Interview

Dr. Jeremy Strong, University of West London

Dr. Strong is a leading scholar in the field of adaptation studies, publishing widely on adaptation and literature-on-screen. He is Professor of Literature and Film at the University of West London.

Are there any genres that are particularly productive for studies of adaptation? Assuming that there are identifiable strands of adaptation studies: Do works within a particular genre tend to come up consistently within certain classifiable types of adaptation discourse, or are particular avenues of study constructed without the influence of generic signifiers?

The intersection of genre and adaptation is, I think, a really interesting area. Whilst it is fair to say that adaptation 'happens' across the whole landscape of screen genres, there is also a tendency to more readily identify certain films and groupings of films (or TV for that matter) as adaptations. Screen versions of canonical literary texts, as well as of contemporary literary fiction, would tend to fall into such a category. What has been called 'heritage film' is often foregrounded by its makers, and received by audiences and critics, in terms of a relationship with a prior written text. Here, I would go so far as to say that a 'bookish' quality may be imputed to some heritage pictures that do not actually originate from any literary source. Conversely, films that may be based – howsoever loosely – on real-life events, and for which the rights to a relevant biography or first-hand account (for example) might have been acquired, are rather less likely to be perceived as adaptations first and foremost. They may more likely be judged by their perceived adequacy to historical fact, and any anterior written account understood as another version rather than *the* version.

How can the location of a base text within a culture's current conscious – time elapsed between release dates of the original and the reimagining, the degree of praise for the base text, or the intensity of fan connection to the story – alter how adaptation studies approach their investigations?

All of these different factors can be relevant to understanding an adaptation, and can afford (though hopefully not limit) a structure, or at least a starting point, for analysis. Time elapsed is, self-evidently, a bigger factor when there is a very long time span between original and adaptation. To talk of audiences, or readerships, or of common views about a range of issues within the worlds of the texts, becomes more slippery when they may be separated by centuries. (Whereas the readers and viewers of *Gone Girl* will likely be identical!) Equally, when a temporal chasm is the case, it is also often true that the original in question has been serially re-versioned, so that the newest text is not simply in dialogue with the earliest, but with a welter of intervening adaptations. Shakespeare on screen would be a relevant example of a raft of versions to compare between, ranging from the most recent screen renderings, through short silent films, and even incorporating fragmentary evidence about pre-film stagings and performances. It is also the case that some other stories, frequently re-visited in radically different ways, are so fertile, so ubiquitous, that it becomes increasingly useless to think of the phenomenon in terms of 'originals' at all. Versions of *Robinson Crusoe* or *Frankenstein* would fit this bill.

How the 'base text' is perceived is also potentially significant. When *Pirates of the Caribbean* is adapted from a theme park ride into a movie, questions of losses or gains in adaptation (or even, heaven forfend, of fidelity) are unlikely to spring to mind. However, when the base is *Moby Dick*, or even *Atonement*, popular responses, and not infrequently critical ones, will commonly involve the 'spotting' of alterations and even the automatic implication that they are to be regretted. Fortunately, adaptation studies' methods and preoccupations are increasingly plural and sophisticated. A variety of critical lenses may be turned upon both individual case studies and wider considerations of the field. In particular, the notion that a literary original represents a benchmark or standard which subsequent versions can, at best, emulate, or at worst, traduce, is thankfully vanished. Far more common are approaches to adaptation that emphasise an inter-textual world and, increasingly, a culture of mixing/re-mixing, versioning, multi-platform franchising etc.

Finally, the role of 'fan connection'. This is both a key consideration for makers/adapters (i.e. disrespect or disregard fans at your peril!), and for scholars of adaptation

in that it represents rich territory for analysis. Securing the approbation and interest of fans of an 'original' is an important strategy for studios who do not want hashtag-happy social-medianauts panning their latest comic-book adaptation, sequel, prequel or re-boot. S*cott Pilgrim vs. the World* is a good example of a film release that got this right. Likewise, the engagement with texts that fan culture creates and enables – the pleasures, participations, spoiling, following, fan-fic(ing) etc. –is fascinating. I would expect the coming years to see a dramatic growth in this area of research.

