

Shifting Perspectives in Adaptations

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Adaptation studies may have been moving past fidelity criticism for the past couple of decades, but there are still a lot of questions left unanswered surrounding the varied types of relation that can exist between source texts and their adaptations. In *Literature, Film, and Their Hideous Progeny: Adaptation and ElastEXTity*, the first volume in the series *Adaptation and Visual Culture* by Palgrave Macmillan, Julie Grossman sets out to demonstrate several ways in which creative filmic and theatrical adaptations—that is, adaptations that treat their sources in imaginative and interpretative ways—can exceed or enrich their sources. Thus, the foci of Grossman’s nine case studies are not the individual texts analyzed, but the relational aesthetics at work between the literary texts and films and their filmic and theatrical adaptations, and the ways they are in conversation with other works and influenced by the cultural context to which they are related.

Literature, Film, and Their Hideous Progeny forms one wide-ranging study, in which chapters of each of the three sections are expected to be read linearly. It begins with an extensive introduction that outlines the theoretical and terminological backgrounds of the book. The two key terms introduced in the title are “elastextity” and “hideous progeny.” The former refers to “textuality that is stretched across time and media” (15), meaning the textual attribute that blurs the lines between discrete texts. In other words, elastextity entails the fluidity of textual identities, and the flexible relationship between sources and adaptations that contributes to breaking down the binary opposition between faithfulness and unfaithfulness. For the most part, however, the introduction revolves around the central metaphor of the book, the “hideous progeny,” borrowed from Mary Shelley’s classic novel, *Frankenstein* (1818). Grossman’s primary use of this already charged phrase is to explain the way adaptations can gain independent lives distinctive from their source texts, but she employs it just as often as a literary synonym for an outcast, as well. What is more, according to Grossman, any adaptation can be viewed as monstrous “because it is born of new concerns, new desires to express ideas in a different medium, with a changed-up narrative reflecting

shifting cultural priorities” (2) and the process of cultural production itself. The adaptations discussed in the book are treated as live “Creatures” approached from different perspectives and reflected upon from various viewpoints. Chapters are organized around diverse aspects of the texts discussed, but the focus is always on the elements of the character of the outcast, fatherhood, or the relationship between creator and creature, the journey from source to adaptation, identity formation, and gender. Grossman also often refers to Victorian and Romantic ideals throughout the book, especially with regard to Shelley as author, as well as her work, *Frankenstein*. In sum, Grossman outlines a non-hierarchical approach to adaptation, where each text is endowed with a distinct identity of its own, a perspective different from its source’s, and can start a dialogue with other texts.

The first section of the book, “Journeys and Authorship,” explores the relationship between auteurs and their works. The first chapter includes the comparative analysis of *Gods and Monsters* (1998) and *Hugo* (2011); with obsession with artistic progeny, and the connection between auteurs as Creators and their films as Creatures forming the thematic backbone of the chapter. Grossman demonstrates how sources other than narratives in films or novels can become the bases for adaptations, as the two films present the adaptations of the lives and oeuvres of two people, James Whale and Georges Melies, respectively, both of whom represent cinema itself at their respective time periods. Grossman also draws a parallel between the contexts of the two films, as the works of both auteurs were influenced by the magical and cinematic, and the simultaneously dehumanizing and destructive nature of technology and World War I. The second chapter recounts the grand failure narrative of the multiple filmic variations of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), spanning the twentieth century. Eleanor Coppola’s documentary about her husband’s struggle in creating *Apocalypse Now* (1979), titled *Heart of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse* (1991), presenting Francis Ford Coppola as an auteur and a Romantic tortured genius, and the HBO mockumentary *Hearts of Hot Shots! Part Deux: A Filmmaker’s Apology* (1993), criticizing Coppola’s auteurist ideology presented in the documentary, are great examples of elastextity, as they show that adaptation must always be critical, and must shift the perspective from that of the original towards a new subject matter.

The second aim of the first section of the book is to explore the various ways in which an adaptation can depart from its source. Grossman occasionally even uses the very literal phrase “home text” (12) to refer to the source or starting point from which the adaptation departs on its journey, since she interprets adaptation itself to be a passage from one text towards

another. Nevertheless, in the last chapter of the first section, instead of treating it merely as a loose adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey*, in the name of elastextity, Grossman draws attention to the underlying message about racial issues as well in *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000).

