

Adaptation, the Genre

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Abstract Instead of considering film and television adaptations in the context of the source texts they are adapting, this essay proposes another context for their reception and analysis: the genre of adaptation itself. Focusing on the Hollywood traditions of masculine adventure and feminine romance associated respectively with adaptations of Alexandre Dumas père and fils, it identifies four genre markers common to both traditions that make it more likely a given adaptation will be perceived as an adaptation even by an audience that does not know its source, and one anti-marker associated with adaptations in the tradition of the younger Dumas but not the elder. The essay concludes by proposing adaptation as a model for all Hollywood genres.

Keywords *Adaptation, film, genre, romance, adventure, Dumas.*

Whenever students of adaptation gather, a call invariably arises for an alternative to a remarkably persistent model of adaptation studies: the one-to-one case study that takes a single novel or play or story as a privileged context for its film adaptation. This essay proposes a different model based on a different context by defining adaptation as a genre with its own rules, procedures, and textual markers that are just as powerful as any single ostensible source text in determining the shape a given adaptation takes.

It may seem perverse to argue that cinematic adaptations of literary works constitute a genre when this genre has attracted so little analysis or attention. The ‘Genre index’ to Rick Altman’s *Film/Genre* lists eighty-five different genres, from ‘action’ to ‘zombie’ (238–9), but neither ‘adaptation’ nor ‘literary adaptation’ is among them. And it is easy to see why, for there is no obvious way that adaptation fits Altman’s account of a genre: ‘If it is not defined by the industry and recognized by the mass audience, then it cannot be a genre, because film genres are by definition not just scientifically derived or theoretically constructed categories, but are always industrially certified and publicly shared’ (16). If adaptation is indeed a genre, it has been a largely invisible genre that has flown beneath most observers’ radar, perhaps because it has been an important force in the American film industry, whose products will be the focus of this essay, as early as the first decade of the twentieth century, when ‘[t]he film industry sought ... to align itself with more ‘respectable’ entertainments such as the Broadway stage’ both in order ‘to distance itself from cheap amusements’ and to ‘sell [its products] in advance to exhibitors and audiences’ (Uricchio and Pearson 44, 49).

Even if it has been an invisible genre, there is abundant precedent for adaptation as a category widely recognized by filmgoers in both high theory and low theory. Kathleen Newell has pointed out that during the Henry James mini-boom of 1996–97, reviewers were just as likely to compare each successive James adaptation—*The Portrait of a Lady* (Jane Campion, 1996), *The Wings of the Dove* (Iain Softley, 1997), *Washington Square*

(Agnieszka Holland, 1997)—to the other two films as to its nominal source in James. Citing reviews by Adina Hoffman and Jeff Millar that both measure Holland's adaptation of *Washington Square* against Softley's adaptation of *The Wings of the Dove*, she concludes: 'The belief that two different films, by two different directors, of two different novels are comparable reveals an assumption that film adaptations do not have identities or functions beyond that of establishing and maintaining an aura around an already fetishized literary oeuvre' (145). These reviewers seem to assume not only that there is such a thing as a Henry James genre of movies but that this genre provides a primary matrix for interpreting and evaluating each new entry. Laurence Raw has approached James adaptations from another direction with a surprisingly similar result. Raw divides films based on James's novels and tales according to a thematic duality—'those [films] that seek to challenge existing conventions of gender and/or sexuality, and offer new possibilities for self-expression for men and women alike' and 'others that take a neoconservative view of Jamesian material by reasserting the importance of marriage, home, and family while suggesting that anyone who seeks to challenge this status quo will inevitably be destroyed' (265)—that strongly implies a generic status for James adaptations.

The inclination to consider adaptations of specific authors' work in generic terms is still more striking in reviewers' responses to Jane Austen adaptations. Julian Jarrold's *Becoming Jane* (2007), which Richard Burt has accurately described as 'an historical fiction' whose plot 'apparently mirrors that of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*' (58) rather than an adaptation of an Austen novel, has been widely compared to earlier Austen films in generic terms. Even viewers who knew that its story was not true have asked whether it was as touching and amusing as the 1995 television adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* Simon Langton directed for the BBC, or at least as Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1999), which also blurred the line between Austen's life and work.

