

H-France Review Vol. 16 (July 2016), No. 100

Kate Griffiths and Andrew Watts. *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France: Literature in Film, Theatre, Television, Radio and Print*. Cardiff: Wales University Press, 2013. x + 235 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. £95.00. (hb). ISBN 9780708325940; £27.99 (pb). ISBN 9781783163083; £27.99 (eb). ISBN 9780708325957.

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Since their publication, the place of nineteenth-century France's most well-known novelists in the Francophone and Anglophone cultural landscapes has been secure. Not only have their novels remained popular in their own right, but countless artists in other media have drawn inspiration from their works, creating a corpus of adaptations that can seem endless in scope and variety. In *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France*, Griffiths and Watts consider this vast corpus, not by attempting a comprehensive examination of it, but rather through a series of case studies that illustrate an innovative approach to reading adapted works together with their source materials toward greater insight into both.

This study reads works by six canonical nineteenth-century writers, not only as commercially and culturally attractive fodder for adaptation, but also as having complex relationships to the act of adaptation itself. They argue for this relationship on two different, but related axes. Firstly, they claim that "adaptive affinities exist between specific authors and specific media" (p. 206). They see these "telling affinities" (p. 9) as rooted in the specific tendencies and preoccupations of each author, as well as in the differing practical and aesthetic considerations and adaptive strategies of the various media. They argue that adaptations of each novelist into the media with which he shows an affinity reveal characteristics of their source material that might otherwise escape attention.

Secondly, Griffiths and Watts reorient us to see these nineteenth-century "originals" as adaptations themselves, situating them in a network of intertextual relationships, rather than as single origins out of which such relationships flow in only one direction. They demonstrate that these writers themselves "position their texts, not as integral moments of absolute origin but, rather, as textual composites influenced by and authored from a whole host of earlier sources" (p. 207), "dramatising their own acts of adaptation and playfully pointing to their multiple points of origin" (p. 10). They thus read in these authors' works an "anticipation of elements of intertextual theory" (p. 10) and construct an intertextual web among the canonical authors themselves.

Moving from these two principles regarding the novelists' relationship to adaptation, Griffiths and Watts structure each chapter around author/adaptive medium pairings, selecting for close examination specific adaptations in each medium that "reflect on their own adaptive acts" in ways that "lead us back to the canonical writers they adapt" (p. 207), by reiterating or reinterpreting the writers' own adaptive strategies. They provide further structure to the chapters with "themes" (p. 11) that link the works, both "original" and adapted, to the act of adaptation, and accentuate the authors' reflections on originality in their works. In this way, they find among the authors and their adaptations a "profoundly intertextual debate on the nature of authorship itself" (p. 11).

In chapter one, “Labyrinths of Voices: Émile Zola, *Germinal*, and Radio,” Griffiths considers Zola’s *Germinal* along with two BBC radio adaptations: one written by David Hopkins (1982), and the other by Diana Griffiths (2007). Zola is linked to the medium of radio by the theme of sound and the voice, not only the audible voices of the radio performance, but the authorial voices of authors in general, and adapters in particular. The chapter characterizes Zola as “an author who famously privileges the visual” (p. 18), while drawing upon the necessary erasure of the visual in what critics and theorists have called the “blind” medium of radio to argue for a counterintuitive “affinity” between the author and the medium. This counterintuitive relationship is explained: “radio is not a blind medium...it offers an ‘inner vision’ essential to the success of the Zolian text” (p. 17), even as outer vision is cast as problematic or insufficient in *Germinal*. As the unifying theme of the voice develops, the author shows how the two adaptations considered emphasize different aspects of Zola’s authorial voice in their own: David Hopkins’s narrator emphasizes Zola’s sociological “voice,” while Diana Griffiths’s reflects Zola’s poetic “voice” more strongly. Finally, the chapter considers *Germinal*’s sources in Zola’s earlier works and in mythology, and notes how Zola’s borrowing from his contemporaries finds echo in the radio adaptations’ borrowing from New Wave cinema.

