

ADAPTATION: AN INEVITABLE FORM OF DELUSION

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Abstract

This paper examines the process of adaptation as an act of delusion, where the original source is a different text altogether. The idea is to reiterate the fact that it is the medium that matters, not necessarily the story line. It is a well known fact that reading a literary book is usually considered superior and the movie adaptation rarely satisfies any reader, this paper deconstructs this notion and argues that such a comparison is redundant. The novels of F.Scott Fitzgerald and their movie adaptations will be the primary focus of this study, and George Bluestone's and Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theories will be the secondary sources.

Keywords: Adaptation, Delusion, Multiple identities, Reality, Illusion.

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Adaptation, in all forms is highly tangled, elusive and hardly satisfying when compared to the original source. For an avid reader, a novel and its movie adaptation are rarely on a par and the latter is always an imitation, not artistic enough or highly commercial. However the underlying problems with regard to adaptation are not adaptation per se, the insidious comparison between the two mediums engenders the conflict of fidelity, authenticity and originality. Irrespective of the content, it is highly unlikely that a novel and its movie adaptation will produce same effect or notch up similar reception.

Following the philosophy of Immanuel Kant on knowledge, one can divide all knowledge into the brackets of form and content. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant says: "That in the appearance which corresponds to sensation I term its matter (or content) but that which so determines the manifold of appearance that it allows of being ordered in certain relations, I term the form of the appearance" (Kant 66). The difference of mediums and the issue of fidelity become less vexatious when the original source and its adaptation are considered as entities, rather than a mere reproduction of the same story through a different medium. As Maria Stirbetiu explains in her article *Literature & Film Adaptation Theory*:

In the language of fidelity, literature and films are never equals; texts are never judged in comparison to other art forms, films in particular, and only its adaptation is capable of being unfaithful to the text. Moreover, this language of fidelity implies a certain hierarchy where the literary text is the source and the film becomes a mere copy. (Stirbetiu 3)

Since the visual image and the verbal image are two different experiences, the question of fidelity to the original source becomes justified. However many critics and theorists find this comparison highly problematic and inimical to the process of adaptation. In his *Novels into Films* (1957), George Bluestone observes, "Between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image lies the root difference between the two media" (Bluestone 3). The two mediums are always defined in terms of each other, one substituting the other. Linda Hutcheon tries to go beyond the issue of fidelity and mere substitution in her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) where she focuses on adaptation being a different mode of interpretation rather than a mere repetition of the original source. She begins her book by defining adaptation and says "adapting is a bit like redecorating" (Hutcheon1). Just the way a renovated house might lose its share of antiquity, adaptation might not capture the essence of the original source. That, however, does not reduce the value of the redecorated state.

Based on what Bluestone and Hutcheon propose regarding the difference of mediums, my paper argues that adaptation is a form of delusion that essentially deludes its audience from the original source by creating an illusion of reality. What the audience perceives or expect may not be what the author actually meant. Following the poststructuralists notion of the "death of the author", the text isolates itself from the author and irrespective of the medium, creates meaning on its own and hence multiple meanings/interpretations are interwoven with each other.

Fitzgerald's novels have an inherent tendency towards motion pictures. The narrative technique is apt for the making of movies and Fitzgerald himself dwells upon the possibilities of a potential film while critiquing the commercial aspect. Alan Bilton observes, "For Fitzgerald, film is both the means of arresting time and a sign planted to mark its passing (Bilton 6)". Fitzgerald not only captures a major epoch of American history but also the transition from words to moving pictures. Adaptation not only transforms the medium/interpretation but also marks a difference in the sensibility. It depicts what people have longed all this while but could not identify what exactly they

desire. As Bilton points out further about *Tender* “Dick's parties, like Hollywood, allow one to identify with ones ego ideal, the screens surface reflecting back to the audience the very characteristics they most fervently desire to absorb. The smartest lines, most flattering lighting, ones best side forever on view; Dick's most cherished talent is to flatter the cinematic egos of his cast, to dress the sets, polish the script, and arrange the cameras for the maximum degree of *ersatz* glamour and sophistication (Bilton 7)”. Going back to Freud's model, the unconscious desire is unleashed to one's conscious mind and hence every viewer is bound to have a unique experience/interpretation, irrespective of what the original source/writer actually intended.

Likewise in *Gatsby*, the film characteristics overpowers the novel and memory divides the gap between the lost past and the anticipated future. The divide between what is lost and what could be preserved is a significant concern for Fitzgerald and one could picture the same both in the novel and even in its slightly romanticized movie adaptation. However, the romantic love between Gatsby and Daisy might dominate the historical and literary significance in the movie, that is, the imagination engendered by a film is often deluded and it marks the absence of reality. Hence, reality becomes abstract and imagination an illusion of that reality.

The double-fold representation of split identities in *Tender*, the delusions experienced by a schizophrenic woman corresponds to the transformations a movie adaptation undergoes. The dialogues in the novel are often cinematic and ruminative, for instance the following conversation of Dick with Rosemary:

“Look, I am in an extraordinary condition about you. When a child can disturb a middle-aged gent- things get difficult”.

