Abstract

Adaptation – the creative reworking of a verbal text or another artefact for a new audience in a different genre or media – is as old a practice as cultural production itself. The processes of cross-generic and cross-cultural transformation continue to be extremely important in film as well as other media industries. In fact, in cinema as a whole, adaptation continues to proliferate. Adaptation and translation, in the form of the conversion of oral, historical or fictional narratives into film, have been common practices for centuries and making significant contributions to our analyses and understanding of a complex and increasingly diverse world culture. My Article would, therefore, be a discussion on and analysis of adaptation and translation in performance and as a creative practice in the context of film. An attempt would be made to examine the adaptation and reception of some of Shakespeare’s plays— in the late 21st century – through the medium of film. The Article would also explore how Shakespeare’s writing practice carries on today through the extraordinarily varied intercultural adaptations that remake him to suit a variety of aesthetic, ideological and cultural interests, especially the notion of encountering otherness/difference through an intercultural articulation.

Keywords: adaptation, translation, appropriation, intertextuality, content, form, fidelity, accuracy, culture, society, intercultural articulation, meaning-making, creative practice

Shakespeare, the most produced playwright, was proficient in the popular culture of his day and his writing practice - especially in relation to adaptation – carries on today through the extraordinarily varied intercultural renderings that remake his works to suit a variety of aesthetic, ideological and cultural interests, especially the notion of encountering otherness/difference through an intercultural articulation. The receptions and/or adaptations of some of Shakespeare’s plays – especially in the late twenty first century – maybe seen as relevant to the emergent theorizing of adaptation as both a localized literary process of meaning-making and as a much larger form of cultural sampling. This is especially true of adaptation, through translation, as a creative practice in the context of film.

Adaptation – the creative reworking of a verbal text or another artefact for a new audience in a different genre or media (film, in this case) – is as old a practice as cultural production itself. In fact, in cinema as a whole, adaptation continues to proliferate. Translation too appears in an ever more urgent political context where issues of cultural mediation in conflict are to be found not on the periphery but central to global developments, open to comment and critique. Both Adaptation Studies, as an academic discipline that has begun to establish itself in the last few decades as an important area of
scholarship and research, and the related areas of Translation and intertextuality occupy a central place in our culture and have a profound resonance across civilizations, making significant contributions to our analysis and understanding of a complex and increasingly diverse world culture. It can, therefore, be of immense significance to study where intercultural productions or sources of adaptation are located, in order to better understand how these sources have been ‘naturalized’ and domesticated in the service of particular outcomes associated with constructing/ theorizing a national identity. This becomes particularly important when seen against the debates surrounding translation and adaptation that are still very much concerned with notions of fidelity and accuracy.

A closer examination of why the notion of fidelity is such a widespread and popular perspective by which to assess adaptation practices seems necessary. At this point, turning towards Translation Studies may be particularly useful in order to develop further an understanding of fidelity and a position which is not dominated by a prescriptive approach that puts the source and target texts, or even the source and target cultures, in a hierarchical relation with each other. What is important, however, is a rigorous engagement with those conceptual frameworks used to assess and analyze adaptations and translations instead of merely dismissing or readily accepting them. Adaptations, for instance, may be ‘mainstream’ and ‘popular’, but they also produce work which is inventive, disrespectful, absurd or eclectic. So, we need to restore to the subgenres or practices of adaptation and appropriation a genuinely celebratory comprehension of their capacity for creativity.

The changing social and scholarly attitudes towards plays and their characters in cinematic adaptations help gauge, underscore, belie, or invoke the characters' states of mind, providing a fascinating indication of culture and society, as well as the thoughts and ideas of individual directors and actors. In fact, it is the fate of any appropriation (emphases, omissions and ideological approach notwithstanding) to be appropriated again. Or, to put it otherwise: let us not trust the teller but trust the tale — not the one you have been told but trust *the whole tale*. Adaptation, in the form of the conversion of oral, historical or fictional narratives into film, thus has been a common practice for centuries, and the processes of cross-generic and cross-cultural transformation continue to be extremely important in film as well as other media industries. However, what remains the focus is the cultural product or original text (plays, in this case) and the discourses using it, originating it, deriving from it or surrounding it. Such an intervention amounts to both an interpretation and an appropriation of the original text since film adaptations effect both interpretations and appropriations of the play, in order to channel (part of) their existing cultural potential in a given direction, combining it with other discourses.

Adaptations often offer a commentary on the times in which they were produced. Changes in language, setting, and costume help place the production in a particular time or style. The variety of adaptations certainly increases our ability to understand and appreciate Shakespeare. Crossing the borders of formal conventions; separating content (story) from its form, in a sense ‘re-placing’ the story in a different form that necessarily changes our engagement with the text, enables a larger, more inclusive reading of the text: the art of adaptation opens a text to possible new readings, *and* possible new
‘readers’. This is because stories are fluid and flexible, they travel and cross borders: they weave their way through different media, historical eras, geographical locations and cultures.

