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On Truth and Falsity in their Intertextual Sense:

Adaptation as Dissimulation

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Pivot is published through Open Journal Systems (OJS) at York University

There is a dishonest claim central to many conversations about adaptation, namely that replication is possible across media—that some element of a text can be copied or transferred from a source to a target medium. This claim is immediately evident in mainstream discourses around source-fidelity, but underlies much of the academic criticism on the subject as well. This claim, however, ignores essential material differences: as much as an actor in a film adaptation may resemble the imagined image of the original character, the former is imparted through light captured on celluloid, while the latter is

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imparted through an arrangement of words on a page. Even the concept of equivalence—that an adaptation works by discovering medium-specific elements analogous to those in the source text—emphasizes sameness in adaptations, without adequately acknowledging the impossibility of literal equivalence. Despite this impossibility, an audience's experience of an adaptation as such is nevertheless founded on just such a perception of similarity. Audiences come to understand the intertextual meaning of an adaptation only by actively recognizing the relationship between the source and adapted texts. If this relationship is not one of replication or equivalence, it is my contention that adaptation is a class of metaphor, depending on a paradoxical relationship that equates unequal terms.

The medium-specific material differences that render literal replication in adaptation impossible are perhaps best demonstrated by example. Robert Rodriguez's film adaptation of Frank Miller's graphic novel *Sin City* is frequently discussed in terms of its similarity to its source text. A brief Google search for audience reactions to *Sin City* as an adaptation

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turns up several examples exemplifying this perception to a near-absurd degree: “[*Sin City* is] also the first (and probably only) adaptation that stays 100% true to its original material” (Usumezbas); “Miller’s vision lives and breathes and *Sin City* took the life from his graphic novel and cut and pasted it onto the screen” (Lloyd); “My biggest problem with the 2005 film is that it was just an expensive motion comic. In my book, it is the prime example of why no one should do a 100% faithful adaptation. There’s just no reason for it to exist if it’s not going to separate itself from its source material” (Goldberg). As the last quotation suggests, even someone who does not see fidelity as the ideal may still see it as a theoretical possibility.

Side-by-side comparisons of pages from the graphic novel and stills from the film, which can be found in several comparison libraries online (cf. Longworth), reveal a striking visual similarity between the two works. Despite this and the reactions quoted above, the film version of *Sin City* is not and could not be a replication of its source. The characters in the film are portrayed by live actors, whereas the comic’s characters are illustrations; the film involves dynamic motion at twenty-four frames per second, whereas the comic merely implies motion by juxtaposing images in separate panels; and the film is light captured on celluloid, while the comic is ink on paper. The physical material of the medium is crucial: an adaptation made in a different medium is essentially different, even if it can somehow be perceived to be completely faithful.

If differences between adaptations and adapted texts are as significant as I suggest, then audiences’ expectations of sameness in an adaptation need elaboration. Firstly, it should be noted that audiences also expect difference. Few, if any, audiences begin their experience of an adaptation with an expectation of encountering an exact replica: if literal sameness was the overarching motivation, then audiences would likely just return to the source. I must grant the

possibility that sentiments like “cut and pasted” are hyperboles employed by passionate fans to (over-)emphasize their perceptions. The anticipation of sameness is often less all-encompassing than these phrasings suggest; it is more likely to function as the (perhaps subconscious) belief that the new medium will replicate various elements of the source even if the medium itself necessitates overt changes.

This kind of belief still fits under the umbrella term “fidelity,” but its logic works more subtly than the usual chorus that the novel was better than the film. The 2010 collection *Beyond Adaptation: Essays on Radical Transformations of Original Works* purports to focus on works that do not merely adapt their sources, but depart from them in more extensive ways. Part of the argument that editors Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams propose in their introduction to the collection is that the term “transformation” offers a way to get beyond the fidelity discourse that seems inherently caught up in the word “adaptation.” Frus and Williams advocate that “transformation” be used to describe more significant departures from sources, while the term “adaptation” be retained for works that are “limited to representing a source text” (5). In framing the collection this way, however, Frus and Williams gloss over the significant necessary differences between adaptations and their sources. In so doing, they reinforce the place of fidelity idealism in the study of “adaptation,” even as they advocate “transformation” as a way out of this dead end (5). However, since transformation implies transference as well as alteration—there must be a kernel from the source in the new text that has undergone the drastic change—Frus and Williams’s language continues to rely on rhetoric that indirectly implies the logic of replication. The logic of this terminology leads to questions of what in a source text gets transferred, how we recognize it once it is altered, and what the process of transitioning elements from one text to another entails.

