

Introduction

Adaptation reconsidered

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The 2015 Annual Conference of the Belgian Association of Anglicists in Higher Education, held at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and cosponsored by the Research Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings as well as the “Literature and Media Innovation” research project (BELSPO IAP7/01), was devoted to the theme of adaptation. As a traveling concept, pertaining to creative and critical repetition, adaptation provides a rewarding perspective and relevant operational logic in each of BAAHE’s subfields (English literature, theatre, cultural studies, linguistics, translation, and language teaching) allowing for theoretical and practical, methodological and interdisciplinary research, intertextual, generic, and genetic criticism. Presentations could focus on the product or the singular and repeated creative process, turning each adaptation of past sources into primary or residual material for subsequent creations in an ongoing practice. This also begs the question of the role of adaptation in the afterlife and institutionalization of art works and as constituents of cultural memory. Alternatively attention could be paid to the adaptation process’s interpretative function, from single or multiple author strategies and uncreative rewritings through the recipients’ stereoscopic or oscillating perception, to the authors’ and recipients’ shared need to mobilize their personal memory for adaptation to become a self-conscious practice. Adaptations can linger within the confines of genres, media, arts and disciplines but more often than not involve transactional, intersemiotic transcodings between them. Equally relevant research questions pertain to the evolving personal and cultural determinants of adaptations, their institutional contexts and discursive communities, depending on degrees of knowingness and appropriation, making for canons and counter-canons or ideological reappropriations, covering a wide spectrum from feminist to postcolonial. These involve a politics as well as an ethics of adaptation, both receiving renewed urgency through the digital era’s ease of recombination, extending artistic creation into a generalized cultural practice both popular and professional, blurring the distinction between production and consumption.

Of the thirteen conference presentations four were reworked into full-fledged articles, focusing on literary, cinematographic, and theatre studies. This foursome is here presented as a thematic section of *English Text Construction*, implementing the journal's title in diverse cross-generic ways, and highlighting more in particular adaptation in terms of cultural transitions and shifts. In keeping with the more cognitive contribution by Christophe Collard, such shifts may be considered an especially rewarding case of incommensurabilities operationalizing the complex dynamic between source and target which any adaptation sets in motion. The concept of incommensurability – the inevitable degree of incompatibility preventing the maximizing of identity, or the impossibility to compare source and target by the same standards – is therefore offered as a more generative alternative mindset for discussions of adaptation than the by now rather contested fidelity stance. Far from wanting to revive this stance, Collard selected as case study John Jesurun's 1997 imaginary "Remake/remodel" of *Mildred Pierce*, the 1945 screen adaptation of James M. Cain's Depression-era novel, directed by Michael Curtiz, in which betrayal forms a central narrative component. In keeping with the mid-twentieth century context, the movie director's role is obfuscated by Collard's insistence, first on the producer's control, the heritage of the studio system which a Supreme Court anti-trust ruling would soon challenge, next on the host of scriptwriters (including William Faulkner) who cut their teeth on Cain's 1941 novel. A concern with both kinds of agents supports the necessary intertextual broadening of a process all too long considered in a unidirectional manner and more often than not monitored with suspicion by the literary authors whose works are adapted. Ultimately adaptation's ramifications are made to include the audience, whose susceptibility to the movie's enhanced noir style and tone (courtesy of cinematographer Ernest Haller) supplement the transformation process with an emotional and communicative dimension that had better not be neglected in favor of factual accuracy.

Going by Simon Labate, this emotional and communicative dimension was central to Michel Hazanavicius and Dominique Mézerette's *La Classe américaine* (1993) which proved perhaps even more radical than Jesurun's "Remake/remodel" in its recycling of sequences from some fifty Warner Brothers warhorses – excluding *Mildred Pierce*. Within the frame of a new script loosely based on Orson Welles's 1941 biopic, *Citizen Kane*, the images culled from extant movies received new French dialogue dubbed in (if not co-created) by the French performers whose voices had become inseparable from specific American film stars. The resulting Frenchified collage takes incommensurability to extremes in the service of a parodistic product whose fun not only depends on the incongruity of the new combinations but also on a profound knowledge of the original performers' careers and cinema personas. After surveying the types of remixes and collages, as well as the creative process, stylistic features and legacy of *La Classe américaine*

in particular, Labate can confidently categorize the movie as a *détournement*, a concept credited to Guy Debord and Gil Joseph Wolman (1956), artists variously associated with Letterism, Situationism and Surrealism. By the same token, and as if to demonstrate the generative character of Labate's analysis, and of adaptation in general, Curtiz's urban noir adaptation of Cain's more psychological novel may merit consideration from the perspective of Debord's psychogeography and *dérive*, and Jesurun's "Remake/remodel" from that of *détournement*, for that matter.