Like a tapestry, content is woven through form so much so that what happens between the reader’s imagination and the text becomes boundless. And, when we bring ‘reception and engagement’ into the tapestry — if we honestly include ‘forms of engagement’ (imagination, perception, interaction) as active in the process of creating meaning, just as active as the writer or the filmmaker — then the ‘form’ also becomes fluid and border-less. Are we then living in an era of adaptation? What might our love of adaptations tell us about our culture? And, how we come to know ourselves through the stories we tell ourselves. With this new understanding of adaptation, we are now experiencing an era of ‘cultural globalization’. In fact, the more one thinks about adaptations, and the proliferation of this phenomenon in our culture, the more can one begin to understand it. The oft-floated idea of the dichotomy between content and form then seems strange, in so much as content/form appears to set up a rigid boundary where one can see ‘layers’.

Ever since the late twentieth century that marked a resurgence of Shakespeare on film, directors and actors with diverse styles have striven to popularize his plays on the big screen, and students have become used to seeing cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare. In fact, more than 420 feature-length film and TV versions of Shakespeare's plays have been produced so far, making Shakespeare the most filmed author ever in any language. Some are faithful to the original story and text, while others are adaptations that use only the plots rather than his dialogue. Adaptations continue to allow new audiences to be drawn in by Shakespeare's characters and themes.

Shakespeare's play Othello, for instance, is an ideal example of his classic tales that we can still relate to. Othello, Desdemona, and Iago play out a drama of race, love, passion, deception, and betrayal as relevant today as it was in the seventeenth century. Othello's ill treatment by a racist society and his internalized self-doubt continue to resonate in today's turbulent culture and times, both in fiction and life. His story transcends the colour of his skin: it's the concept of the other that Shakespeare writes about and the mistrust of differences that is present in all societies. Desdemona's wifely loyalty and the physical abuse she withstands at the hands of her jealous husband are issues that make up today's news. And Iago's envy and treachery still echo in competitive scenarios, from University elections to government coups. The trick, says the director - Trevor Nunn - in an interview about The Merchant of Venice, is to make a completely new piece of work while preserving the original piece of work1.

The timelessness of Shakespeare's themes continues to keep his plays fresh. He dramatized basic issues: love, marriage, familial relationships, gender roles, race, age, class, humour, illness, deception, betrayal, evil, revenge, murder, and death, and created unforgettable characters, from lowly thieves to lofty kings, who have become archetypes

of modern drama, but remain people we can relate to. Nunn notes in the same interview that the most admirable people can be flawed, while the most despicable people can be redeemed by elements that allow us to understand them. Douglas Brode too maintains in his book titled *Shakespeare in the Movies* that Shakespeare's plays aren't plays at all; rather, they are screenplays, written, ironically, three centuries before the birth of cinema.\(^2\)

Shakespeare has been presented in myriad versions, from the traditional to the almost unrecognizable. England's Royal Shakespeare Company has presented both true-to-book Elizabethan-era productions as well as modern versions, including a 1986 *Romeo and Juliet* featuring sports cars, swimming pools, and hypodermic needles. Ben Donenberg's *Starship Shakespeare*, produced in Los Angeles in 1985, offered Shakespearean characters fighting for control of a starship. Staged musical adaptations include Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (also made into a movie), with rival street gangs as the warring families of *Romeo and Juliet*. Interestingly, Henderson observes how G. B. Shaw once remarked in his article entitled “A Word More about Verdi” (*Anglo Saxon Review*, Vol. VIII, Mar. 1901) that *Othello* is a play written by Shakespeare in the style of an Italian opera. And, I say that there have been many operas made from Shakespeare plays.\(^3\)

Shakespeare was first adapted to the movie screen in 1899, when *King John* was filmed as a four-minute movie. The first *Hamlet* on screen was played in 1900 by Sarah Bernhardt. A highly regarded 1920 *Hamlet*, by the German director Svend Gade, was one of the first complete reinterpretations of Shakespeare. With the advent of sound, came a 1929 production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Two famous productions in 1948 have generally been regarded by film critics as influential but flawed. These are Olivier's *Hamlet* and Welles' *Macbeth*. On the other hand, Olivier's *Richard III* and Welles' *Othello*, both produced in the 1950s, are considered some of the best and most innovative film adaptations ever made.

Peter Hall's 1968 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* included mini-skirts and Beatle wigs. And Tony Richardson's 1969 *Hamlet* emphasized the generation gap. While Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet* featured unknown young actors; his earlier *The Taming of the Shrew* starred the famously volatile couple - Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. In the 1970s, Roman Polanski's penchant for menace and violence was evident in a rough *Macbeth*. Moving on, Kenneth Branagh kindled a resurgence of popular interest in Shakespeare in the late 1980s with *Henry V*, which portrayed the battlefield as squalid, gory, and decidedly unglamorous. The 1980s also saw *Ran*, an Asian version of *King Lear*, by the highly-regarded Japanese director - Akira Kurosawa.


Directors and actors have thus adapted Shakespeare as long as his plays have been performed. Some feel that without Shakespeare's original poetry, audiences are robbed of the opportunity to experience the cleverness, poetry, and majesty of the language: Shakespeare's genius, in short. Others feel that modern adaptations do not challenge viewers and offer weak plots, less dialogue and less complex characters. It is precisely for this reason that the study of the ‘intentions’ behind a text becomes important, requiring us to step beyond the boundaries of the usual literary considerations into the realms of geography, history and culture. This would further help the viewing public in better interpreting visual media and the more discerning scholar in lugging the literary baggage along by noting the ideological approaches or emphases, omissions and choices, which emerge in the intertextual and interactional dynamics of meaning-making through a cinematic adaptation.

**Works Cited:**