Questions like this—often phrased in terms of “what gets adapted and how?”—were the subject of ongoing debates in adaptation studies from the late 1990s to the mid 2000s, but the current conversation has largely shifted away from such concerns. The shift occurred, in part, because critics seemed to agree both that the relationships between the texts involved in any given adaptation are more complex than the logic of transference or equivalence allows, and that there are ultimately many other much more interesting areas of concern in the field, such as production contexts and the processes of reception (Cartmell and Whelehan 6; Cutchins et al., *Pedagogy* xii; Leitch “Crossroads” 76; Murray 5). Current work predominantly supports the idea that there are more differences than similarities between texts that move across various media. Theorists suggest that adaptation studies ultimately benefit from the recognition that elements like character, narrative, story, spirit, tone, and style are either too intimately related to the medium of expression for any notion of transference or equivalence to hold water, or are too ineffable to properly theorize (Andrew 100-3; Hutcheon 10, 16, 171; Leitch “Fallacies,” 168; Raitt 51; Stam, “Theory,” 49). Regardless of this shift in the academic conversation, popular discourse still employs the shaky rhetoric of transference, equivalence, and replication, as the *Sin City* examples quoted above suggest. It is thus worth returning to this discourse in order to ask why it continues to be so seductive.

George Raitt addresses what he terms as “fidelity lust” by suggesting, somewhat paradoxically, that the attraction to fidelity is a “fascination with difference” (55). For Raitt, sameness and equivalence are not mutually exclusive with difference, because the statuses “alike” and “unlike” are relative. They will vary according to the specific criteria being used as the principle of comparison (55). He uses the following analogy to explain his meaning: an orange is different from every other orange in subtle ways, yet they are all the same

kind of fruit, sharing a similar taste. Apples are different from oranges, and yet both are equivalent in their capacity to satisfy hunger (Raitt 55). While objects may be seen as the same according to one principle of comparison, they may still be different according to other principles. It is only by the strict adherence to one principle, one perspective in the process of comparison, that two objects may be deemed the same. Raitt suggests that by studying adaptations in line with this understanding, the role of the reader/viewer becomes centralized. It is each audience member that determines his or her principle of comparison when evaluating the relative "sameness" and "difference" of the adaptation/source relationship (55). Raitt, however, does not elaborate further on the reader/viewer's role—how it functions, what it requires—and so more inquiry is needed into the ways in which audiences understand adaptations as intertextually meaningful.

Raitt also does not take as a premise that "sameness" is a literal impossibility, instead seeing it as overshadowing the fruitful possibilities inherent in the study of "difference." If we accept the premise that an adaptation and its source text are not literally the same or equivalent to their sources on any level, how can we account for the pervasiveness of the tendency to see adaptations as involving partial replication? Julie Sanders writes that "it is usually at the very point of infidelity that the most creative acts of adaptation ... take place" (20). I intend to push this claim one step further by suggesting that it is at the very point of infidelity that all adaptations take place. This is clear when we understand sameness, not as an inherent feature of an adaptive text, but as a function of the reader or viewer's role. Since fidelity depends on the perception of sameness where there is, in a literal sense, none, there can be only varying degrees of infidelity. Put another way, the relationship between texts is not so much revealed as created.

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The drive to find similarities between an adaptation and the original is very strong. If there were only differences, there would be no distinction between adaptations and wholly unique texts. Thus the phenomenon of adaptation is paradoxical: adaptations are fundamentally different from their sources, and yet the perception of sameness is necessary to understand adaptations as such. A closer look at the “very point” of infidelity is needed in order to tease out the details of this paradox. This theory must take stock of the impulse to fidelity, a hermeneutic inclination powerful enough for the logic of transference to so pervade the popular and critical discourse surrounding adaptation.