More generally, Sarah Cardwell has ruled that 'any account of the "genre" of classic-novel adaptations ought to foreground the defining traits of that genre' and adds that 'televisual adaptations must be distinguished from film adaptations' (73)—a prescription that seems particularly compelling in light of Ginette Vincendeau's treatment of heritage films, which include such varied projects as *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981), *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987), and *Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee, 1995) as members of 'a new genre' (xvii). If there is indeed a Henry James genre, a Jane Austen genre, a classic-novel genre, and a heritage genre, it requires only a short step to postulate the even more capacious genre of adaptation itself.

Although he does not consider adaptation as a genre, Steve Neale, like Altman, has delivered some cautions in defining any genre that are particularly apt here. Acknowledging that all utterances are understood within the context of generic norms, he warns that 'the argument that genre is ubiquitous, a phenomenon common to all instances of discourse, ignores or collapses the distinction between those instances which are relatively formulaic, relatively predictable, relatively conventional, and those which are not' (26). Later, citing Tzvetan Todorov and Hans Robert Jauss, he concludes: 'It is precisely because they "exist as an institution" that genres can "function as 'horizons of expectation' for readers and as 'models of writing' for authors"' (42; see Todorov 17 and Jauss 24). Adaptations can no doubt be set alongside one another and certain common

elements extracted from the group. The question is whether those elements have been specifically sought by filmmakers and recognized by filmgoers attracted to adaptations.

Linda Hutcheon suggests the single best question to begin work on the thorny problem of defining adaptation as a genre: what features of a given film encourage its audience to consider it as an adaptation? For Hutcheon, ‘adaptation *as adaptation* involves, for its knowing audience, a conceptual flipping back and forth between the work we know and the work we are experiencing’ (139). If large numbers of filmgoers signal their willingness to play this intertextual game by recognizing adaptations as adaptations, there must be textual markers that identify adaptations as such, analogues to the same sort of textual markers associated with genres like films noirs and romantic comedies. Putting aside the question of how the genre markers of television adaptations differ from those of feature films, which textual features are most likely to extend an invitation to a mass audience to consider a given film as an adaptation? Assuming, that is, that an audience with no knowledge of a given film adaptation’s literary source missed or paid no attention to the credits that identified that source, which features of the film would make it most likely that they would identify it as an adaptation?

The adaptation genre is not to be identified with the classic-novel genre or the heritage genre. Any genre that includes *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931 et al.), *Beloved* (Jonathan Demme, 1998), and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946; Bob Rafelson, 1981) will be far more elastic than the classic-novel genre, which it includes as a subset, or the heritage genre, which it overlaps but does not include. Indeed it is a fair question whether the genre of film adaptation as such is too amorphous to be useful. Several years ago, when I asked students in one of my classes which generic conventions identified a film adaptation as an adaptation, they came up with exactly three markers: it had to be based on a novel, play, or story; it had to have a period setting; and the opening credits, or at least the main title, had to be lettered in cursive or Old English script. Provocative as I find these markers, they smack a little too narrowly of the classic-novel and heritage genres, the sort of romances I associate with *Camille*—even though the 1936 MGM film adaptation directed by George Cukor and marketed as a vehicle for Greta Garbo barely mentioned its literary source, burying the credit ‘Based on the Novel and Play by Alexandre Dumas Fils’ at the bottom of the screen beneath the screenplay credit for Zoe Akins, Frances Marion, and James Hilton.

It is no easy task to extract foundational rules for a genre that may have thousands of avatars. Instead of attempting generalizations about the entire field of adaptations, I propose to widen the field only as far as the Dumas family, basing my observations on the adaptation genre on films in the spirit of Dumas fils—that is, the romances that take their cue from *Camille*, an adaptation of Dumas’ 1848 novel *La Dame aux camélias* and the play he derived from it in 1852—balanced by films based on the novels of Dumas père: *The Three Musketeers* (1844), *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1845–46), and *The Man in the Iron Mask*, the third part of *The Vicomte de Bragelonne* (1847). Expanding the genre of adaptations that invite audiences to recognize them as adaptations from the tradition of the younger Dumas only as far as the two traditions associated with father and son may sound comically arbitrary. Yet these two traditions already provide rich material for theorizing adaptation as a genre.

