

ENGL3030 Research Essay:

Engaging with The Three Musketeers

Using the 2011 3D film adaptation of *The Three Musketeers*, directed by Paul W S Anderson, and its adapted text, the novel *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas for demonstration purposes, this essay will explore the meaning behind Linda Hutcheon's statement: "adaptation as adaptation involves, for its knowing audience, an interpretive doubling, a conceptual flipping back and forth between the work we know and the work we are experiencing" (139).

Hutcheon's critique of adaptations and their construction is firmly centred in reader-response theory: she defines the value of a given work in terms of audience satisfaction, from either the inter-textual pleasure of adaptation or the pleasure of accessibility (Hutcheon 117). Hans Robert Jauss, an acknowledged reader-response theorist, also comments on the "process-like relationship between work, audience, and new work" (Leitch et al. 1552) to measure the success of a work. In the case of adaptation studies, this process includes not just the inter-textual background of general previous works, but the adapted text in particular.

Any audience engaging with a work, knowing or unknowing, brings with them an inter-textual knowledge of the process of engagement. This knowledge is not just gained from prior experience of engagement, but from the work itself: Jauss expands:

"A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informal vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. (Leitch 1554)"

An unspecified audience watching the film adaptation will expect a beginning, middle, and end, but also extrapolates from the costumes and setting of the film expectations that the characters will act to different social norms than those of current society, in this case those of 17th Century France. A knowing audience would have these same expectations, overlaid with the knowledge the work is an adaptation. The distinction between general inter-textual expectations and the expectations of a knowing audience may become blurred in the case of highly adapted works, as each successive adaptation adds to a cultural knowledge of an adapted text: this is particularly evident with works identified as canonical which I shall discuss later.

It would be appropriate at this stage to clarify what Hutcheon means by a knowing audience. Hutcheon states that a knowing audience is defined the following dimensions: "an awareness of the specific adapted text(s) ...[, the] context— in cultural, social, intellectual, and aesthetic terms

(123)”—of both the adaptation and adapted text, “genre and media 'literacy'”(125), and inter-textual knowledge of the product and process of adaptation (126).

The knowing audience therefore experiences the engagement with an adaptation within a complex, inter-textual dialogue between the adapted work and the adaptation they are experiencing. Within this dialogue, the audience's interpretation of each individual work is doubled as their interrelation produces shadows highlighting the similarities and differences between the two. Jauss compares this to “an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers” (Leitch et al. 1553). For the adapted text in particular, this reassessment in relation to its adaptation may highlight aspects of the adapted text not previously considered on first engagement.

However, a knowing audience for an adaptation is not likely to be homogeneous and nor would be their analysis of, or level of satisfaction from comparing the two works: “knowing audiences have expectations—and demands...[d]ifferent adaptations solicit different audiences (Hutcheon 122)”.

For example with the 3D film adaptation, a literary knowing audience may concentrate on the content and context, with the change in plot including the addition of Da Vinci's zeppelins, and the change in historical societal norms, with Milady's martial prowess. While a filmic knowing audience may concentrate on the medium requirements and inter-textual knowledge of product and process, with the inclusion of explosive trip wires and a higher level of feminine emancipation, and the use of steampunk genre to expand to a wider intended audience and therefore increase the commercial profitability of the adaptation.

The demands of a knowing audience are particularly relevant if an adapted text or adaptation is “a work a particular audience cherishes and resists seeing changed (Hutcheon 122)”. For adaptations of highly adapted or canonical texts like *The Three Musketeers*—which has been adapted in over 6 different media, including at least 18 film adaptations (Meslow)—, the knowing audience must acknowledge the role of the adapted text not only within the inter-textual dialogue, but also “a generally circulated cultural memory (Hutcheon 122)” to which each successive adaptation has added to.

In the case of Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*, the incarnations of the novel's concepts including famous catchphrase “all for one and one for all” (Dumas 102) have outstripped the adapted text in popularity. With such a strong cultural knowledge, it is highly possible that the chronological order in which the knowing audience experiences these works is not the same as the chronological order in which they were produced. If we take the cultural knowledge of Australia as an example, it would be uncommon for an audience to not have heard of the Three Musketeers, however it would also be even more uncommon for an audience to have read the adapted text or heard of Alexandre Dumas. For example, my first experience with *The Three Musketeers* was the animated children's TV show *Albert the 5th Musketeer* (IMDb) which had a very different narrative and political plot to the adapted text.

Which brings us back to Hutcheon's claim that audience satisfaction, arises from either the inter-textual pleasure of adaptation or the pleasure of accessibility (Hutcheon 117). Jessica Friedrichsen writes in her thesis on knowing and unknowing audiences that when a knowing audience engages with an adaptation, “the pleasure of repetition is combined with the pleasure of using previously acquired knowledge to negotiate the new circumstances that the adaptation is presenting (8)”.

Whether the aim of the adaptation is to increase the accessibility of the adapted work, to gain commercial success and educate a new audience (Hutcheon 117) or to extend the inter-textual pleasure gained from comparing an adaptation to its adapted text and predecessors, it is clear that a knowing audience cannot experience an adaptation as adaptation in isolation. Furthermore, the act of comparing two (or more) related works—adaptation and adapted work—creates an inter-textual dialogue in which the audience's interpretation of each individual work is doubled and must therefore be reassessed.

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