Adaptation as Compendium: Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*.

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Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (Disney, 2010) is the latest release on the Internet Movie Database's list of 66 film and television adaptations of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), adaptations spanning the years 1903-2010 and the nations France, Spain, Italy, Japan, Poland, Russia, (former) Czechoslovakia, Britain, and the US. They include silent and sound films; live-action and animated productions; live television theatre, TV movies, and TV series; ballets, musicals, and puppet shows; a murder mystery (*Alicja*, 1982), a Carrollian biography (*Dream Child*, 1985), and a Playboy pornographic musical (1976).

When books have been adapted so often and so variously, two questions are inevitably asked of any newcomer: How does it adapt the books? How does it differ from prior adaptations? These tandem questions raise the perennial paradox of adaptation criticism, which has, from George Bluestone's foundational work on novels and films (1957) to Linda Hutcheon's postmodern widening of the field (2005), demanded both originality and referentiality of adaptations. Perceiving an aesthetic affinity between Carroll and Burton, many reviewers had anticipated an adaptation that would satisfy both expectations. *Empire* magazine's Angie Errigo sees them as "a dream team"; Richard Corliss of *Time* magazine calls Burton Carroll's "kindred cinematic soul." The film promised much in terms of originality: director Tim Burton's reputation for innovative idiosyncrasy, digital 3-D, and a sequel. Yet in spite of so much promise, most reviewers found the movie "disappointinger and disappointinger" (Bray) both as

an adaptation and as an original film. Anthony Quinn of *The Independent* ties the film's failure in originality to its failure as a literary adaptation: "The madcap ringmaster of Gothic phantasmagoria does not exert his individual stamp on a book one might have thought he was born to film."

As a literary adaptation, Errigo deems the film "sadly Lewis lite … regrettable for Carroll enthusiasts, the most fervent of whom will lament the loss of many cherished puns and quips, riddles, recitations, logic exercises, word games, contests and game playing." For *Time Out* reviewer Dave Calhoun, the film "doesn't always sit well with the mania of Carroll's creations"; he prefers its glimpses of adapted scenes from the Alice books—the film Disney chose *not* to make: "when we see a brighter flashback … we wish we were in that world."

Although the film calls itself a sequel rather than an adaptation (and Hutcheon excludes sequels from her definition of adaptation), it is nevertheless an adaptation in spades—and hearts and clubs and diamonds. It adapts many scenes and most characters from the Alice books; it quotes many of its lines verbatim. It adapts and builds on Carroll's "portmanteau" words, explained by Humpty Dumpty as "two meanings packed into one word" (187), not only at the level of diction (it makes up its own portmanteaus, like "Frabjous Day") but also at the levels of character and plot. The Red Queen (Helena Bonham Carter) is also the Queen of Hearts, two literary characters packed into one filmic character; the film's final scene pits Carroll's two books against one another, as Wonderland cards take on Looking Glass chess pieces. More centrally, the film makes the narrative structure of Carroll's Jabberwocky poem the narrative structure of the whole film. In the book, Alice cedes, "it's *rather* hard to understand," but "somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas." The poem

evidently filled screenwriter Linda Wolverton with ideas, carrying her beyond Alice's ambivalent certainty that "*somebody* killed *something*" to produce a familiar and decisive ending to the film, in which Alice herself slays the Jabberwocky. Killing the Jabberwocky is a structuring principle not only for the film's plot, but also for its destruction of Carroll's nonsensical aesthetic. The poem is the epitome of nonsense; to kill the Jabberwocky is to kill nonsense.

Concerns about the film as literary adaptation and/or sequel emerge in the film's dialogue as well as in the film's reviews. Characters wonder if this is "the right Alice": the Dormouse (Barbara Windsor) insists, "You've brought the wrong Alice"; the Caterpillar (Alan Rickman) deems her "hardly Alice" and "almost Alice"; Alice herself (Mia Wasikowska) insists, "I'm not Alice. Well not that Alice"; the Mad Hatter (Johnny Depp) mourns, "You've lost your muchness." Since Alice is the name of the books and the film as well as the character, these concerns address changes from book to film as well as from child to adult. They canvass adaptation variably as negations of the books ("wrong," "not"—the first a moral, the second a poststructuralist negative), as degrees of approximation ("hardly," "almost"), and as diminution and loss ("lost your muchness"). For all Alice's coming of age and heroic action, in spite of her defiant declaration, "How's this for muchness?", the film's militant finale is the reviewers' main reason for determining that Burton has not made the right *Alice*. *Variety*'s Todd McCarthy grants that the film "has its moments of delight, humor and bedazzlement," but laments that "it also becomes more ordinary as it goes along, building to a generic battle climax similar to any number of others in CGI-heavy movies of the past few years." Cosmo Landesman of *The London Times* agrees: "Burton's film should be as mad as a hatter—a work of exuberant and bold barminess, with the

strangeness of a dream, the fever of delirium and the grand hallucinatory quality of a LSD trip—but it isn't. In the second half, it slumps into the formulaic and the familiar." The technological novelty of digital 3-D offers little by way of compensation: for Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times*, it "distracts more than it delights"; for Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly*, it is "rather humdrum"; for Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun Times*, it is simply an irritant—"that annoying third dimension."