In chapter two, “Diamond Thieves and Gold Diggers: Balzac, Silent Cinema and the Spoils of Adaptation,” Watts considers Balzac’s *Comédie Humaine* along with two silent films—Jean Epstein’s *L’Auberge Rouge* (1923) and Rex Ingram’s *Eugénie Grandet, The Conquering Power* (1921)—brought together through the common theme of theft. While Balzac’s works and these adaptations all share acts of theft as significant plot elements, they also, according to this chapter’s reading, “invite us to reconsider the relationship between theft and adaptive process” (p. 75). Critics of this early, silent period of cinema, Watts explains, “have looked disdainfully ...on early filmmakers...as thieves, plagiarists and profiteers who devalued the artistic currency of the authors they adapted” (p. 47). He argues, however, that this process of “plundering” is not unique to silent cinema, but rather “an unavoidable reality of textual creation” (p. 48), and reads Balzac, too, as having “plundered” a variety of sources (notably the Bible, melodrama, and Gothic and fantastic fiction). This view of adaptation forms the foundation of the “affinity” between Balzac and silent film. Beyond this, he notes that both Balzac’s documentary and creative impulses are reflected in early cinema’s exploration of the new medium’s potential. As expression and silence alternate in all three works, Watts demonstrates that *La Comédie Humaine*’s theme of frustrated (material) exchange offered an outlet for early filmmakers’ anxieties about communicative difficulties in this new medium.

In chapter three, “Fragmented Fictions: Time, Textual Memory and the (Re)Writing of *Madame Bovary*,” Watts considers Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, along with two “literary homages” (pp. 12, 80): Posy Simmonds’s *Gemma Bovary* and Philippe Doumenc’s *Contre-enquête sur la mort d’Emma Bovary*.^[1] This chapter need not argue for an “adaptive affinity,” because it considers “adaptations” of Flaubert’s text into other texts, for which it borrows Gérard Genette’s term “hypertexts” (p. 81). It argues instead for understanding these texts not as copies or rewritings, but as true adaptations that share an affinity with *Madame Bovary* thanks to a shared “interest in how fiction rewrites earlier texts, and how these antecedents...can themselves be refitted for a new era” (p. 81). The chapter thus undertakes a broader examination of the importance of time in the adaptive act, calling it “integral to understanding the myriad ways in which texts remember and recreate earlier texts” (p. 82). Watts reads *Madame Bovary* in part as the story of how Emma “adapts” the texts she reads to her reality, and her resulting boredom is related to the repetition that is reinforced by echoes of other texts throughout the novel. These echoes “[appeal] to the reader’s memory of the sources being reworked, and [require] us to participate actively in decoding the traffickings between past and present” (p. 96). Watts argues that the adaptations in question share a similar interest in the past—not only in the source text, but that within each of the stories, memory and reconstruction of the past are significant themes that serve as reflections on their own adaptive strategies.

In chapter four, “*Les Misérables*, Theater and the Anxiety of Excess,” Watts considers Hugo’s *Les Misérables* and two of its adaptations on stage: the West End and Broadway mega-musical adaptation by

Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg (1985) and José Pliya's play, *Le Complexe de Thénardier* (2001). He argues for an adaptive affinity between *Les Misérables* and the stage based on the novel's theatricality in two different senses. First, he demonstrates the role of drama and theatricality in the text of the novel, including its references to theatrical productions and the frequent use of "masks, disguises and multiple identities" (p. 118). Second, he shows that the novel "reflects [Hugo's] interest in adapting theatrical conventions to an extent that could no longer be accommodated by the stage" (p. 119). Watts also connects these two adaptations to Hugo's novel through the theme of excess, showing that each in its own way repeats the adaptive work of Hugo himself, who "trims and refines the work of his predecessors," most significantly Balzac, "in an attempt to resolve his anxiety over the multiple forms of excess that his novel represents" (p. 115). In the same way, the adaptations strip away Hugo's excesses in order to make way for their own: Boublil and Schönberg engage in the excesses typical of the megamusical, "a medium already founded on a desire for vast scale and elaborate spectacle" (p. 123), and Pliya elaborates on a small portion of Hugo's text to explore the excesses of "violence, selfishness and the desire for power and control" (p. 116). Each work, in its own way, repeats Hugo's adaptive strategy for combatting the anxiety of excess.

In chapter five, "Chez Maupassant: The (In)Visible Space of Television Adaptation," Griffiths considers the adaptation of Maupassant's short stories in the first two seasons of the television series *Chez Maupassant* (France 2, 2007 and 2008). She argues that Maupassant's works share an affinity with the small screen, in particular via the themes of space and claustrophobia. Simplicity, she argues, is a feature of Maupassant that is essential for television's lower budgets and smaller format, such that "Maupassant's fictions leave space for the artistic actions of adaptations to the small screen" (p. 149). Furthermore, she argues, the representations of space in Maupassant's fiction, where "space traps characters" either literally or figuratively, is naturally replicated by television's frequent close-ups and the "smaller shared space" and "greater equality of scale" between television characters and viewers (p. 149). She then shows the relationship between Maupassant's work and reality to be one of adaptation: "Maupassant offers his readers not a naive belief in his prose's ability to offer reality, but a playful vision of the fictional, adaptive game that is realism" (p. 153). Television shares a similarly unique relationship to the adaptation of reality, from its early days when all broadcasts were live, to its modern "focus on chat shows, current affairs, news and adverts" (p. 153), making it a natural adaptive fit for Maupassant. Through this, Griffiths shows the notion of space to extend beyond the spaces represented in the works into the creative spaces of the author and adapter, "[made] visible" (p. 152) through references to source material in literature and the visual arts. Thus, the productions that make up *Chez Maupassant* "[echo] and [amplify] Maupassant's critique of the very possibility of origin" (p. 166).

