Barbara Straumann

Adaptation – Remediation – Transmediality

In *Handbook of intermediality: literature - image - sound - music ,* 2015

Part 1: Adaptation

Adaptation – the "extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art" (Hutcheon 2006, 170) – can occur within the same medium, for example in literary rewritings, which appropriate and refigure previous literary texts.

Cinematic adaptations of literary texts enjoy immense popularity, while adaptation discourse often invokes pejorative terms such as

- Infidelity
- Betrayal
- Deformation,
- Violation

etc.
As well as seeing literature and film in rivalry with each other, this rhetoric works with a clear-cut dichotomy between **high art and popular culture** as well as a hierarchical distinction between original and copy.

This binary opposition in which the literary source text is privileged over the cinematic adaptation and in which the copy is considered to be less prestigious than the original has, however, been deconstructed by recent approaches in adaptation studies. As Sanders points out, "adaptation and appropriation are fundamental to the practice, and, indeed, to the enjoyment, of literature" (Sanders 2006, 1). Shakespeare was himself very much an adaptor.

Modern notions of originality and autonomy are the result of "a rather recent, individualistic conception of the 'author' and the 'work', a conception […] that started to become legally defined only at the end of the eighteenth [century]" (Bazin 2000 [1948], 23).

Although adaptations are derived from predecessor texts, this does not render them derivative or second-rate… If literary texts are themselves intertextual and dialogic, and if authors are multi-discursive and fragmented, there is no single 'origin' or 'spirit' to which adaptations could be 'faithful'. Contemporary approaches regard all texts and adaptations as forms of (re)interpretation. The (re)interpretation offered by an adaptation can alter our reading of a literary text in a lasting way.

Stam (2005, 3) describes adaptations as "mutations" that help their source texts "survive" by adapting them to changing environments. Indeed, the cultural survival of texts can be nourished by the ways in which adaptations reimagine them in and for a different historico-cultural context and media system.

At the same time, film adaptations have been described as a ‘digest’ processing literature so as to make it more widely accessible in popularized form to a mass audience.

Usually the shift from the literary to the cinematic is said to require condensation and concentration, especially with regard to plot and characters.

While narrative texts describe characters through purely verbal means, characterisation in film and drama can draw on a range of extraverbal elements such as body movements, acting styles, gestures, accents.

In other respects, however, film resembles narrative fiction more than drama. While the theater stage offers a broad perspective on the scenes, all of which are invariably seen from the same angle and distance, film allows for a myriad of changes in the position of the camera so that scenes are always represented from a particular angle and distance. Since the camera adopts a particular position and thus a particular point of view, it can be said to focalise, accentuate and mediate the narration in analogy to the narrator in narrative fiction.

Like narrative fiction, film can convey a character’s point of view not just through direct speech (namely commentary by voice-over) but also by means of a range of other devices, including camera angle, focal length, music, mise-en-scène, etc.

The frequent adaptation of the ‘classics’ is partly due to economic and legal considerations, namely the fact that the texts in question are outside of copyright law (cf. Sanders 2006, 48). Starting with the early cinema, film has often sought to accrue cultural capital by drawing on the literary canon. Yet the adaptation of well-known canonical texts is also a way of ensuring prior knowledge on the part of the viewers.

Filmmakers have to decide whether or not their adaptation is going to entail a cultural relocation and historical updating. The historical, cultural and regional specificity of adaptations can either be reduced or heightened.

One of the best-known cross-cultural adaptations is Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957), which transposes *Macbeth* from medieval Scotland to Japanese feudal culture and, in so doing, replaces the Shakespearean text with a form of visual poetry.

Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000) refigures Elsinore as a Manhattan financial corporation and Claudius as a corrupt CEO – an updating that brings the play closer to the audience’s temporal, geographical and social frame of reference.

Transcultural adaptations often involve shifts in racial and gender politics. Gurinder Chadha’s *Bride & Prejudice* (2004) gives Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* a Bollywood treatment and refigures the Bennets as a contemporary Indian family. Tim Blake Nelson’s ‘O’ (2001) is an update of Shakespeare’s *Othello* which focuses on an African-American high school basketball player, and thus invokes the O. J. Simpson trial as an important intertext.

As a form of retelling, adaptation can be said to oscillate between conservative affirmation and revisionist subversion. Adaptations can support the creation of cultural and national myths.