There is a basic interpretive process undergirding this paradox of adaptation, which Nietzsche suggests, in “On Truth and Falsity in their Extramoral Sense,” is fundamental to the formation of all ideas. He writes,

Let us especially think about the formation of ideas. Every word becomes at once an idea not by having, as one might presume, to serve as a reminder for the original experience happening but once and absolutely individualized [...] but by having simultaneously to fit innumerable, more or less similar (which really means never equal, therefore altogether unequal) cases. Every idea originates through equating the unequal. (5)

Not only can we designate things as “the same” which are inherently different, but we must do so in order to communicate at all. As Nietzsche argues, we only know “leaf” by an “arbitrary omission” of the differences between individual leaves (5), so too do we understand adaptations as such. We can say that a character, plot device, motif, or image is the same as another such element in another text only by means of an arbitrary omission of the traits that differentiate them. These traits include, as explored earlier, the various ways that the material differences of the medium render literal

replication or transference across media impossible. Though he does not cite Nietzsche, Raitt's analogy of the apples and oranges should come to mind. Raitt emphasizes the importance of difference, and its paradoxical non-exclusivity with notions of sameness and equivalence. Through Nietzsche, we see that all ideas require the omission of differences in order for relationships of equivalence to become intelligible.

Where Raitt stops just shy of naming the phenomenon that enables this paradoxical equating of the unequal, Nietzsche suggests that this enabler is metaphor, which he describes as the leap "out of one sphere right into the midst of an entirely different one" (4). As adaptations are distinct texts, the ability to understand them in a relationship of equivalence to their sources requires just such a metaphoric leap. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in *Metaphors We Live By*, suggest that "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (5). The inclusiveness of their definition, like that of Nietzsche, supports the idea that metaphoric thought is central to the interpretive process underlying the experience of an adaptation. This aligns well with Linda Hutcheon's argument that we experience adaptations as oscillations between the text currently being witnessed and our memories of the source text (8, 121): as we watch, read, or play the adaptation, we flip back and forth in our minds to other texts we have experienced, forming connections and exploring possible relationships. In order for an adaptation to be meaningful as such, audiences must make a strong identification in this process of oscillation. They must commit to experiencing the text (the adaptation) specifically in terms of the memory of a previously experienced text (the source).

Every idea, like that of Nietzsche's leaf, exists relationally. We do not know Nietzsche's leaf as a thing-in-itself, existing in the world, but rather by establishing a fixed convention that

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organizes what we arbitrarily omit: a pine leaf is not a bay leaf, as a bay leaf is not a maple leaf—and so on *ad infinitum*, though all of these are referred to equally by the word leaf. The relationality of ideas moves a step further with Derrida's argument that meaning is produced through the play of signification (354). Adaptations are likewise meaningful through the play of substitutions in the closed system of language (Derrida 365). The supplementary nature of signs enables the intertextuality that, in turn, enables adaptation. That this is a metaphoric process can be made clear with reference to Max Black's "system of associated commonplaces" (40). Black uses the example of "wolf" as a sign that organizes sets of associations:

The idea of a wolf is part of a system of ideas, not sharply delineated, and yet sufficiently definite to admit of detailed enumeration. The effect, then, of calling a man a "wolf" is to evoke the wolf-system of related commonplaces. If the man is a wolf, he preys upon other animals, is fierce, hungry, engaged in constant struggle, a scavenger and so on. Each of these implied assertions has now to be made to fit the principal subject (the man) [...] Any human traits that can without undue strain be talked about in "wolf-language" will be rendered prominent, and any that cannot will be pushed into the background. The wolf-metaphor suppresses some details, emphasizes others—in short, *organizes* our view of man. (40-1; italics in original)

Similarly, adaptations work by deeming one text (at least partially) to be the same as a previously existing text. Doing so instigates the relational interaction of the two texts. Adaptations come to function not as a single extended metaphor, but as a connected series of opportunities to engage various systems of associated commonplaces in productive interaction. It is thus that the perception of sameness is not

found in an adaptation itself, but created by the audience's playful equation of two unequal texts through the omission of various material traits. As it is a process bound up in the play of signifiers, adaptations are not necessarily experienced as such. It is wholly possible to view an adaptation, even of a familiar text, and not think of it as adaptive. The process of interpreting an adaptation as such not only requires the reader/viewer to know, directly or indirectly, the various sign structures that comprise the adapted text, but requires him or her to also actively engage in the playful interaction of the two texts by perceiving their metaphoric linkage. I use the word "actively" because the process of experiencing an adaptation is productive, generative of new meanings, not merely an exercise in passive reception. However, like an everyday conversation, where the play of language usually happens effortlessly—unconsciously—the play of adaptation often occurs without pause. It is thus that the metaphoric equating of unequal texts is obscured, a hidden seam that binds the two unlike materials.