That is in part because the selection of Dumas père and fils as exemplary figures is less arbitrary than it sounds. Mireia Aragay and Gemma López have recently demonstrated that ‘the notions of masculinity and femininity articulated in romance have remained compelling in Western culture as unassimilated material in a self-styled post-feminist milieu’ (216). Adaptations like the 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice* present old-fashioned romance as a fantasy still ardently desired by female viewers who otherwise identify themselves as postmodern feminists. *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001), an adaptation of Helen Fielding’s 1996 novel that sharpens Fielding’s strategic echoes of Austen and its send-up of the BBC’s Mr. Darcy through the casting of Colin Firth as Bridget’s unlikely beau, ‘is so thoroughly steeped in ironic double-coding’ that it allows female viewers ‘to have it both ways—that is, to provide the utopian promise of happiness that romance brings while at the same time acknowledging its Imaginary status’ (213). This retro fantasy of economic, psychological, and cultural plenitude has long been recognized as the defining characteristic of heritage cinema, which might be called a national utopian romance. When the possibility of seduction by a well-loved novel that both is and is not present and its cinematic adaptation is added to this heady brew, it becomes the foundation of what many filmgoers would identify as the adaptation genre.

But the female-directed romance that runs from Dumas fils and Jane Austen through the BBC *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is only half of the story. Just as the romances at the heart of the classic-novel and heritage genres emphasize female heroes and values, their swashbuckling counterparts, whose appeal Brian Taves has aptly described as ‘the romance of adventure’, emphasize masculine heroes and values. This male-oriented romance, defined by the allure of male bonding, self-definition and group definition through heroic physical action, and a return to a simpler time when the only threats to complete happiness were intrigue, violence, and sudden death, is just as utopian as the female-oriented romance of *Camille*, and it is eminently logical that the two genres should have complementary histories. Both reach an early apotheosis in 1921, with the Alla Nazimova–Rudolph Valentino *Camille* directed by Ray C. Smallwood and the Douglas Fairbanks *Three Musketeers* directed by Fred Niblo. Both re-emerge in greater numbers in the mid-1930s, once the strict enforcement of the 1930 Production Code encouraged studio chiefs to aim for what Gueric DeBona has called ‘an aura of middle-class respectability’ during ‘the most puritanical era of the Hollywood censorship code’ (111, 112) under the Breen Office, which cast a cold eye on adaptations of recent novels like Theodore Dreiser’s 1925 *An American Tragedy* (Josef von Sternberg, 1931). Instead of more Dreiser adaptations, *Camille*-like romances like *Jane Eyre* (Christy Cabanne, 1934) and *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (Sidney Franklin, 1934) competed for marquee space with historical adventures like *Treasure Island* (Victor Fleming, 1934) and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Rowland V. Lee, 1934). Taves points out that such adventure films were a natural fit for the Hollywood studio system because they ‘would recycle period sets, costumes, and props, calling on such standard miniatures as ships in battle from the special effects department, as well as utilizing the back lots and ranches for exteriors’ (70). Both male-oriented swashbucklers and female-oriented romances have commanded strong loyalties ever since, as many a couple arguing over which film to see at the multiplex can attest. And both have often left their mark

on mixed-genre films from *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) to *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (Doug Liman, 2005) that seek to appeal to audiences of both sexes.

The domestic romances associated with Dumas films may seem more literary than the swashbuckling romances that trace their lineage to Dumas père. But to recognize and enjoy an adaptation as an adaptation is quite different from categorizing it as literary. In fact, the assumptions behind the literary tag have obscured the importance of swashbucklers to the adaptation genre. Tino Balio has defined the prestige picture, ‘far and away the most popular production trend’ in Hollywood during the 1930s, as ‘a big-budget special based on a presold property, often as not a “classic,” and tailored for top stars’. Following an article in the *Motion Picture Herald* for 15 August 1936, Balio identifies four sources most often used for prestige films: ‘nineteenth-century European literature’; ‘Shakespearean plays’; ‘best-selling novels and hit Broadway plays written by Nobel and Pulitzer Prize—winning authors’; and ‘biographical and historical subjects taken ‘from originals or from books and plays produced by authors of known worth’ (179–80). To this summary may be added an important detail: the fact that Hollywood’s rush to literary sources in the years immediately following the success of *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927) was to a great extent a rush to plays, each an evening’s entertainment readily amenable to filming, rather than novels that would have to be condensed and reworked.