In "The 'Wandering Jew': History, Fiction, and Adaptation", you write that "Adaptation…is more than decanting a story from one medium to another. It can be a matter of much higher stakes". Could you offer a bit of a reflection on this?

In particular, I was interested in the way that they were interpreted, by some viewers, as representing Jewish characters. Somewhat wilfully, I compared two non-mainstream reviews drawn from the most radically divergent worldviews imaginable. One of these was a review of *The Way We Live Now* which came from a horrible white-supremacist website. (Not, one would think, a likely place to find a review of a BBC period drama based on a canonical nineteenth century novel, but then web searches do throw up some unlikely results!) Intriguingly, the reviewer found much to praise in the BBC's rendering, including, as he imagined, a heightened quotient of anti-semitic messages that had been developed (again - he imagined) in the page-to-screen process. Needless to say, any reasonable viewer would not have reached the same conclusion, especially given the absence of any supporting evidence in the text itself. I was interested in the overlaps between Melmotte, Maxwell and Rachman, which muddied fact and fiction, and in how casting – Suchet played both Melmotte and Maxwell in TV dramas – helped cement those connections.

So – to actually answer the question! – I'd say that the 'stakes' here, and in related instances, can be thought to become higher for at least a couple of reasons. Firstly, a 'hot' issue – around "race", sexuality etc. – always has potential to freight an adaptation with an assumed additional responsibility. Acknowledging this is not to subscribe to a retrograde presumption that cultivated readers can handle difficult stuff while mere audiences (massive, passive, and quite possibly illiterate to boot) need greater protection. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that greater 'reach' might suggest greater responsibility. Secondly, adaptations that address the life of a real person or event might also be thought to have a greater duty to 'tell the truth' or, at least, to do so if that's what they suggest to viewers they are watching. Respectable counter-arguments to this perspective could readily be deployed (your readers might well be doing so right now!) but I'd point to the welter of semi-demi-hemi truth claims and disclaimers that accompany many such texts as partial evidence of story-tellers' intuition (or at least that of their legal representatives) that a certain duty might be operative here. 'Inspired by true events', 'based on a true story', 'characters and events have been altered for dramatic effect' and the like all seem to want to have their cake and eat it, to be simultaneously fact and fiction, to enjoy the structural freedoms afforded by fictive forms and the emotional resonance and heft associated with actuality. 'Power without responsibility' might be a shade too dramatic as a summary, but I do think there's a wish here to raid the toy box of History without the obligation to tidy up afterwards.

Of course, one might say that the only duty of any film or television programme is to be entertaining and profitable; that is, to work as a piece of television or film. However, this is patently inadequate, in that TV news nowadays and the cinema newsreels of yesteryear are and were assumed to have a duty to represent accurately (albeit that everyone can think of examples where this didn't and doesn't happen). So this eventuates in a discussion not so much of media broadly, but of specific types and kinds of text, how they address people, and how audiences are invited to regard what they see. Although the structure and duration of the full-length feature film, or the mini-series, cue audiences to feel and understand in terms of fiction, this will be complicated by opening sequences that reference historical reality (often intrinsically weaselly themselves), by content that may well echo viewers' knowledge of history or recent events, and by concluding inter-titles that speak to subsequent events in a post/extra-filmic world. Because feature films occupy such a big place in the cultural landscape there is a tendency in the reception of certain adaptations (a tendency that is effectively the polar opposite of the source-cherishing of fidelity criticism) for the film account to be *the* account; the most widely-disseminated, the most generative of media attention, frequently the most lucrative. In many cases, the film will be the *only* account many viewers encounter. When adaptations adapt history and reality there is the possibility that they will shape perceptions, not merely of whether the film was good or bad, but of the actuality with which they intersect, to become the dominant history. This may not necessarily be a bad thing; forgotten or marginalised events and experiences may be properly recuperated, afforded the significance they deserve. But, as I commenced by saying, the stakes are higher when fact and fiction mingle.