The chapters of the second section are closely connected as they discuss and compare the same films. Titled "Textual and Marginal Identities," this unit is about the struggle for negotiating and forming identities under various strict, socially restricted circumstances in America in the twentieth century. The introductory chapter deals with the issue of passing as a form of adaptation in a novel and two films based on it, all of which are titled *Imitations of Life* (1933, 1934, and 1959). The three texts also reflect on Toni Morrison's, Zora Neale Hurston's, and Nella Larsen's most important works, and the greater context and cultural history of the twentieth century concerning the formation of minority women's identities and passing. The fifth chapter introduces a new term, "'quiet' adaptations" (106), referring to unintentional adaptations. This term helps do away with the binary approach to adaptations as faithful or unfaithful, adding the option of chance intertextuality. The film *[Safe]* (1995), for example, is treated as a "hideous progeny" of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) as, although it resets the story in the 1980s, it also must tackle the same problems all over again, showing distinctly that not much has changed in terms of the oppressive nature of marriage and medicine with regard to white, middle-class, American women. The following chapter is about intermediality, that is, how adaptations can shift the focus from the source text to other texts. Grossman briefly discusses the differences between independent film and musical theater, and concludes that both are hideous progenies among other films and theatrical productions respectively, because they are less widely acclaimed either by professionals or by audiences. The discussion of the musicals *Dogfight* (1991), *Far From Heaven* (2002), *Kinky Boots* (2005), and *Once* (2006) draws attention to the thematic shifts between the source films and their musical adaptations, and to the crucial roles music and dance play in this process.

The final section, "Immersive Theater and the Monstrous Avant-Garde," deals with adaptations in more interactive forms of media. According to Grossman, all adaptations can be considered avant-garde in the sense that they always reflect on other works. Chapter seven opens with the discussion of immersive theatre, which surpasses the limits of the stage, the conventional theatre space. In *Sleep No More* (2011), the audience is free to follow the characters through different rooms as they wish, and this way they can get a

unique experience; while in *Then She Fell* (2013), a psychological adaptation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), the audience can experience the feeling of instability and being lost—which Alice encounters in the children's story—by becoming participants in several scenes. While exploring conflicts and trauma, *Then She Fell* emphasizes liminal, flexible textual identities, much like elastextity. The following chapter discusses a single video-installation titled *The Clock* (2011), a 24-hour montage from the history of cinema and television, in which the videos' narratives are synced to real time. This intramedial adaptation maintains a hierarchical source-adaptation relationship, but de-hierarchizes the included films and television series in order to demonstrate the arbitrariness of time and mortality. The final chapter of the section and of the book centers around *Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play* (2012), a dystopian musical drama based on episodes of *The Simpsons* series, and the 1993 episode, "Cape Feare," in particular, which is a parody of *Cape Fear* (1991). The play explores the importance and value of memory and of the shared knowledge of cultural products, along with the power of telling stories in binding communities closer. Besides scrutinizing the novelty of such immersive and avant-garde theatrical performances, Grossman also connects them to other media in her discussions.

Grossman has compiled an intriguing and thought-provoking set of essays. Unfortunately, after the introduction, the focus quickly shifts from elastextity to the close reading of each text and, although it is very thoroughly defined in the introduction, she hardly refers to it directly in other sections of the book. The primary sources analyzed are extensive but often lesser-known, therefore it would be ideal for the reader to familiarize himself/herself with them prior to reading, especially since, in many cases, the author has spared introducing and summarizing them. Grossman included a wide-ranging list of literary and filmic texts from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, to the extent that she even added a brief discussion of *Hamilton* (2015) in the epilogue, a successful Broadway musical that premiered the same year as the book was published. The choice of the texts, however, is nowhere justified, neither is the fact that she focuses solely on the American context—in the case of musical theater, exclusively on New York City. All in all, *Literature, Film, and Their Hideous Progeny* is an intriguing read for fiction and film scholars, and for anyone passionate about literature and cinema. Through her selected examples, Grossman successfully proves that "adaptations are part of a process of cultural change" (157).