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"Why can't it be a movie simply about flowers?": Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002) and the Death of the Adapter

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Abstract:
The common debate surrounding the act and process of adapting a book to screen often includes the idea of fidelity. Adaptation studies' discourse has increasingly moved beyond the fidelity debate with a notion that film adaptations do entail deviations from the source text. Thus, the constant disapproval of the film for the points at which it departed and omitted parts of the book is an orthodox viewpoint. Spike Jonze's film *Adaptation* (2002) dramatizes this idea and further delineates the limits of infidelity while the screenwriter/adapter of the book remains trapped in the world that the book offers him as a reader. Conventionally, the question of fidelity arises from the reader's point of view. A film maker or a screenwriter usually does not concern themselves with the question of fidelity as they adhere to the formulations of the filmic medium. The film deliberately conflates the two- the reader and the screenwriter and complicates the process of adapting a text while positing that infidelity is embedded within the methodology of adaptation. Therefore, the death of a faithful adapter is inevitable for the adaptation to become a final product. The paper attempts to articulate the ways in which the film expands on this idea and thus foregrounds a possible conceptualization of the process of adaptation as depicted in the film.Furthermore, it also analyses the film as a meta narrative and a commentary on the act of adaptation of a book into a film. The paper situates this study within the critical framework of adaptation theory and draws on key concepts of adaptation to examine the film's narrative.

Key words: Adaptation, novel to film, fidelity, reader, screenwriter, adapter

Introduction

"Valerie Thomas: I guess we thought that maybe Susan Orlean and Leroche could fall in love, and. . .
Charlie Kaufman: Okay. But, I'm saying, it's like, I don't want to cram in sex or guns or car chases, you know... or characters, you know, learning profound life lessons or growing or coming to like each other or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end,

you know. I mean... The book isn't like that, and life isn't like that. You know, it just isn't. And... I feel very strongly about this. . . " (05:34 - 6:07).

Charlie Kaufman, the protagonist, the screenwriter and the adapter of Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief*, in Spike Jonze's film *Adaptation* voices his dilemma in the exchange above. This critical exchange in the beginning of the film is positioned as an intellectual high ground not only of a thoughtful screenwriter but also of a faithful reader. The rest of the film only becomes a tool in the hands of the director to deconstruct this notion of adaptation and film making while also stating that the two identities of a reader and a filmmaker need to be deliberately kept at bay in order to make the film adaptation of a book possible. The film seems to be making a point that the two cannot co-exist which curiously marks the impossibility of the act of reading a book and writing a screenplay together. However, the adaptation happens and mostly at the cost of the death of a conscientious adapter. By the time the film ends Charlie seems to have bowed to everything he resisted in the beginning of the film. There are car chases, guns in the climax and also the two characters happen to be involved romantically. He keeps sneering at his alter ego Donald Kaufman, for being a typical Hollywood writer but eventually he falls from his own pedestal only to realize that the answer to his brooding self lies in the blissfully unbothered one.

The "Process" and "Product" of Adaptation

Linda Hutcheon in her book, *Theory of Adaptation* (2006) defines adaptation through the framework of a "double vision" (Hutcheon 15) She explains: "However, straightforward the idea of adaptation may appear on the surface, it is actually very difficult to define… because we use the same word for the process and the product. As a product an adaptation can be given a formal definition but as a process- of creation and reception. . . " (15). She further distinguishes it as a product - "an announced, extensive, specific transcoding of a particular text" (16) and a process - "of creation, and of reception/intertextuality" (18). *Adaptation* shows the *process* on-screen as Kaufman struggles to make the product. The product as it comes into existence remains a shifting mirage throughout the film and that is, in fact, where the film evidently becomes a meta narrative on the process of adaptation. Kaufman, while brooding excessively about the process fails to visualize the product as an entity that has to go through a "transcoding," transposition and inevitable alteration while also doing all of it with a self-sabotaging streak thrown in the framework of adaptation as unpacked in the film. He ruminates, "Who am I kidding? This is not Susan Orlean's story. I have no connection with her. I can't even meet her. I have no understanding of anything but my own panic and self-loathing and pathetic little existence. The only thing I am actually qualified to write about is myself and my own self" (57.33- 57:45).

