'interacting' – within which all her chosen media can be encompassed (22). By counterpoising specific textual examples against long-established 'rules' stating which media are capable of which artistic effects, Hutcheon joins a line of critics in debunking various 'clichés' (xv) of adaptation studies, insisting that 'the truisms of theory need testing against the realities of practice' (63). But as examples can always be produced to rebut any so-called 'rule' of cultural creation, and given that rule-breaking has long been held to be the very *purpose* of artistic innovation, one wonders what the point of such a rule-seeking approach by critics might be in the first place.

The move away from Hutcheon's intellectual home territory of literary theory and criticism to 'cultural studies / media studies' (as publisher Routledge classifies the book on the back cover), has required the author to get

across a vast range of research, which she has accomplished with characteristic enthusiasm for interdisciplinary pursuits and intellectual generosity. However, in the sections dealing with adaptations and computer gaming some of her observations about new media are less assured, betraying a residually literary perspective in their occasional over-generalisation or positing as cutting-edge, developments which have now been around for some time (50-52; 135). This aside, Hutcheon's book builds upon the work of Robert Stam (also generously referenced throughout) to provide a disciplinary bridge between adaptation studies and the waves of critical theory which recast cultural analysis from the 1980s onwards: semiotics; post-structuralism; feminism; and post-colonialism. The nexus between such schools' concerns with the instability and protean possibilities of culture and the phenomenon of adaptation should always have been apparent but, for reasons perhaps of disciplinary politics and institutional history, this is an intellectual exchange that is only now belatedly taking place.

Hutcheon's structuring device of investigating the 'what, who, why, how, when and where' of adaptation is accompanied by a vast array of examples from all chosen media in an effort to provide readers with specific textual examples to help them 'hook onto' the theoretical concepts under discussion (xii). Nevertheless, despite this ostensibly 360-degree approach to adaptation, in practice Hutcheon's interest lies principally in the textual and audience dimensions of the phenomenon. At three points in the book Hutcheon develops lengthy sections subtitled 'Learning from Practice' which offer extended case-studies of selected cultural narratives' adaptation across multiple media in different historical and geographical contexts: *Billy Budd* (72-77); the story of the eighteenth-century Carmelite nuns of Compiègne (95-105); and *Carmen* (153-67). While functioning as useful encapsulations of the range of theoretical principles discussed in their respective chapters, these sections seem to balloon, as though the comparative literature critic in the author cannot tear herself away from the intricacies of specific cultural texts and restrict herself to abstruse theory for too long. As would be apparent from their listing above, opera also features largely in all three case-studies, and Hutcheon's extensive digressions into the minutiae of their musical scores raises the suspicion that, in casting her net of mediums so wide, Hutcheon has been obliged to make some sacrifices in terms of analytic depth. As the field of adaptation threatens to spill over into the study of culture at large, the topic risks becoming so all-encompassing as to be conceptually unwieldy.

Of Hutcheon's 'what, who, why, how, when and where' categories, it is the fields of *who* and *why* that are given the shortest shrift. There is some discussion of the intellectual property and conglomerate media dimensions of adaptation in chapter 3, but the shadow of the Frankfurt School looms large in the overly-ready equation of 'franchis[ing]' with cynical corporate profit-mongering (5; 30; 87-88; 116-19). The commercial aspects of adaptation undoubtedly deserve attention – not all corporate enthusiasm for content multi-purposing is based on selfless, high-minded circulation of classic texts, to be sure. But the rapprochement between the political economy and cultural studies wings of media analysis in recent years has given rise to more nuanced understandings of the interplay between producers, texts and audiences, which could be registered in greater depth here.

In a fascinating framing device, Hutcheon introduces in chapter 1 and again towards the close of the book a secondary, here shadowy meaning of 'adaptation' – namely, the term's denotation in Darwinian theory and biological anthropology of an organism's fitness for its environment as a means of increasing its chances of survival. This unexpected (in this context) take on adaptation is reminiscent of Spike Jonze's brilliant *Adaptation* time-lapse montage sequence of life from the apocryphal primeval soup all the way through to contemporary LA. What had seemed like yet another writer's block-induced stalling tactic on the part of the protagonist 'Charlie Kaufman' – after all, in adapting Susan Orlean's admired *The Orchid Thief* how could he possibly cut anything out? – now takes on a second meaning as a visual pun. It also serves, of course, as a semi-serious meditation on whether the stories that survive and reproduce as adaptations do so because of their very cultural fecundity – their ability to signify in new ways for new times and in new places. This metaphor of culture as ecosystem might be extended further to encompass the realm of academe itself. If disciplines exist in a state of uneasy co-dependence and tooth-and-claw rivalry, then Hutcheon's cross-breeding of literary analysis, cultural theory, film studies, new media and theatre history evidences hybrid vigour. *A Theory of Adaptation* should give the study of adaptation a new lease of intellectual life and make the lamentably inbred discipline of adaptation studies as central to humanities academe as the practice of adaptation unquestionably is to popular culture at large.