Dudley Andrew has traced a trend in the French film industry of the 1930s from adapting ‘the full repertoire of stage plays, from boulevard farces and light musicals to serious drama’ to the ‘novelistic aesthetic’ associated in the later 1930s with the poetic realism of both adaptations like *Le Quai des brumes* (Marcel Carné, 1938) and *La Bête humaine* (Jean Renoir, 1938) and films like *Un Carnet de bal* (Julien Duvivier, 1937) and *La Grande Illusion* (Jean Renoir, 1937) written directly for the screen (116, 150). The most celebrated 1930s Hollywood adaptations follow a similar evolutionary pattern as they move from adapting plays to adapting novels. This pattern has been obscured by the fact that so many 1930s adaptations of novels drew their material not directly from those novels but from theatrical dramatizations of them. The list of early sound novelistic adaptations that are actually early sound theatrical adaptations ranges from monster movies like *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1931) to romances like *Becky Sharp* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1935), *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), *Pride and Prejudice* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1940), and of course *Camille*, which Dumas had dramatized from his own novel. *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1934), *The Three Musketeers* (Allan Dwan, 1939), and *The Man in the Iron Mask* (James Whale, 1939), by contrast, were all adapted directly from novel to screen—not counting the indispensable intermedium of the screenplay itself.

It is hardly surprising that novels of romantic adventure would be even more readily adapted to the screen than novels of romantic love. George Bluestone announced in 1957 that ‘the novel has tended to retreat more and more from external action to internal thought, from plot to character; from social to psychological realities’ (46). Ever since, studies of novels and movies have been shadowed by the assumption that novels are radically unadaptable to the screen because they are psychologically oriented. This assumption, which has recently come under gratifyingly effective attack by Hutcheon (56–63), conveniently overlooks the fact that Bluestone is talking specifically about modern and

postmodern novels, not about novels in general; that no organized constituency has complained about the danger of losing this psychological orientation when novels have been adapted to the stage; and that there are many other things novels do more easily than plays that make them more readily adaptable to the screen. The broad scenic canvas necessary to *The Count of Monte Cristo*, for example, is easier for both novelists and filmmakers to evoke than for playwrights and theatrical designers, who have more limited means at their disposal. And swordfights are easier for both novelists to describe and filmmakers to present than for theatrical performers to re-enact anew for each performance. Even the most accomplished alumni of the Royal Shakespeare Company who have studied swordsmanship as part of their formal training must be relieved at the prospect of their staged fights being filmed once instead of repeated dozens of times, night after night.

When Hollywood studios turned in the mid-1930s from adapting plays to adapting novels that had not yet been dramatized for the stage, the novels they chose as sources were usually blessed by features the movies could not so easily find in plays: rousing physical action (*Treasure Island*), crowded social canvases (*David Copperfield*, George Cukor, 1935), exotic settings (*The Garden of Allah*, Richard Boleslawski, 1936), or a combination of all three (*Anthony Adverse*, Mervyn LeRoy, 1936). Until studios began to link these extroverted, masculine elements with the more psychological, feminine elements of romance in films like *The Prisoner of Zenda* (John Cromwell, 1937), *The Four Feathers* (Zoltan Korda, 1939), and especially *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), Hollywood filmmakers of the 1930s often found swashbucklers a more readily adaptable source of material than romance novels that had not yet been dramatized.

In considering the textual markers of the adaptation genre, therefore, it is important to consider elements equally important in the traditions of Dumas père and Dumas fils. The remainder of this essay will analyze four such markers—four kinds of cues that encourage filmgoers to experience adaptations as adaptations, even if they know nothing of their sources—and one anti-marker, an apparently obligatory element surprising in its absence.

1. The single trait most likely to encourage a film to be watched as an adaptation is one that my students identified: a period setting. Whether the film is an adaptation of a literary classic like *Little Women* (George Cukor, 1933; Mervyn LeRoy, 1949; Gillian Armstrong, 1994) or a modern novel like *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007), the adaptations most likely to be packaged, consumed, and analyzed as adaptations are costume dramas. The adaptation genre's unwonted emphasis on period settings is exaggerated still further by a blind spot identified by Simone Murray, who contends that because 'adaptation studies has traditionally focused greatest attention on the nineteenth-century and Modernist Anglophone literary canon' and 'cultural studies has always preferred to examine demonstrably "popular" genres such as romance novels, pulps, crime fiction, westerns or comic books', the result has been to direct attention away from 'the processes by which contemporary *literary* fiction is created, published, marketed, evaluated for literary prizes and adapted' (7). Indeed the contemporary novelists whose work has been most repeatedly and successfully adapted have often been authors of historical romances like Henryk Sienkiewicz, whose *Quo Vadis?*, published in 1895, was filmed by Lucien Nonguet and Ferdinand Zecca