Most critics blame Disney and its *Beauty and the Beast*/*Lion King* screenwriter for the film's failure as a literary adaptation and as an original work. Quinn opines, "This production feels much more in hock to Disney than it does to Lewis Carroll." Nigel Andrews of *The Financial Times* is one of many to blame the screenwriter: "gifted director takes on gaga script." But to my mind, there is another reason: new directions in adaptation practice, theory, and criticism frustrate the old questions we ask of literary film adaptations. For over a decade now, adaptation studies has been pushing away from its earlier, narrower emphasis on canonical-book-to-film adaptations to consider films of non-canonical books, films adapted to prose texts and to other films, books adapted to lowbrow media, and books and films adapted to other forms like graphic novels, video games, and theme park rides. Adaptation theorists, most prominently Linda Hutcheon and Thomas Leitch, have pondered the boundaries between adaptation and intertextuality and found them problematically and promisingly permeable. Adaptation scholars now face the exciting possibility that every cultural production is an adaptation and the terrifying thought that we have somehow to account for all of it. What's more, in the wake of postmodern

theories of pastiche, adaptation scholars are keenly aware that each cultural production draws on—and adapts—a host of prior cultural productions.

Tim Burton's *Alice* manifests in practice what adaptation scholars address in theory. It is precisely *because* Burton's film adapts so much *besides* the Alice books that it fails to tick both originality and literary adaptation boxes for reviewers. The headline to Kate Muir's review in *The London Times* reads, "Burton has forsaken the Alice narrative for a postmodern mash-up." Quinn complains that the film "seems to be copying from other family blockbusters of recent vintage, e.g. *The Lord of the Rings* and *Chronicles of Narnia*, with their climactic battles between good and evil." Burton's film goes much farther than this, adapting a plethora of media, genres, and other films. It adapts videogame narrative structure, with its tasks, levels, spaces, problem-solving, and battles (flee the Bandersnatch; get the vorpal sword; kill the Jabberwocky). Intriguingly, this structure governs the chapter in Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* where Alice must find the key, become the right size, in order to get through the door into the garden. Surprisingly for a sequel, but unsurprisingly for a film engaging videogame structure, the script adapts it almost verbatim. The film also adopts other narrative structures, like the *bildungsroman*, the anti-Cinderella story, and the mythological hero plot, in which an outsider comes from another world, rescues a community, and returns to the other world. It engages aspects of fantasy, action adventure, quest, war, Gothic, and pornographic genres. Its plot, characters, visuals, and music adapt aspects of various specific films. The camera work and editing of the Bandersnatch chase sequence could come right out of any *Indiana Jones* film; the set on which a shrunken Alice navigates a garden-jungle is indebted to the sets of *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*; when Alice

shrinks, but her clothes do not, the scenes unfold as a censored versions of similar scenes in Playboy's pornographic musical. A simultaneously pre-Raphaelite and 80s Goth Alice adapts both Joan of Arc and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Her chain mail costume figures her as the former; her declaration, "I don't slay," casts her as a reluctant version of the latter. Helena Bonham Carter plays the Red Queen, Iracebeth, like Miranda Richardson's Elizabeth I in the *Blackadder* series (Quinn); her physical appearance was based on Bette Davis's Elizabeth I (Salisbury). Iracebeth is a portmanteau of ire and Elizabeth. Beyond Burton's intended reference to Davis's Elizabeth I, critics perceive her as an adaptation of toys and comics: Ty Burr is one of several critics to nominate her "a bobblehead"; Peter Bradshaw calls her a "hydrocephalic nightmare from Charles M. Schulz." While these last two may be metaphors for reviewer readings rather than filmmaker intentions, they indicate spillages from production into consumption. The Red Queen's desolation of Underland and the stone heads of her victims more didactically adapt the White Witch's frozen landscape and statue-bodies in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; her "I love a morning execution" evokes Colonel Kilgore's "I love the smell of napalm in the morning" in *Apocalypse Now*. Her evil henchman, the Knave of Hearts, raises spectres of many cinematic scar-faced, eye-patched villains; her frog footmen look like mass-produced Kermits; her retinue of monkeys, together with Anne Hathaway's portrayal of the White Queen as Glinda from *The Wizard of Oz*, tie her to Oz's Wicked Witch of the West. Hathaway does not mention Glinda in the litany of the characters she consciously adapted: "I wanted the White Queen to have the punk spirit of Debbie Harry, the etherealness of Dan Flavin, and the glamour and grace and emotion of Greta Garbo" (Salisbury). Physically, Burton intended her to look