Finally, in chapter six, "*Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours*: Verne, Todd, Coraci and the Spectropoetics of Adaptation," Griffiths considers Verne's novel, along with film adaptations by producer Michael Todd (1956) and director Frank Coraci (2004). She links the works via the theme of ghosts, arguing for the spectral presences of the source materials' artists both in the adaptations and in Verne's text. Through an examination of Verne's relationship with his publisher Pierre-Jules Hetzel, which she characterizes as "close and interactive" (p. 175), she argues that Verne was as much a ghostwriter as he was ghostwritten, blurring his authorship and originality. She also reads Phileas Fogg as a ghostly or "perforated" character (p. 181) who "ever present in *Le Tour du monde*,...is simultaneously always absent" (p. 182), and considers the "phantom character" and "phantom day" (p. 176) in *Le Tour du monde* as another type of ghostly presence. The ghostly presences in the adaptations, meanwhile, echo Verne's. In Todd's adaptation, she argues that Verne becomes a spectral presence alongside Todd himself, as do the omitted portions of Verne's text. In Coraci's film, these spectral adaptive presences accumulate even further to include both Verne's and Todd's personae and their versions of *Le Tour du monde*. Both filmmakers, she claims, "share in part [Verne's] concept of authorship...as a mutating, ever-changing voice, shot through with the ghostly whispers of authors, moments, and texts gone by" (p. 203).

In the final analysis, the choice to structure each chapter similarly around an author/adaptive medium/theme/adaptive strategy grouping left this reviewer somewhat ambivalent. On one hand, it provided predictable structure that went a long way toward making their complex approach accessible. The groupings were often counter-intuitive (such as the pairing of the linguistic carnival that is Balzac with his silent film adaptations, or the focus on radio adaptations of the meticulously visually descriptive Zola), and the choice to read these counterintuitive groupings through the framework of their adaptive strategies or a pertinent theme made them interpretively fruitful indeed. However, although they did not state it outright, the authors seemed at times to suggest that the groupings or “adaptive affinities” (p. 206) that they chose to explore were the only such affinities or perhaps the most telling, a suggestion that was less than convincing. Might we not also consider an affinity for film in Hugo’s work, or television in Zola’s, and be rewarded with similarly fruitful insights? The same could be said for the themes that serve as lenses into the adaptations. Indeed, the potential of this approach—that is, the possibility that these groupings are not, in fact, the only ones that might offer insight—is perhaps the most intriguing contribution of this study, and the limitation implied in the rigid chapter structure somewhat obscured that potential. Furthermore, a more robust recognition of their own theoretical contribution at the intersection point of literary studies and adaptation studies might have allowed engagement with a wider range of existing theoretical frameworks in adaptation studies. While they do set their approach in contrast to fidelity discourses and refer to “key critical voices [who] make clear the need for a more intertextual approach to the discipline” (p. 10), a fuller conversation between their own approach and the intertextual approaches of the last decade or two in adaptation studies might have enriched each case study and the overall work.

Generally speaking, however, this study is a rewarding read. It challenges the conventional thought at the intersection of these two fields that much nineteenth-century or realist writing is “pre-cinematic,” postulating instead a complex relationship between the canonical “originals” and their adaptations and situating the authors of each work as both originators and adaptors. It thereby deconstructs the categories of “original” and “adaptation” into which we have traditionally organized works, in favor of an intertextual web in which canonical novels and works in other media based upon them participate together, contextualizing the lionized canonical works and accentuating the originality of the adaptations. This reading of the nineteenth-century authors’ works as a network of “adaptations” whose adaptive strategies might inform adaptations in other media constitutes a welcome innovation in nineteenth-century literary study. The readings of the canonical works themselves may not always be revolutionary to scholars of the period’s literature, but it is in part the foundation in traditional scholarship that makes this study’s use of adaptations as lenses through which to reconsider “originals” seem convincing and potentially applicable to other works. Its accessible style and approach mean that a wide variety of students and scholars will benefit from this fresh and contemporary look at the classics.

NOTE

[1] Posy Simmonds, *Gemma Boverly* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999) and Philippe Doumenc, *Contre-enquête sur la mort d’Emma Bovary* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2009).

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ISSN 1553-9172