(1902), Enrico Guazzoni (1912), Georg Jacoby and Gabriellino D'Annunzio (1924), and Mervyn LeRoy (1951), and Rafael Sabatini, whose *Scaramouche*, published in 1921, was filmed by Rex Ingram (1923) and George Sidney (1952), or authors of fantasies like J.R.R. Tolkien, whose *Lord of the Rings*, published in 1954–55, was filmed by Ralph Bakshi in 1978 and Peter Jackson in 2001–03, and J.K. Rowling, whose seven Harry Potter novels, published in 1997–2007, have been adapted in films that have repeatedly broken box-office records ever since 2001.

2. The emphasis on costume drama is closely linked to another generic marker. Adaptations that wish to announce their status as adaptations are adorned with period music, even if the period that produced the music is different from that of the story. The key figure here is Herbert Stothart, the most prolific composer at MGM from the studio's founding till his death in 1949. Stothart introduced Dorothy and Toto in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) with Schumann's 'The Happy Farmer', underlined the opening sequence of *Pride and Prejudice* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1940) with Smetana's *Bartered Bride*, identified Garbo's Camille with Weber's *Invitation to the Dance* and the haunted hero in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945) with Chopin's D-minor Prelude, and recycled Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture* from Cukor's 1936 *Romeo and Juliet* for the scenes between D'Artagnan and Constance in *The Three Musketeers* (George Sidney, 1948). Ronald Rodman, who aptly identifies pastiche as 'Stothart's working procedure in adaptation', emphasizes the ways '[p]astiche allows music to contribute to the narrative' of a given film (189, 190). Equally important, however, is the ways that citations of or allusions to tags of well-known classical pieces invite viewers (or more precisely listeners) to interpret the events of a film adaptation within the context of an acknowledged cultural landmark independent of the adaptation's nominal source, even if that invitation violates the second of Claudia Gorbman's seven cardinal principles for film scoring during the Hollywood studio period: 'Music is not meant to be heard consciously' (73). Merchant Ivory and the producers of BBC televisual adaptations eschew such recognizable classical tags only to substitute the period pastiches of Richard Robbins or Carl Davis. Together with the determination to specify places, dates, and durations, this fondness for valorizing both identifiable historical periods and the idea of history in general suggests an honorific conflation of literature and history which is at the heart of the adaptation genre. This conflation is obviously central to heritage films that celebrate a national past, but it is equally apparent in adaptations like *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960) that seek to revisit the past critically as a way of understanding the present. Such films present idealized epitomes of typical or pivotal historical moments that end up fetishizing the very idea of history by defining history in terms of the actions of a small number of psychologically motivated individuals rather than in terms of the conflicts of large-scale social, political, or economic forces.
3. This fetishizing of history is linked to an even more recognizable fetish that marks adaptations as adaptations: their obsession with authors, books, and words. Though their selection may seem arbitrary, my students were surely responding to something

important when they called the script lettering of credits a hallmark of adaptations, because such credits unite the quest for authority with a taste for heraldic history, the history associated with the wealthy, heroic, and powerful. The more strongly films wish to identify themselves as adaptations, the more likely they are to list the authors of their source texts in their titles (*William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, Baz Luhrmann, 1996; *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, Kenneth Branagh, 1994) or above their main titles ('Edward Small presents Alexandre Dumas' immortal story', the tag that introduces the 1934 *Count of Monte Cristo*). And the more likely they are to feature books in prominent roles, whether in their plots (e.g., the quest for the truth of the poet Randolph Henry Ash's life and work in *Possession*, Neil LaBute, 2002), or more likely, in their credit sequences. Problematic adaptations from *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946) to *Marnie* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964) have been shored up by prominent shots of books in their opening credits, and every filmgoer is familiar with the credits that appear as the magically turning pages of a book, a trope that aims to give the adaptation the authority of a book itself. Adaptations routinely anchor their opening scenes in intertitles, whether those titles congratulate the author on having written a great book (*The Red Badge of Courage*, John Huston, 1951) or merely introduce the action.