“You're not middle-aged, Dick- you're the youngest person in the world”.

“Rosemary?” Silence while he stared at a shelf that held the humbler poisons of France- bottles of Otard, RhumSt.James, Marie Brizzard, Punch Orangeade, Andre Fernet Blanco, Cherry Rochet, and Armagnac.

“Are you alone?”

-Do you mind if I pull down the curtain?

“Who do you think I'd be with?”

“That’s the state I’m in. I’d like to be with you now”.

Silence, then a sigh and an answer. “I wish you were with me now”.

There was the hotel room where she lay behind a telephone number, and little gusts of music waivered around her-

“And two-for tea.

And me for you,

And you for me

Alow-own”. (Fitzgerald 94)

The above quoted passage marks a significant shift in the narrative. The latent anxiety and desire is portrayed with a sense of camera consciousness. The refrain “Do you mind if I pull down the curtain?” creates the binary of real and imaginary, reinforcing the idea of a potential movie that deconstructs the notion of superiority of the original source while grappling with the issue of fidelity and originality.

To this end, Ruth Perlmutter analyses the role of camera and the subjectivity with which it deludes us:

The camera possesses knowledge, lets us into the “truth”, exploits our expectations of suspense, prepares us with motivations and foreshadowings by which we see or predict the future. At the same time, we endow it with a subjectivity. It becomes for us Rosemary’s point of view or the direction of Nicole’s or Dick’s gaze. The camera, therefore, leads us seductively into its fiction, its “truth” of representation, directing our gaze through the gaze of a character while maintaining the power of a *dues ex machine* (Perlmutter 11).

The “one truth” notion of reality that a camera or for that matter a movie offers restricts the scope of interpretation and delusion becomes a symptom. The image and the imagination become alike and we perceive reality through the eyes of moving characters/pictures. In her seminal work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey argues of a woman being the image, and men the voyeur. However, it is the fallacy of an actual woman on screen that feeds the fetish of men, not the real woman.

A cinematic adaptation depends for its success on the response of the characters to the real life situations. Unlike realism or realistic fiction, films eject a counter response “by burlesquing the correct emotional responses- fear and love and sympathy” (Fitzgerald 288). The fact that literary texts and films are verbal and visual respectively builds up the hierarchy that claims the former medium to be superior. This however has been contested by poststructuralists and the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s technique of deconstruction denounces this gap of the original and the imitation. According to him, the idea of superiority comes from the process of copying, unless there is an adapted version, the original source is not significant.

Fitzgerald himself reiterates the role of an actor and how very often it is going beyond the cliché of human life, emotional responses and assumed realities. In *Tender*, Fitzgerald presents Dick in a conversation with Rosemary about the pernicious position of an actor. He says:

“The danger to an actress is in responding. Again, let’s suppose that somebody told you, ‘your lover is dead’. In life you’d probably go to pieces. But on the stage you’re trying to entertain- the audience can do the ‘responding’ for themselves. First the actress has lines to follow, then she has to get the audience’s attention back on herself, away from the murdered Chinese or whatever the thing is. So she must do something unexpected. If the audience thinks the character is hard she goes soft on them- if they think she’s soft she goes hard. You go all *out* of character-you understand?” (Fitzgerald 288).

Gatsby on the other hand, encapsulates the post war disillusionment, the shattered American Dream, a failed love story through a series of movie-like images. Since the cinematic traits are dominant in Fitzgerald’s novels, the movie adaptations always sparked conflicts regarding its fidelity to the original source. The transition apparently fails since the conventions of a novel cannot be applied to movies and hence the original is never replicated.

According to Freud, delusions were mainly due to the conflict between the id, ego and super-ego. A person’s inner conflict attributes its meaning to the external world and perceives things in a split/broken form, and hence reality is always distorted. The adapted

version, likewise, deals with a lot of disorientation, multiplicity of voices, and ethical conflict. After analyzing Fitzgerald's novels and film adaptation in this context, the question of transformation seems vague and critical. Whether the film elements paved way to the cinematic representation or was it the desire to replicate the story in to a movie is an entangled quest. Both mediums represent unraveling of the same theme and context through different modes, allowing multiple interpretations and point of views. Hence, the story takes a back seat and the medium of the discourse becomes powerful.

Desmond and Hawkes note the politics behind adaptation and argue along the lines of the conventions followed by verbal and visual mode. They observe:

For the transition to be successful, it is important that the adapter understands the story as well as the means of expression of both discourses. Another way of saying this is that the adapter needs to be aware of the conventions of the literary story as well as of cinema itself...If the adapter doesn't take into account the conventions of the antecedent form will stubbornly cling to the adaptation and make it seem uncinematic (40).

The commercial and economical aspect also determines the quality of discourse, masking the original content to suit the taste of people. Novels allow the reader to delve into the psychology of characters while such an analysis is absent in case of films. Films facilitate what the audience expects and the actors delude the reality and mould it according to or against their anticipation. Delusion, thus, becomes a coherent strategy, materializing unreal events into reality during the process of adaptation.

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