In the light of their originally less humorous and more political functionality, *dérive* and *détournement* would also seem to be profitable approaches to the two Afro-European novels which Janine Hauthal subjects to a generic analysis, Mike Phillips's *A Shadow of Myself* (2000) and Bernardine Evaristo's *Soul Tourists* (2005). The premise from which Hauthal starts is that crime fiction and travel writing, the two genres to which these novels respectively belong, are by origin "white" conventions which their British authors of Guyanese and Jamaican origin needed to adapt. Reappropriation is necessary in order to undo these genres of their nationalist, gender, race and class biases, which the continental multicultural setting presumably helps in shaking up. Ultimately Phillips is shown to equivocate by immersing the Ghanaian-Russian George Coker in a shady business world, thus tending to prolong the metaphorical equation between black and criminal. George is also instrumental in his family's reunification in London, where his half-brother Joseph is residing and people of foreign descent arguably may still fit in more easily than in Europe. Ironically, in the wake of the war in Syria, the contested assignation of immigrants to European countries with less experience in multicultural social projects (whether or not as a result of an absent colonialist past), and the eagerness of many newly arrived immigrants to cross the Channel, retroactively grants Phillips's turn-of-the-century novel a prophetic power. Still, Stanley Williams, the "counter-traveler" on a road trip version of the Grand Tour in Evaristo's *Soul Tourists*, would seem to draw the more consistent conclusion from his confrontations with the ghosts of under-exposed black Europeans (from Mary Jane Seacole, a.k.a. the Black Florence Nightingale, to Hannibal, Shakespeare's Dark Lady, and some more) by continuing his nomadic existence and identity *Bildung* after his emancipation from his father and traveling companion, Jessie O'Donnell. The juxtaposition of different time frames here of course makes for an additional exemplification of adaptation's incommensurabilities.

A similar playful tension between past and present, historicity and contemporary update is noticeable in the three biopictures Carolin Crespo discusses with a view to determining to what extent the vastly popular *Shakespeare in Love* (dir. John Madden) sets up or confirms the existence of a transnational model adopted by continental filmmakers in *Molière* (dir. Laurent Tirard) and *Young Goethe in Love* (dir. Philipp Stölzl). The scholarly interest in biopictures tends to be inversely

proportional to their popularity among general audiences, the exception being the two by now classic studies by George Custen, *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992) and Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (2010), both published by Rutgers UP some two decades apart. In the course of this period the genre of the biopic has gone through obvious changes, complicating its affinity with documentary and historiography – as evident in that classic of the genre, *Citizen Kane* – into a system of modes, that comprises not just the hagiography and mythifying celebration but also the revisionist investigative portrait and public exposure of the private personality, on to pastiche and parody, and all possible filmic inflections of extant literary genres. *Citizen Kane* (1941) functioned in this respect as a genre and game changer, which helps explain Hazanavicius and Mézerette's decision to adapt Herman Mankiewicz's script as (shaky) backbone for the hilarious collage adaptation discussed in Labate's paper. After all, Bingham calls Welles's movie "the key film in the parody and deconstruction cycle of the biopic" (2010: 19), parodying and revising the 1930s biopic, by presenting its protagonist's inconsistencies, which in the earlier decade were ironed out, and extending the unitary character's fragmentation into the movie's very form.

Still operating within this larger tradition the biopics Crespo selected present their canonical authors in down-to-earth ways facilitating identification, if not necessarily the serious engagement with their literary work. The collage principle, albeit in a more restrained manner, was relied on in *Molière*, whose plot, as demonstrated by Crespo, offers a compendium of the French playwright's dramatic characters and situations rather than a straightforward filmic dramatization of his life. For the rest, the movies Crespo analyzes point not just to the seemingly uncreative repetition of a stock formula whose youthful and feminine appeal partly revolves around the canonical writer's love life and the exoticism of costume and heritage drama. These movies also show up nationalist inflections depending on the more literate audience's recognition of intertextual references to the writers' output. If these movies thus try to straddle low-brow and high-brow audiences, their common technique of presenting a core literary work – whether *Romeo and Juliet*, *Tartuffe* or *The Sorrows of Young Werther* – as based on the biographical experiences of their authors, provides the kind of autobiographical interpretation that contributed towards the genre's poor scholarly reputation.

References

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