4. The specific nature of those intertitles provides a final genre marker. Many films that neither are nor pretend to be adaptations use intertitles to give information about their settings, particularly if those settings are remote in time or place. But the intertitles of avowed adaptations are utterly distinctive, like the opening of the 1948 *Three Musketeers*, which announces: 'In the year of Our Lord 1625, William Shakespeare was not long dead, America not long settled, and the calm of France not long for this world. A Gascon villager was preparing to go forth and shake that world till its teeth rattled'. This title begins by reminding the audience of literary and historical events they presumably know already—the life of Shakespeare, the European colonization of America—so that it can pretend to remind them of what they are much less likely to know—the intrigues that would plunge France into the Thirty Years War—and introduce the hero, D'Artagnan, a wholly fictional character who will still be familiar to anyone who knows Dumas' novel.

Half a century later, Kevin Reynolds introduces *The Count of Monte Cristo* (2002) in much the same way. Following the abbreviated opening credits, which give the film's title as *Alexandre Dumas' The Count of Monte Cristo*, the film shows a map of the Mediterranean centred on the west coast of Italy behind an intertitle that begins: 'In 1814, the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was exiled to the island of Elba, off the coast of Italy'. Even though the shot will end by zooming in on an island clearly labelled 'Elba', the intertitle feels the need to remind the audience not only where Elba is but who Napoleon Bonaparte is.

Apart from adaptations, the films most likely to contain such intertitles are silent films, whose ambiguously double function of presenting new information and illustrating a text familiar to at least some audience members is amusingly illustrated by the introduction of the palace dungeon early in Rowland V. Lee's synchronized-sound film *The Son of Monte Cristo* (1940) by a screen carrying the incongruous but

scrupulously accurate script title ‘The Palace Dungeon’. It is hardly surprising that the tension between informing and reminding the audience is the leading impulse behind the intertitles in adaptations, because, as Hutcheon points out, it is the tension that informs adaptations themselves.

These four markers, all essential to adaptations that identify themselves as adaptations, may be contrasted with a trait long and erroneously assumed to be a genre marker of adaptations because it is found in most amatory romances, though in hardly any swashbucklers: reverence for the source text. When Richard Lester’s *The Three Musketeers* and *The Four Musketeers* were released in 1973 and 1974, many reviewers recoiled from their incongruous amalgam of violence and farce, their mix of period costumes, silent-movie pratfalls, and postmodern self-reflexiveness. Yet these qualities had been vital to adaptations of Dumas père since the days of Douglas Fairbanks, who, ‘by stepping into costume, emerged as a character that was uniquely his own’ (Tibbetts and Welsh 119). Fairbanks plays D’Artagnan, Zorro, Robin Hood, and the Thief of Baghdad in costume dramas that emphasize his trademark insouciance, brashness, confidence, humour—in short, his Americanness. Instead of disappearing into each role, Fairbanks uses his distance from them to confirm a genially self-mocking persona that floats above them all. This tradition of self-mockery continues in the casting of the Ritz Brothers as bakers who impersonate the three musketeers in Allen Dwan’s 1939 film; in Louis Hayward’s dual performance as the effeminate Louis XIII and his more virile unacknowledged brother Philippe in James Whale’s 1939 *Man in the Iron Mask*; and in George Sidney’s 1948 *Three Musketeers*, staged like a musical with swordfights in place of songs. As D’Artagnan, Gene Kelly seems to be channelling Douglas Fairbanks in his insouciant athleticism. But the self-mocking tone of swashbucklers, however deeply indebted to Fairbanks’s performance style, is more pervasive than his influence alone can explain. Fairbanks’s performances could never explain the sublimely ridiculous casting of Lana Turner as Milady or June Allyson as Constance. Someone at MGM must have realized how preposterous the whole enterprise was, because the studio lifted one of Kelly’s fight sequences for the premiere of the fictional silent feature *The Royal Rascal* to illustrate the essential silliness of silent movies in the opening of *Singin’ in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952), even though the source of this antiquated swordfight was a synchronized-sound film made only four years earlier. So the tradition of reverence toward source texts characteristic of BBC adaptations is balanced by a tradition of self-mocking distance from the source texts that is just as fundamental to adaptations as such.

