

How do we talk about adaptation studies today?

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The question, “How do we talk about adaptation studies today?”, asks both how we *are* talking about adaptation studies and how we *should* talk about it. These questions lie at the centre of my research (e.g., Elliott 2013; 2014a; 2014b; 2016). I begin with the first. Surveying recent publications, adaptation studies today continues to be a field of contrasts—of both-and rather than either-or or neither-nor. Longstanding debates between fidelity and infidelity (Hermansson; Dovey), formal and cultural approaches (Elliott, “Rethinking Formal-Cultural Divides”), empirical and ideological epistemologies (Cattrysse), individual agency and sociological forces (Murray), and politics and aesthetics (Hassler-Forrest and Nicklas; MacCabe) continue.

Yet in spite of these tensions, the field is more settled now than it was in the 2000s. It is no longer the new kid on the academic block: in 2013, Routledge gave us a library of critical “classics,” reprinting critical work on literature and film published between 1968 and 1993 (Routledge Library Editions). If classics bring heft to the field, new book series, such as Palgrave’s Studies in Adaptation and Visual Culture, join new media, technologies, and business models in granting it currency. Here and elsewhere, adaptation studies evinces what Thomas Leitch nominates a “Janus-faced” view (2005, 234). The field looks back and forward not only between adapting and adapted entities, but also between older and newer media, cultures, and theories. While adaptations of canonical literature to film (e.g., Hazette; Marsden; Buchanan) and literary adaptations by canonical filmmakers (e.g., Osteen; Tincknell; Hunter) continue to dominate

publications, they are joined by articles and book-length studies of new media adaptations (e.g., Burke; Papazian and Sommers; Constandinides) and modes of adaptation (e.g. Loock and Verevis) excluded from Linda Hutcheon's definition of the field a decade ago (9). Conversely, attention to new media has done nothing to diminish interest in historical adaptations; history and adaptation studies are thriving (e.g., Cartmell 2015; Semenza and Hasenfratz; Marsden; Raw and Tutan). Similarly, studies treating corporate franchise entertainment and globalization (e.g., Corrigan) co-exist with historical, national studies of adaptation (e.g., Rentschler; Sleuthaug; Umrani; Neil and Weisl-Shaw; Gelder and Whelehan).

The Janus-faced view extends to theoretical approaches to adaptation: as some scholars bring new theories (e.g., Hodgkins) and disciplines to bear (e.g., Murray; Raw and Gurr), others revive and rework older ones. In 2014, for example, Patrick Cattrysse returned to polysystems theories pioneered by him and others in the early 1990s; in 2013, Katja Krebs and others restore that translation, rejected as a model for adaptation by radical scholars at the turn of the century, to adaptation studies; in 2012, Leo Chan used translation to bridge formal and cultural divides. These are just some of the myriad, productive ways in which we talk about adaptation studies today, demonstrating our field's maturity, relevance, diversity, and capaciousness.

Is there then any need to ask, "How *should* we talk about adaptation studies today?" I think so. Adaptation itself is not static; adaptation studies must never stop adapting. Today I want to focus on some areas where the field has struggled and seems stuck. Sixteen years after Robert B. Ray's influential field critique, adaptation studies still lacks a "presiding poetics"; it still unfolds more

often than not as a series of disconnected case studies (Ray 44-5; Elliott 2016, forthcoming). While case studies have adapted to new questions, theories, and issues, and many do address broader topics (for example, those in *LFQ* 43.4 (2015) treat experimental fiction, writerly texts, heritage, juvenile delinquency, melodrama, and tragedy), with the exception of Shakespeare adaptation studies, case studies do not dialogue with each other as much or as often as they do in other fields. Intriguingly, larger field views are more likely to be found in editorials and book reviews, as recent issues of *LFQ* attest. But the best places to find larger issues addressed today and tomorrow are field companions and handbooks, as a brief survey of their contents attests (e.g., Cartmell 2012; Leitch 2016; Cutchins, Krebs, and Voigts 2017).

Adaptation studies is fractured because it participates in so many disciplines, periods, cultures, and media. Each discipline subjects it to its own theories and methodologies, which are internally contested as well as contested across disciplines. While the diversity of the field and the inherent resistance of adaptation to being governed or fixed by theorization makes a “presiding poetics” undesirable and impossible, we do need a shared *core* if we are to *talk* to each other about adaptation. In the past, the field cohered around aesthetic values and the canon. When radical politics challenged these, the battle shifted from literature versus film to modernism versus postmodernism, humanism versus radical politics, and structuralism versus poststructuralism. But the main reason that we don’t talk to each other are not these theoretical debates but because we rarely discuss adaptations as adaptations: instead, we discuss them as books, films, and other media; as history, aesthetics, politics, economics, psychology, sociology, and philosophy, and place them in the service of battles

over value and ideology. Too much energy has gone into debating which principles should govern the field and not enough into locating and debating principles of *adaptation*. Hutcheon (4) and Cattrysse (15) claim to be theorizing adaptation as adaptation on the basis of their empirical methodologies. To a degree, this is true. But empiricism is not adaptation, nor are the principles of empiricism the principles of adaptation: indeed, they are distinctly at odds. Eckart Voigts comes closer to theorizing adaptation as adaptation when he recommends “the study of meta-adaptation ... [as] the best way to make adaptational processes explicit” (66). “Meta” articulates a methodology that considers adaptation in terms of its own principles rather than principles addressing other things; as a prefix denoting change, transformation, permutation, and substitution, it articulates principles of adaptation *itself*. Principles of adaptation will provide a much needed centre for adaptation studies, enabling dialogue and debate across all manner of media, cultures, ideologies, and theories from a more firmly established core. We do not need to agree on these principles in order to discuss them; indeed, I hope we do not. But if we are to be a field that talks to each other, as well as a field in its own right, we need to make adaptation the core.