As a reviewer makes an interesting observation which connects it to the larger idea of adaptation that film grapples with. He writes, "As the title of the film suggests it's also a reflective take on the process of adaptation itself, be it in the life of a plant, or in this film's case an orchid, or adapting to unforeseen changes in life and adapting to loss, loneliness or accepting and adapting to being somewhat different to the people we surround ourselves with" (Blackford). While Susan Orlean is on her own journey of her interactions with John Laroche which eventually she plans to turn into a book, she goes through her own revelations. In a frustrating moment, Laroche calls her a "leech" who will " just attach yourself to me and suck me dry, spit me out" (01:02:43) Orlean is the writer of the source text who is also herself adapting real life events in the form of a narrative, first in her *New Yorker* piece, and then for the book that Kaufman is adapting. Her contemplation about her whole chapter with Laroche and Ghost orchid pushes her to conclude, "Life seemed to be filled with things that were just like the ghost orchid. Wonderful to imagine and easy to fall in love with but a little fantastic and fleeting and out of reach" (1:02:58 - 1:03: 15). "A little fantastic and fleeting and out of reach" (1:03:27), repeats Kaufman as he finishes reading the book three years later. This common line that cuts through the two authors and two scenes in the film is nothing but an perceptive commentary for the adaptation as a product. To write a screenplay from a book is indeed an act of deep reading first, but the engagement of the screenwriter/adapter must respect the confines of the medium and vocabulary of the film. One of the oxymorons of the process of adaptation is to adapt a book much loved but not love it too much for one runs the risk of replicating the book on screen and making an unwatchable film. While defending the film adaptations of literary texts, Brian McFarlene emphasizes the need to be "bold" in doing the adaptation, highlighting another kind of dilemma that an adapter encounters:

" …. merely being bold is no guarantee that the filmmaker will give satisfaction to audiences who may or may not have read the antecedent novel, neither is a slavish devotion to the original text: that is, to details of plot, character, and settings, for example. Not being bold can cripple the processes of adaptation, and one can end up with not so much an adaptation as an embalmment of a famous work." (McFarlane 8)

In the film Kaufman, in an attempt to reject the conventional Hollywood style filmmaking for Orlean's book adaptation, is seeking an almost faithful visualization of the book. He asks, "Why can't it be a movie simply about flowers?" (05:28- 05:30) without even pondering for a moment about the target audience. From the criteria MacFarlane states, *The Orchid Thief,* the film, as Kaufman plans it, has every chance to become a mere "embalmment" of the book. *Adaptation,* therefore, appears to be not only a meta narrative on the very act of adaptation but also on filmmaking. Right from the voice over expressing the crises of writerly self to the projection of the idea of adaptation through the montage of evolutionary process, the film lets the audience grasp the concept of adaptation and mutation even before the

narrative is set fully. In one of the most telling sequences in the film that seems to be directly commenting on the inadequacy felt by the adapter, Kaufman struggles even to begin his script. He sits in front of a typewriter with a chain of distracting thoughts and is not able to type even a single word. This cuts to Susan Orlean efficiently working on her write up and fluently telling her bit (13.48- 14:38). The striking contrast between the two acts of writing here simply does not emerge from the self-doubt v/s creative poise of the two characters/writers but also highlights the struggle of an adapter whose bar for adapting the book is set by a reader in him. The continuation of the sequence takes the audience further in the writing process as Orlean follows Laroche to the court proceedings and approaches him for an interview for her piece. The scene again cuts back to Kaufman's room where he is seen looking at the map closely and setting the location of the first scene of the novel, instantly taking a break after a couple of sentences (15:09- 16:51). This constant back and forth to the act of writing the source text and the adapted one aptly sets the stage for further negotiations and methods of adaptation that are to be forged within the narrative of the film.