Adaptations can also have the potential of re-visioning the past in their appropriation and rewriting of canonical texts. Hence they can, for instance, bring to the screen what is absent, merely evoked or even hidden and repressed in the texts they refigure. An example for this type of rewriting is Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1999), which fills the gaps and absences that have been located by Edward Said's postcolonial reading of the novel (1994) as it makes explicit the colonialism and slavery on the Antiguan plantations that support the Bertram estate in England.

Part 2: Remediation

The much-cited concept of remediation was coined and developed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000). The authors argue that media are not autonomous. Rather than operating in isolation, media are in constant exchange with other media:
"A medium is that which remediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media […]" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 65).

Put differently, what defines media is not their distinct formal or technical specificity but the fact that they adapt, remodel and transcode the forms and practices of other media:
"Media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other, and this process is integral to media. Media need each other in order to function as media at all" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 55).

Newer media refashion older media just as older media draw on newer media. Hence, for example, virtual reality remediates both film and perspective painting, while television can remediate digital computer technology (as in Katy Perry's lyric video for "Wide Awake").

In *Sherlock* (TV show, BBC, 2010) digital textual layers are superimposed on the film image in order to render the thinking process of the protagonist visible as he is searching for and filtering information in his mind.

The concept of remediation works with two distinct and contradictory modes of mediation:
Transparent immediacy,
in which the medium is made to erase the traces of mediation so as to render the fact of mediation altogether invisible (e.g. in the case of virtual reality), and

Hypermediacy,
in which a medium multiplies and highlights the signs of mediation (e.g. in the fragmented visual style of computer desktops and the internet).

The process of remediation is closely linked to the long-established tendency of media to adapt and absorb older media in order to present themselves as ever more transparent. This attempt is particularly pronounced in the case of the new digital media, which remediate and refashion earlier media such as television, film, and photography.

Certain digital media forms have to employ a lot of mediation (i.e. hypermediacy) in order to create an experience of transparent immediacy and thus make the medium (seemingly) disappear. The immersive experience of virtual reality and video games, for instance, requires that the viewers do not notice the presence of the medium itself.

Part 3: Transmediality and Extended Storytelling

The term *transmediality* literally means 'across media' and is used to refer to textual elements such as plots and characters that appear in a variety of different media.

Some critics argue that characters and themes are not dependent on a particular medium but, on the contrary, can be put into narrative form in different media.

Transmedial examples include Disney films that have led to the creation of entire franchises comprising comic books, musicals, collectable figurines, physical and digital games as well as theme parks.

The more specific concept of transmedia storytelling coined by Henry Jenkins (2006) is concerned with projects which extend and develop stories and themes across various media platforms coherently.

In contrast to spin-offs and mere merchandising, **the transmedia approach is, from the start, crucial** to the conception of the narrative plot, the fictional story-world and the characters as well as to the ways in which they are dispersed and sold across various delivery channels.

What is emphasized by Jenkins' concept of transmedia storytelling is not so much the question of how a story is translated into another medium (adaptation) or how a medium refashions another medium (remediation), but **the possibility of expanding the scope and meaning of a theme or narrative by using a range of different media**. Several different media platforms are used because certain media can explore certain facets better than others.
Telling a story on multiple media-platforms makes it possible, for instance, to add further plot developments, to explore character backgrounds, or to provide new insights into the fictional story-world. Transmedia storytelling thus typically thrives on rich story-worlds with multiple characters that sustain multiple narratives.

A game, for example, can develop aspects and ideas that do not fit within a two-hour feature film (Jenkins 2006, 8–9).

In Tying it all together: Popular video and transmedia practice in popular music. (*Bloomsbury handbook of popular music video analysis*, 2019) Christopher Jost **offers very interesting examples of transmediality. He discusses**