Since it is this metaphoric stitching that connects the texts involved in an adaptation, the recognition of sameness is a prerequisite to interpreting an adaptation as such. Paul Ricouer writes of "the wonderful 'it was and it was not,' which contains [in a nutshell] all that can be said about metaphorical truth" (224). I suggest that "it was and it was not" also contains all that can be said about the "truth" of adaptation. Pushed far enough, there is nothing to maintain the notion that adaptation involves replication or transference. An adaptation, rather, is the result of a clear understanding in the audience's mind that an adaptive relationship exists between two texts. This understanding is powerful enough to identify unlike objects even where literal sameness is an impossibility. Ricouer suggests that "metaphor creates the resemblance rather than finding and expressing it" (236). In the same fashion, adaptation as a class of metaphor works by creating sameness

or equivalence. The interpretive processes that enable this creation are akin to what Nietzsche terms dissimulation, that character of forgetfulness that permits humankind to exist beyond discrete, unique experiences—that is, to communicate general ideas, and so to exist socially (3). As a trope for discussing adaptation, dissimulation encompasses the “it was and it was not” of metaphor; it acknowledges that the fundamental difference between texts can nonetheless be experienced as sameness. Those elements that we perceive as true (in the sense of equal) in the relationship between an adaptation and its originary text are, as Nietzsche says of all truths, “illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses” (5). The wearing out of metaphor is likewise how an adaptation comes to be understood as faithful or equivalent to its source: the result of forgetfulness regarding the “it was not” of metaphoric coupling.

There are actually two sets of worn-out metaphors at work in the rhetoric undergirding adaptation theories of transference and equivalence. On the one hand, the adaptations are themselves worn-out metaphors. They not only function by audiences’ equation of the unequal, but audiences are so used to this process of playful interaction that the fallacious nature of the identification fades away. They are illusions forgotten as illusions. On the other hand, the language of transference and equivalence has itself lost its metaphoric function. In referring to an adaptation as a transposition or a functional equivalent (McFarlane 6, 22), we evoke the metaphor of transference, often without recognizing that that is what we are doing. As shorthand, there is nothing wrong with discussing adaptation in such terms. Indeed, the equating of texts can be so strong, as with *Sin City* and its adaptation, that it seems as though the comic was transferred onto the screen, and there is no absolute reason that it should not be discussed in this way. The issue arises when the “it was not” of metaphor is not

properly acknowledged. Ultimately, the comic was not transferred: actors were cast and assembled on a soundstage; a screenplay was written and edited; producers, directors, set dressers, costume designers, and a myriad of other individuals made choices that impacted the final film; a soundscape and musical score were recorded and edited, as were the hours of shot footage, the various takes, the various angles; and so on. The medium-specific production processes render the material of an adaptation entirely distinct from the adapted text. The apparent sameness in the relationship of an adaptation to its source, enabled by the power of the metaphorical “is,” accounts for the *impulse* to fidelity; forgetfulness about the “is not”—the Nietzschean dissimulation—accounts for the *rhetoric* of fidelity.

As the field of adaptation studies continues to expand and develop, it is crucial to recognize the ongoing challenge raised by the strength of the metaphoric “is” and its tendency to obscure the “is not.” As Raitt suggests, the paradoxical co-existence of sameness and difference in adaptation centralizes the reader/viewer. It is up to the audience member to form the connection, to explore the relationship between texts in whatever fashion suits that person. In regards to the popular consumption of adaptations, there is no great harm in discussing them as faithful or not, nor in using the terms of transference and equivalence; the wearing out of metaphors is part of the way that language develops. However, it is possible that a wider recognition of adaptation’s metaphoric function could play a role in improving strategies of media literacy. Future work on adaptation as metaphor will hopefully contribute to this initiative. We may continue to desire a degree of faithfulness in the adaptations of the texts we love, just as we may continue to view successful adaptations as accurate transpositions of the source text. But if we learn to recognize the roots of this desire and this perspective, we may learn to recognize, and then enhance, the complex intertextual

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exchange that occurs. Even if there is nothing necessarily lost in believing the lie of fidelity idealism, there may be much to be gained through a heightened awareness that it is, after all, a lie. ☉

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