like Nigella Lawson (Muir). Visually, the Caterpillar is a decrepit, Gothicized version of Disney's 1951 figure. Carroll's Dormouse has been re-gendered and Reepicheepified, another borrowing from the Narnia chronicles. Feisty rather than sleepy, she brandishes a sword, taking on monsters many times her size. Both red and white castles in the film blatantly adapt the Disney castle, although of course the "good" white castle resembles it more than the "evil" red one. These and other adaptations too numerous to mention are not simply allusions; since they determine the narrative structure, characterization, visuals, and sounds of the film, they constitute micro-adaptations of other material.

Most intriguing of all are reviewer criticisms that Burton has disappointingly adapted his *own* prior work. Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* complains that the film is "more like a Burton derivative than something he actually did himself." Muir similarly critiques Depp's performance, assessing that he "has gone for a Burton once too often. This is the director's and the actor's seventh collaboration, and the Mad Hatter has the aura of Willy Wonka about him." In a similar vein, music critics remark of long-time Burton collaborator, Danny Elfman, that his score "is so saturated with Elfman's mannerisms that you can't help but be reminded of his prior classics" (*Filmtracks*). Such reviews figure the film not only as sequel to Alice books and films, but also as sequel to other Burton films. They represent a strikingly new and yet jaded view. Thirty years ago, reviewers would have praised Burton's, Depp's, and Elfman's "signature styles"; in 2010 these styles are seen as unoriginal adaptations of their own prior work.

The wearied sense that the film has "been there, done that, bought the T-shirt" emerges not only in reviewer comments and the film's identification as

sequel; it is further embedded in the film's visuals and script. Alice has been to Underland before (she simply misheard it as Wonderland). Her recurring nightmare of that visit manifests in dark, Gothic circles under her eyes. In contrast to the brighter colors and softer focus of the flashbacks to her childhood visit, the sequel too is seen through darker, more Gothic lenses. Although the film incorporates Tenniel's illustrations, Burton based his darker vision on Arthur Rackham's 1907 illustrations (Salisbury). The film-dream connection, addressed extensively in film studies, is destabilized in this film by a rival memory-flashback duo. The film flashback is an analogue for memory, but it is equally a motif for adaptation; the flashbacks gesture not only to Alice's memory, but also to the books and to other films of the books. Additionally, we have seen that much of the sequel is equally a flashback of other films, genres, and media. While the film certainly makes connections between Alice's memory and her dream, at the end of the film, Alice rejects dream in favour of memory: ""It wasn't a dream at all. It was a memory." Embedded here is a concept of adaptation as collective memory and of film as a flashback to other cultural productions.

The film's always-already-adapted sense emerges further in the Oraculum, "a Calendrical Compendium of Underland." A compendium has two definitions: (1) a brief treatment of a subject; (2) an inventory. As a treatment of the Alice narratives, the compendium straddles temporal and representational spheres. It unfolds like an ancient scroll, like a story told, but as an "oraculum," it foretells future events, like a prophecy or a script. It hovers between past and future as map of the road already and yet to be travelled. Visually, it is a cross between an animated, Victorian book illustration and a film storyboard, both of which raise familiar, disparaging concepts of literary adaptations as moving book

illustrations (e.g. Wagner 223) and of screenplays as blueprints for films (e.g. Harrington 102-3). The age-old battle between word and image continues in the battle over whether oraculum or dream will win out as the film's presiding metaphor. Although Alice declares, "This is *my* dream. *I'll* decide where it goes from here. *I* make the path," she follows the oraculum-script exactly and, as we will see below, abandons the dream metaphor not only for memory, but also for something more sinister.

However, it is compendium's second sense, inventory, that points more particularly to changing approaches to and perceptions of adaptation and to the new questions we need to ask of it and the new criteria we need to assess it. We need to adapt, "Why is a raven like a writing desk?" not, as I did in *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* to the larger question, "Why is a film like a novel?" (Elliott 241), nor to the other larger questions we have traditionally asked ("Why is this story like that story? Why is this character like that character? Why is this representation of history, popular culture, nation, class, sexuality, gender, race, or technology (etc.) like that one?"). Rather, we need to ask more complex, microscopic questions of the micro-adaptations that make up films like Disney's 2010 *Alice*, reading its adapted fragments in relation to each other and to the works they adapt. For example, we can ask how the pieces from which Anne Hathaway adapts her White Witch, both those she acknowledges and those reviewers perceive, reconstruct concepts such as goodness and whiteness. We can ponder how red and white refigure prior black and white colorations of evil and good. We can ask what it means that Burton pits the two Alice books against each other at the end of the film. Then, for all the similar CGI effects and choreography, we will see that this battle radically reworks and adapts the battle

scenes of other films. From this angle of view, the films are decidedly *not* the same.