It is pertinent here to highlight the idea of adaptation as ruminated by Kaufman in the film. He ponders while writing the script, "It is a journey of evolution. Adaptation. It is a journey we all take. A journey that unites each and every one of us (40:15 - 40:20). He then spirals into the whole idea of adaptation as Charles Darwin had perceived thus opening another possibility of looking at adaptation. In fact, the character of Laroche is undertaking his own journey of cloning of the Ghost Orchid. He wants to reproduce the rare flower in a controlled environment and then mass market it. However, in the twisted Hollywood version of the film in later part, Laroche is seen to have grown the flower in his house. This is a projection on the adapter's part. The flower resists the cloning and remains just an object of pursuit in the original book. This mirrors the trial of Kaufman's act of adapting Orlean's book. However, Robert Stam understands this trope of mutation as seen through the arc of Laroche's story in an interesting manner. He notes, "the metaphor of adaptations as hybrid forms, as "meeting of places of different species" like the orchid…- mutations- filmic adaptations- can help their source novel survive" (cited in Hutcheon, 30) Mutation, therefore becomes intrinsic to the act of adaptation, thus unburdening the adapter from the ethical question. But Kaufman's source of suffering is not this ethical burden alone. He suffers not because he adores the book too much, but also because he despises the conventional Hollywood "un-intellectual" filmmaking which in fact would permit him to creatively adapt the text with mutations. The film, therefore, sets out transformation (at the hands of Laroche) and the resistance to it (through Kaufmann) as a primary criterion within the practice of adaptation process. To put it together, both convention of the filmmaking and mutation seem to be affirmed as the strategy of the survival of the adaptation of the text. The film, in other words, affirms the question as modified by Thomas Leitch, "Instead of constantly seeking answers

to the question "Why are so many adaptations unfaithful to perfectly good sources?" adaptation studies would be better advised to ask the question, "Why does this particular adaptation aim to be faithful?" (Leitch 129). To put this, in context of this film, the attempted faithfulness emanates primarily from the interpretation of the text that the adapter/screenwriter arrives at while reading the source text.

The final product of the adaptation of the book is the film one watches being made into a script finally. It rejects the unproductive idea of fidelity in the adaptation of books and presents a possibility of a text that can straddle between two mediums efficiently. The question now arises that the readers and film critics while watching the adaptation of a book are not expected to ask the genuine question about the text being presented to a different audience and medium. Robert answers this in a balanced way:

I have been suggesting, we in no way abandon our rights or responsibilities to make judgments about the value of specific film adaptations. We can-and, in my view, we should-continue to function as critics; but our statements about films based on novels or other sources need to be less moralistic, less panicked, less implicated in unacknowledged hierarchies, more rooted contextual and intertextual history. (75) Another position that complicates the process of adaptation could be seen by adopting a critical lens to see the entire way in which convention of filmmaking is treated as a justified way of adapting the source text. While it seems plausible and also advisable for a screenwriter to abide by the convention, it also presents a very simplistic way out at the same time. The dilemma and the crises that Charlie goes through is not invalid. He values the book as a reader and therefore wishes to replicate the same value in his screenplay as well. Therefore, to think of such a conscious and conscientious act of adaptation through Geoffrey Wagner's three categories of adaptation would be appropriate here. He divides the act of adaptation into, "transposition, 'in which a novel is given directly on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference'" (222); "commentary, 'where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect. . . when there has been a different intention on the part of the film-maker'" (224); and "analogy, 'which must represent a fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art'" (226). Spike Jonze's film is both a "commentary" and an "analogy" and it justifiably executes the plot taking both ways of adapting the book as a roadmap.

Unadaptability of the Source Text

One of the most important debates in the discourse of adaptation is the constant question of the unadaptability of the text. The conversation between Robert McKee, the screenwriting workshop mentor, and Kaufman provides a layout to the intent of the adaptor and the Hollywood-ization of the source text. As Kaufman reads out the last lines of the book, Mc Kee wants to know what happens next and there's nothing Kaufam could add. He responds, "I wanted to present it simply without big

character arcs and sensationalizing the story. I wanted to show flowers as God's miracle. I wanted to show that Orlean never saw the blooming ghost orchid. It was about disappointment. Rober McKee says, "I see. That's not a movie. You gotta go back, put in the drama" (1:10:32 - 1:10:50). The idea that becomes quite evident here is that the formula, as the adapter had been refusing to submit the adaptation to, is the key to finally adapt it. The formula of car chases, of guns, of the romantic angle and also the characters' arc are in fact a few tools to fit a book seemingly unadaptable within the frame of a film. It is a commissioned Hollywood project by a production industry and therefore cannot be adapted solely on the vision of the adapter. From the moment Mckee hands over his sage-like advice, "Wow them in the end and you've got a hit" (01:11:09). Kaufman does everything in his might to follow it. The film also changes from this point and picks up every other cliche to show and make the course of the events pacy and engaging. Linda Hutcheon calls Orlean's book as an "intractable" (15) text to adapt and explicates it further:

> Linear realist novels, it would appear, are more easily adapted for the screen than experimental ones, or so we might assume from the evidence: the works of Charles Dickens, Ian Fleming, and Agatha Christie are more often adapted than those of Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, or Robert Coover. "Radical" texts, it is said, are "reduced to a kind of cinematic homogenization" (Axelrod 1996: 204) when they are adapted. But Dickens' novels have been called "theatrical" in their lively dialogue and their individualized, if broadly drawn, characters, complete with idiosyncratic speech patterns. (15)

There is a certain quality that easily lends some texts to adaptability. Hutcheon further comments that Dickens' novels are generally seen as an easy text to adapt. She writes:

> Their strongly pictorial descriptions and potential for scenes of spectacle also make them readily adaptable or at least "adaptogenic" (Groensteen 1998a: 270) to the stage and screen. Historically, it is melodramatic worlds and stories that have lent themselves to adaptation to the form of opera and musical dramas, where music can reinforce the stark emotional oppositions and tensions created by the requisite generic compression. . . . (15)

Orlean's book may not have these qualities to be rendered an easy adaptation, but it is definitely not unadaptable. Her interactions with Laroche which is the modus operandi of the subject matter of the book becomes the entry point of the adapters. The "drama" that McKee advises ensues from this point. David Kaufman takes over the film and the writing and suddenly within the last quarter of the film Laroche and Orlean's relationship transforms into a full-fledged affair. Laroche becomes a drug mafia and Orlean a cheating wife in the dramatic adaptation of the book. It is done for the drama, for the film and it is also at this point that the film brings in perspectives

on the formulation of adaptation of the text. To put it in the perspective of Dudley Andrews, adaptation in the film does end up becoming "the appropriation of a meaning from a prior text" (29). The meaning is largely an interpretation of the screenwriter and therefore, for the later part of the film "appropriation" suggests a meaningful way to conceptualize the process. also suggests that the novel is like "a crystal chandelier," intricate and self-contained, while the cinema is "a crude flashlight," valuable not for its own shape but for "what it makes appear in this or that dark corner" (31). The film doesn't absorb the book; it illuminates parts of it from outside, leaving its otherness visible. This, perhaps, is the most suitable perspective to understand the idea of adaptation as put forth through the film. The darkness is indeed a subjective inability to see or in fact ability to see too much that can be pivoted either way while reading the source text. Moreover, it completely justifies the idea of appropriation which Julie Sanders considers alongside adaptation in her seminal work *Adaptation and Appropriation*. She explains that appropriation "frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain," and "the appropriated text or texts are not always as clearly signalled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process" (26). Therefore, appropriation can be as dependent as adaptation, but it withholds or dilutes the acknowledgment, leaving the audience to "spot" the source rather than being invited to compare it. The film appears to have crossed the line and entered the side where it can be deemed fit as an "appropriation" too, while being a "commentary" and an "analogy" at the same time.

Conclusion

The "upward mobility" and "cultural capital" that a film gains while adapting a book is another facet of the process of adaptation. (Hutcheon 91). However, one can also ask , if a film is a newer form than the novel, would it not be better to see the book in film adaptation as an evolved form? If so then, the much looked down upon filmic medium becomes no less than a reward for a book. Susan Orlean is visibly elated to know that the book will be turned into a film. Adaptation of a book also means more visibility to the author and also a bigger market. Therefore, it would not be entirely disproportionate to understand that adaptation, considered from a transactional perspective, leaves a book and hence a writer without any gain. However, Arundhati Roy's contention as a screenwriter is notable in this context. In her memoir, *Mother Mary Comes to Me,* she writes about the time when she decided to write her first novel, and she asserts, "I wanted to try to write the opposite of a screenplay. A stubbornly visual but unfilmable book. Even if such a thing did not exist, I wanted to try" (Roy 215). Roy who had written screenplays before her novel, knew that both the mediums do tend to converge somewhere and for someone who knows the world of film, writing a novel which is "unfilmable" is not only a creative endeavor but also a reclamation of the book from world of the book v/s film. The "upward mobility" that is available for some films by attaching the name of book to

it still belongs to the world of logophilia v/s iconophobia and *Adaptation* both as a process and product exemplifies that.

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