

Bakhtin in Cinema and Adaptation Studies

Part II. Adaptation studies: back to Bakhtin again

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Annotation. It is not surprising that the study of Films that are adaptation of literary works has attracted both specialists of Cinema and Literature for a long time. In the last twenty years this topic has developed into a whole academic discipline of its own, especially in the Anglophone world, with a growing bibliography, magazines, manuals, anthologies. One of the thinkers most quoted and used in this growing field is Mikhail Bakhtin. We will sketch here the reasons for this central role, offer a bibliography of research based on his work and examine some of the main contributions to this bibliography and suggest why we think Bakhtinian contributions to the field were the beginning.

Keywords: M.M. Bakhtin, Bakhtin circle, theory of cinema, cinema as language, cinema semiotics.

“Great novelistic images continue to grow and develop even after the moment of their creation; they are capable of being creatively transformed in different eras, far distant from the day and hour of their original birth” (Bakhtin 1981: 422)

As soon as cinema began to be narrative, the first directors began to think about adapting literary works, but the theory of cinema was interested in the beginning on the specificity of this new language. Among the first researchers who explored the links between cinema and literature we already mentioned were Russian formalists, later on few people were aware of the semiotic reflections of Eisenstein and his interest in what later on would be called intermediality (the relations between different media or codes). We mentioned already that in the seventies professor V. Ivanov from the Tartu–Moscow school drew attention to Eisenstein semiotic reflections and he was also one of the first to vindicate the potential of Bakhtin’s ideas for a new semiotics in a highly influential article (Ivanov 2001).

The earliest Anglo-American academic monograph on literature and film, George Bluestone’s hugely influential *Novels into Film* (1957), opened with the statement that ‘the film in recent years has become more and more insistent on its claim to serious recognition’ (1957: vii), a legitimacy of the early film industry, considered to be a low-brow, popular form of entertainment, didn’t had yet. While the field of studies known as “Film and literature”, began to emerge in the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1960s and 1970s out of English literature departments, inheriting the main assumptions of the dominant New Criticism and liberal humanism (a vision of the author and of the canonicity of literature that would be later problematized), the notion of the author and the image of cinema was changing across the world especially in Europe. François Truffaut’s ‘A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema’, originally published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in January 1954, inaugurated the polemic by attacking what he called the ‘tradition of quality’ in French cinema, meaning films – most of them adaptations of French classics – which Truffaut dismisses as literary, not truly cinematic, uncreative. Instead, he praises the cinema of filmmakers such as Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Jean Renoir or Tati. In the sixties, with the renewal of semiotics and the new wave of cinema across the globe, new developments in the theory of cinema brought again to the center of attention the relation between literature and cinema as two languages (the essays of Pasolini, Metz, Eco appeared in Europe just before the discovery of Bakhtin’s works).

In the English-speaking context, the 1970s were the decade when film studies became fully institutionalized in the academy. In the field of adaptation, however, the assumption that literature was the superior medium was an enduring one. Geoffrey Wagner's book *The Novel and the Cinema* (1975), for instance, was still working with the fidelity criterion and focused on the literary source/filmed adaptation binary pair.

Adaptation studies were substantially transformed over the 1980s in the light of both poststructuralism and cultural studies. The magazine *Screen* played a significant role. Born as a movement to go beyond disciplinary boundaries, "Cultural studies" as a research program, developed by the Group in Birmingham around Stuart Hall, approached cinema, music, literature and TV with a mix of sociological, psychoanalytical, feminist and poststructuralist tools and his vindication of a contextual reading of culture was instrumental in taking a contextual approach (Marxian English theories of literature like that one of R. Williams' had a big influence in their first works).

Maybe the most important monograph on adaptation to emerge in the 1990s was Brian McFarlane's *Novel to Film Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (1996). It was already a first step beyond the fidelity debates (fidelity as the major criterion for judging adaptations) but the path-breaking watershed were the works by Robert Stam. His dialogic approach was developed after his studies of French Theory (he was in Paris in 1968 and came back later to have a fruitful dialogue with Metz) and a seminal and highly original and subversive article which he and Ella Shohat published in *Screen* in 1985 were references to the newly translated texts of Bakhtin appeared prominently in the first page was a very promising path and soon afterwards Stam's book *Subversive Pleasures* was the confirmation of the fertility of his dialogic perspective. But it remained not too well-known, he was probably still a step ahead of the mainstream.

Finally, Stam's theories became not only popular among researchers on Adaption studies but were assumed by many after his programmatic article "Beyond fidelity" that appeared as a chapter in the anthology of Naremore *Film adaptation* (2000). The same year Stam published *Film Theory*. Since then his dialogic approach has been one of the most quoted and widespread among researchers of the field. In this famous article, he re-read adaptation as a case of intertextuality:

'Film adaptations ... are caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation' (Stam 2000: 66), an argument Stam pursues and expands on in his most recent contributions to the field of adaptation (Stam 2005).