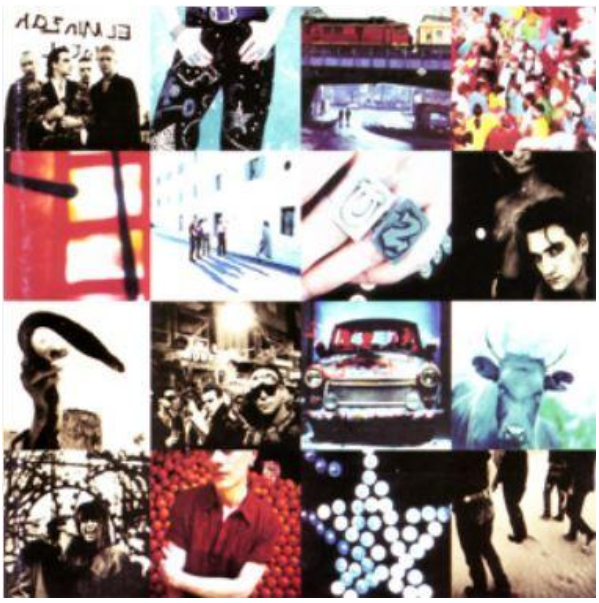
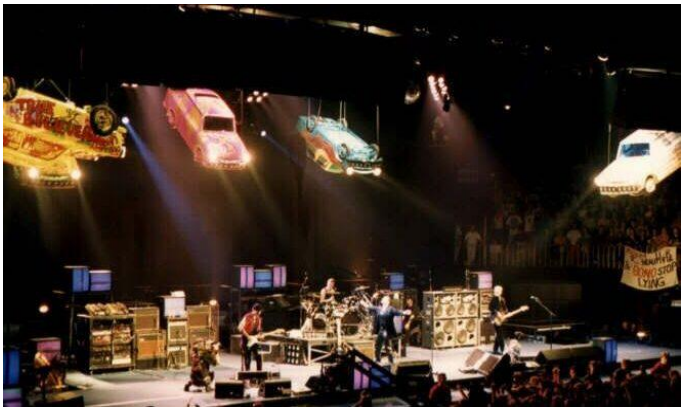
- U2, *Achtung baby,* 1991 (Concept album)
- The Who, *Quadrophenia,* 1973 (Concept album)
- Kraftwerk's music and shows

U2 recorded *Achtung Baby* in Berlin at a time when the city was at the political epicenter of a changing world and the Berlin Wall was falling (1990). Berlin represented change, and Achtung Baby was a revolutionary album, very different from U2's previous album. It's a provocative, experimental album that alienated U2's fanbase, but allowed the band to reinvent themselves and remain relevant for another 30 years.

Anton Corbijn, Dutch photographer and film director, came up with the idea of using Trabants, cars made in East Germany, as a thematic element for the album cover of Achtung Baby. They stood for the fall of the East and the demise of Communism.

The Trabant cars became one of the enduring images of the Achtung Baby artwork and the Zoo TV tour. U2's set director Willie Williams found a way to suspend the Trabant cars and use them as spotlights to shine down on the band and the audience.

Trabant car. Trabant is a series of small cars produced from 1957 until 1991 by former East German car manufacturer VEB Sachsenring Automobilwerke Zwickau.	

U2, Achtung Baby, album cover (example of collage) featuring the Trabant car.	
U2 - One. Official music video (Anton Corbijn Version) / screenshot featuring a Trabant	
U2, Zoo TV tour. Trabant cars used as spotlights to shine down on the band and the audience.	

The Who's *Quadrophenia* was released in 1973. A short text written in the style of an interior monologue portrays the everyday life of the protagonist, a young man called Jimmy. In addition to this, a total of thirty-two monochrome photographs illustrate different stages of the plot in the style of a photo novel. Apart from this, narrativity is constituted within the lyrics, which are printed in the booklet; they provide important perspectives on the protagonist's psyche and his perception of the world.

On top of this, there is a fourth level of narration: environmental sounds. As in the case of radio plays, these sounds characterize different settings within the plot.

Six years after the album release, in 1979, Quadrophenia was produced as a feature movie. The cinematic realization led to a multitude of changes in the plot, but the most striking difference was in how the musical material was reorganized. The songs were turned into a film score, leading to a number of interesting changes and atmospheric effects.

The rock opera is an example of a transmedia approach that is based on the crossmedia elaboration of a specific subject. Kraftwerk—the German exponents of electronic pop music—have played a pioneering role in such manifestations of transmediality.

Due to Kraftwerk's integration of these design aesthetics, the band's works carry a very strong visual appeal. The creative vision of the band is closely linked to the idea of the manmachine, an entity based on the mutual relatedness of human conduct and technological devices. This is not only expressed with the help of album titles (Autobahn,Trans Europa Express), cover artwork, and lyrics, but is also conveyed in the music.

The stage from the band's 1981 Computerwelt tour looked like the control room of a factory or a power plant, and, furthermore, a set of dummies contributed to the show as the materialization of "the robots," which the band addressed in the song of the same name.