But some things do remain the same. In *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, I discussed the problems that all-star casts and highly theatrical films present for adaptations of Carroll's subversive linguistic play. When all-star casts perform Carroll's language on highly theatrical sets, as the 1933 film and the 1985 and 1999 television adaptations do,

> theatrical layering displaces Carroll's effects of wonder and illogic, for beneath the artificial theatrical layers lies a puncturing realism that never allows fantasy, nonsense, or dream to take flight. Animal characters are clearly human actors layered over with fictional names, costumes, and makeup. This effect is most marked in the all-star productions of *Alice*, where filmmakers are anxious to showcase famous actors beneath their roles. (190-1)

Burton's film adapts the all-star casting from prior Alice films and is even thicker with theatrical layering that keeps peeling off to reveal what lies beneath. Alice's costumes drop from her body; fake body parts drop from courtiers near the end of the film; the Red Queen's lips remain visible beneath the heart-shaped painted ones. Unlike Disney's 1951 film, in this film, puncturing realism extends from its theatrical to its animated elements. In Disney's earlier animated *Alice*, the Caterpillar adapts Carroll's word play by blowing smoke graphemes and pictures that spell and illustrate his speech. The scene "mocks verbal language along graphic-phonetic lines, challenges the ability of words and pictures to represent each other, and tests models of literary film adaptation when it creates a miniature film adaptation of a Carrollian poem" (Elliott 224). However, Disney's

2010 Caterpillar blows only realist smoke. Similarly, its personification of flowers are limited to adaptations of Tenniel's illustrations, which are far less effective in adapting Carroll's word play that the animations of Disney's 1951 film. Instead of using petals and stamens to create faces, Tenniel merely superimposes a human face on his flower.

Pondering why filmmakers opted for these less innovative ways of adapting Carroll's language, it seems that CGI and 3-D may well be the culprits. These technologies investigate not so much a tension between nonsense and sense as between fantasy and reality: they aim to make the fantastic seem real and the real seem fantastic.[1] Wolverton's script percolates with dialogue that renders such tensions didactic: lines about believing the impossible; lines affirming the superiority of altered states of consciousness to ordinary states ("All the best people are bonkers"); and lines inquiring, "Was it a dream or was it real?" In the altered states of madness, dreaming, and CGI, the impossible is possible and seems real. 3-D makes it seem more so. At the end of the film, Alice not only abandons the film-as-dream metaphor in favor of the film-as-memory flashback, she also comes down squarely on the side of reality: "It wasn't a dream at all. It was a memory. *This place is real*." Alice's didactic declaration of Underland's reality, however, ruptures rather than affirms tensions between impossibility and possibility, reality and fantasy. Even more puncturing than didactic deflation of uncertainty and indeterminacy, when Alice returns to the Victorian world, she harshly denounces her aunt's fantasies as delusive and tells

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[1] Anthony Lane views 3-D as an expression of "our craving for an alternative world in which we can place our trust" (73).

her to go into therapy. Suddenly, it seems that the best people may not be mad after all and that they despise fantasy. More disturbing still, militant feminism in Underland metamorphoses to colonizing capitalism in Overland, as Alice takes her Underland experience of combat into the Victorian world, boarding a ship called Wonder to colonize China as the Caterpillar, now a butterfly, flutters encouragingly on her shoulder to affirm the metamorphosis. If Underland subsumed Wonderland, Overland reinstates it in the form of global capitalism. Whereas Carroll's books subvert and mock authority figures and social structures, Disney's film makes the historical western conquest of eastern nations its happy ending, an apt adaptation of its own colonizing enterprises. On 23 April 2010, a news article reported, "Since returning to the Chinese market in the 1980s, Disney has made significant inroads into retail and education," including the construction of a Disney theme park in Shanghai (Ying). Another article reports: "Over 2,000 households and 297 companies have to be relocated to make way for the first phase of construction" (Xinhua). The managing director of Disney's China division has indicated: "China is becoming an increasingly important market for us and we will be looking for more opportunities to cooperate with our Chinese partners in the future" (Ying), which brings to mind a portmanteau: Chisney. This isn't a dream; this isn't a film; this is real.

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