For this reason, the intimacy between a given adaptation and its source text, which might be assumed as central to the recognition of an adaptation as such, is in important ways beside the point. William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson concluded their study of the ways the Vitagraph quality films of 1907–10 mark the ‘the film industry’s deliberate attempt to upgrade perceptions of the medium among key authorized interpretive communities and institutions of cultural reproduction’ by observing that ‘a surprisingly minimal level of textual engagement was deemed sufficient for this purpose These encounters may have elicited little more than simple recognition of the cultural figure or text’ (195–6, 198). Six years later, Ken Gelder pointed out that Jane Campion’s film

The Piano (1993) ‘attracted the kind of sustained analytical criticism which worked to designate it as “literary,” even though it was not actually an adaptation’ (157). To many critics who presumably knew better, *The Piano* contained the generic features that marked it as an adaptation, rendering its actual independence from any literary source text closer than *Wuthering Heights* secondary. To take the opposite case, an adaptation can easily diminish its status as adaptation by underplaying its debt to its nominal source text. Randall Wallace’s 1998 adaptation of *The Man in the Iron Mask*, for example, excises Dumas’ name from the opening credits by the simple expedient of limiting those credits to the main title. It begins with a voiceover over a black screen. ‘Some of this is legend’, says the voice of Jeremy Irons. ‘But at least this much is fact: When rioting citizens of France destroyed the Bastille, they discovered within its records this mysterious entry: ‘Prisoner number 6389000—the Man in the Iron Mask’. An intertitle reprints the last nine words in period script just before the screen fades into a brief pre-credit scene climaxing in a glimpse of the title character. The whole introduction, which makes no mention of Dumas’ novel, neatly cuts out the novel as an extraneous middleman and establishes the film directly as history, or at least as legend, acknowledging that whatever the value of the Dumas cachet in 1998, it is less compelling than the promise to plumb past historical deceptions in the manner of Oliver Stone.

The film’s many anachronistic details, from King Louis’ bowties to Leonardo DiCaprio’s post-coital scenes under rumpled bedclothes, root it more firmly in the audience’s period than in 1662. The star casting of the Musketeers—Gerard Depardieu, John Malkovich, Gabriel Byrne, and Irons—defuses any possible interest in their reunion in a novel that Dumas wrote as a sequel to *The Three Musketeers*, since no one believes these stars worked together twenty years ago. Most important, the withholding of the Man in the Iron Mask’s identity as the King’s brother for the first third of the film recasts as mystery what *The Iron Mask*, Allen Dwan’s 1929 Fairbanks vehicle, and Whale’s 1939 film with Hayward had revealed at the very beginning. Remakes from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956/Philip Kaufman, 1978) to *The Fly* (Kurt Neumann, 1958/David Cronenberg, 1986) commonly rework the central mystery of their progenitor films in terms of dramatic irony, since later audiences who presumably know the source material will not be fooled by the mysteries that puzzle the characters. But Wallace, adapting Dumas half a century later, can reverse this procedure, making a mystery of Iron Mask’s identity secure in the assumption that no one in the audience has read the book.

Ginette Vincendeau has ruled that ‘*Sense and Sensibility* cannot be watched in ignorance of Jane Austen, even by a spectator who has not read a line of the novel’ (xi). The genre markers of adaptation this essay has identified, however, show that even viewers who know nothing of a film’s nominal source can identify it as an adaptation purely by generic conventions, and that adaptations, quite apart from the fidelity or freedom with which they handle material drawn from their sources, can mask or inflate their status as adaptations at will. The audience’s familiarity with conventions of the adaptation genre as a context is ultimately independent of their knowledge of the quite different context provided by a given source text.

My analysis of these genre markers, taking off from the importance Hutcheon ascribes to watching ‘adaptation as adaptation’ (139), has necessarily emphasized the reception

rather than the production of the genre. But surely it is obvious that the producers of adaptations have strategically developed these generic markers for many years. Once they are developed, the markers can be inserted into a film like *The Son of Monte Cristo* so that it can be packaged, quite gratuitously, as a sequel to specific Dumas novel. Just as Adrian's costumes for the 1940 *Pride and Prejudice*, long criticized for their period inaccuracy, echo the costumes Walter Plunkett designed for *Gone with the Wind*, the cast credits of *Pride and Prejudice*, which categorize the characters according to their homes rather than indicating their importance to the story, inescapably recall the similar organization in the credits of *Gone with the Wind*, attesting MGM's desire to link the two quite dissimilar films through the newly prestigious genre of the literary adaptation.