As soon as 1985 Stam and Shohat had suggested the potential of Bakhtin ideas to explore the links between adaptation and translation. Since the early 1990s, translator, historian and theorist Lawrence Venuti had insisted that concepts such as fidelity, equivalence or transparency needed to be replaced by that of the translator's visibility or palpable presence in a translation, as a reminder that no act of interpretation–translation being, after all, interpretation – can be definitive (Venuti 1995: 1–42). The 'visible' translator 'refracts' the source text – 'inflects' is the term used in Mireia Aragay's article in Aragay (2005). This link has been explored further in some recent comments building on Bakhtin (Cutchins).

Among recent works on adaptation probably the two most closely related to Bakhtin's works are Colington's article (Collington 2012) and Harrison's book (Harrison 2017). Harrison uses Bakhtin to explain how and why filmmakers locate their particularity in Shakespeare's "everywhereness" (the fascination Shakespeare inspires everywhere):

"A range of movie directors–faithful to their individual moments and angles of perception yet responsive to Shakespeare's historically remote lines–have found a model for their expressive acts of co-authoring in Shakespeare's own theatrical practice of re-telling earlier utterances. Using a wide variety of tones, languages, and cultural orientations, filmmakers have updated, translated, transposed, fragmented, parodied, and geographically re-situated Shakespeare. Bakhtinian theory can illuminate how directors from Orson Welles to Deepa

Mehta have re-voiced and revived the famous plays for the cinema. The concept of the dialogic is a key to understanding this paradoxical creativity” Harrison (2017: p.1)

Harrison thinks that by making dialogic use of Shakespeare’s words, such filmmakers parallel the method and aim of novelists who express their own thoughts indirectly via double-voiced discourse, which often involves laughter, this is why he focuses not as much on canonic or “faithful” version but re-interpretations like the one of Kaurismäki or Godard who builds sui generis versions of the classic.

Following Stam and Shohat Linda Hutcheon in his widely read manual on adaptation theory Hutcheon (2006) and Harrison prefer dialogicity to intertextuality to emphasize that a dialogic approach is not limited to relations between texts but must be aware of the role of contexts (authors, readers, audiences, power) because as Harrison says:

“Bodiless intertextual studies, even when extended to the partly subjective and more dynamic concept of auteurial intertextuality, are insufficient to explain the relational process of co-creation whereby the utterances of earlier speakers (oral or textual or filmic) are revived and altered through individually embodied re-voicings. Presupposing at least two individuals differentially situated in time—as well as in space and in angle of perception – Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism combines creativity with history, enabling an intellectual grasp of how past utterances link to present expressiveness”. (Harrison pp. 6–7).

This trend is also visible among recent theories of translation and it is not casual that one of the first to bring together adaptation and translation studies was Patrick Cattrysse (1992) who proposed the application of the polysystems theory of translation to the study of film adaptations, in his case by focusing on American film noir. Translation studies, much like adaptation studies, were traditionally source-oriented and normative – emphasising the faithful reconstruction of the source text – and narrowly formalistic – focusing on the linguistic comparison of pairs of individual texts, source (original) and target (translation), to the exclusion of wider (cultural, contextual, intertextual) mechanisms that may have determined the translation process (Cattrysse 1992: 54). Polysystems theory focuses on the way the target (translated) text actually functions in its context, and on how and why shifts of emphasis take place during the translation process.

Venuti’s article “Adaptation, Translation, Critique” mentions Stam and Cattrysse among the most sophisticated contributions and proposes to go further in the analogy between translation and adaptation exploring different kinds of “interpretants” (Venuti employs the notion of Peirce following Eco, as he himself explains elsewhere).

As we have seen Bakhtin and his circle not only offered a theory of language and literature but gave us the basis for a whole theory of culture, including audiovisual texts and his potential keeps unfolding every day in the work of new researchers and scholars.

Бахтин в кино и адаптационных исследованиях

Часть II. Адаптационные исследования: назад к Бахтину

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Аннотация. Неудивительно, что изучение фильмов, являющихся адаптацией литературных произведений, давно привлекало внимание как специалистов в области кино, так и литературоведов. За последние двадцать лет эта область исследования превратилась в отдельную академическую дисциплину – особенно в англоязычном мире, где увеличивается библиография, растет количество журналов, учебников, сборников. Одним из мыслителей, наиболее цитируемых

и используемых в этой расширяющейся области знания, является Михаил Бахтин. В данной статье выявляются причины того, что Бахтин занимает здесь столь важное место, предлагается библиография исследований, основанных на его трудах, рассматриваются некоторые наиболее значительные работы из этого библиографического списка, приводятся аргументы, подтверждающие гипотезу автора статьи, согласно которой вклад Бахтина в эту область был основополагающим.

Ключевые слова: М.М. Бахтин, Круг Бахтина, теория кино, кино как язык, семиотика кино.

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