Since the emergence in the period between *Brideshead Revisited* (Charles Sturridge and Michael Lindsay-Hogg, 1981) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) of the BBC miniseries as the gold standard of period romance, adaptations have not only been increasingly marketed as adaptations but also increasingly repackaged as adaptations for their video release. Hence the 14-DVD box of 'A & E Literary Classics: The Romance Collection' (2002), a roundup of BBC and Arts and Entertainment television productions ranging from *Ivanhoe* (Stuart Orme, 1997) to *Victoria & Albert* (John Erman, 2001), has been complemented by Warner Bros' 'Literary Classics Collection', whose gathering of *The Prisoner of Zenda* (John Cromwell, 1937; Richard Thorpe, 1952), *The Three Musketeers* (1948), *Madame Bovary* (Vincente Minnelli, 1949), *Captain Horatio Hornblower* (Raoul Walsh, 1951), and *Billy Budd* (Peter Ustinov, 1962), though it represents a very different idea of what it means to be a literary classic, is equally intent on using adaptation as a selling point. Most revealing of all is Columbia TriStar's 'Classic DVD and Book Collection', which bundles each of four adaptations—*Tess* (Roman Polanski, 1979), *Little Women* (Gillian Armstrong, 1994), *Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee, 1995), and the BBC television *Persuasion* (Roger Michell, 1995)—with a paperback reprint of its source text in packaging that urges purchasers to 'Complete Your Classic DVD and Book Collection'. Whether or not films were originally produced and marketed predominantly as adaptations, the fact that they can always be re-released as adaptations indicates that the industry is as keenly alive to the generic potential as adaptation as the most lovelorn post-feminist, the most nostalgic desk jockey, or the considerable audience that evidently goes to the movies specifically to get the pleasures once associated with reading books.

Why do filmgoers watch adaptations as adaptations? No list of textual markers of the genre would be complete without a rationale that explained how they operated to make the genre a genre with its own marketability and appeal. Surely the appeal of adaptation as a genre is broader than simple nostalgia for earlier times and earlier values. Hutcheon's description of the distinctive mode in which adaptation is experienced as 'a conceptual flipping back and forth between the work we know and the work we are experiencing' suggests a more general rubric: Watching or reading an adaptation as an adaptation invites audience members to test their assumptions, not only about familiar texts but about the ideas of themselves, others, and the world those texts project against the new ideas fostered by the adaptation and the new reading strategies it encourages. On a more general level, of course, the conceptual flipping back and forth Hutcheon ascribes to readers or viewers of adaptations is the attitude prescribed by all genres, from Westerns to musicals. And on a more general

level still, it is the work of all reading or viewing, since reading any book, attending any play, looking at any painting, or watching any film allows an audience to test assumptions formed by earlier experiences of books or plays or paintings or films against a new set of norms and values. The distinctiveness of adaptation as a genre is that it foregrounds this possibility and makes it more active, more exigent, more indispensable. Comparisons that are discretionary in all texts, because they are all intertexts, become foundational to the extent that any audience experiences an adaptation as an adaptation.

Different audiences, of course, are likely to respond to this challenge in different ways. Some will reject the new framing out of hand with some version of the complaint Brian McFarlane has memorably summarized as ‘It wasn’t like that in the book’ (3). Some will allow the new text to eclipse the old. Others will concentrate on more subtle or discriminating comparative evaluations. Others will seek contextual reasons for the changes they find most prominent or problematic. Still others will use the new text to interrogate both the old text, their own reading habits, and the very ideal of textual coherence.

In the end, the decision about how to experience an adaptation as an adaptation is up to individual members of the audience. But their decisions will be everywhere inflected by the power of the institutional contexts within which a given adaptation, and adaptations in general, are made available to them and identified as such. Whether the 1949 *Madame Bovary* is being framed by MGM’s publicity department (‘Whatever it is that French women have ... Madame Bovary had more of it!’), Bluestone’s censorious analysis of a film he labels ‘appalling’ (198), Robert Stam’s comparative review of Flaubert adaptations that finds in the MGM film ‘a kind of aesthetic mainstreaming’ inimical to Flaubert (175), a classroom discussion of the film that a teacher has assigned in order to make the book more approachable, a library reading or movie discussion group, or Warner Bros.’ Literary Classics Collection, audiences will be urged to contextualize the film in terms of their romantic fantasies, their cultural nostalgia, their hierarchical sense of aesthetic value, or some combination of these desires that allows them to indulge an escapist fantasy of irresistible desire that is sanctified and indemnified by its cultural capital. There is no single context, and therefore no one reaction, that the experience of adaptation as adaptation prescribes. Because it presumes by definition audiences who are experiencing each new text in the context of earlier texts, however, adaptation has a serious claim to be not only a genre, but the master Hollywood genre that sets the pattern for all the others.

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