

The Art of Fidelity: On Films that One Can Read

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ABSTRACT. While adaptation studies have moved away from the traditional focus on fidelity as a defining criterion of adaptation, some scholars in aesthetics advocate for a re-examination of fidelity with respect to film adaptation. In my paper, I consider “experiential adaptations” – that is, those that, as films, seek to be faithful to the literary experience – and suggest that we should consider them as a bipolar art form. I begin by discussing two skeptical perspectives on film adaptation as art: Susanne K. Langer’s view against translating one art form into another and Peter Lamarque’s concept of “reading for opacity”. Langer considers hybrid art inherently less valuable, while Lamarque critiques film adaptation for promoting “transparent reading”, which he deems incompatible with art as art. Both highlight a dilemma: the very success of a work as a faithful adaptation undermines its success as a work of art. I propose avoiding this dilemma by examining appreciative practices that naturally integrate literary and cinematic perspectives, such as those discussed by Paisley Livingston and James Harold. I focus on fidelity – the concept they both employ. I contrast Livingston’s treatment of it as a norm, which may sometimes be worth breaching, with Harold’s framing of it as a merit, requiring a narrower scope. My account seeks to balance these perspectives, arguing that fidelity functions as a norm in critical practices but also as a value when understanding film adaptation as a synthesis of distinct art forms.

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1. Introduction

After spending some time with the “massively expanded and proliferating field” of adaptation studies (Cardwell 2018, p. 31),³ I was surprised to find that the very word it revolves around – *adaptation* – started to feel oddly empty. Its conceptual thinning, I believe, is due to harsh critiques of what has often been considered its constitutive element: the requirement of fidelity. Since the 1980s, fidelity in adaptation studies has been under attack. A sharp summary comes from Casie Hermansson, who in 2015 observed that in adaptation studies, fidelity

has been castigated over the past decades with such predictable frequency that Fredric Jameson called the practice ‘generational repudiation,’ J. D. Connor has labeled it the ‘fidelity reflex,’ and Simone Murray ‘the ritual slaying’ (Hermansson 2015, p. 147).

With this foundational act of violence, *new* adaptation studies sharply distinguished itself from older approaches to adaptation, many of which had emerged from, or remained strongly shaped by, earlier theoretical reflections on adaptation within aesthetics and art criticism.

From the perspective of adaptation studies, fidelity came to be seen as an aesthetic bias to be overcome, and its dethronement was embraced as a new beginning. As Sarah Cardwell observes:

Rejecting the prejudice and hierarchies of the pre-1980s adaptation studies, embracing and asserting pluralism, today’s scholars positively celebrate adaptation as a diverse cultural practice (Cardwell 2018, p. 31).

The critique of the central concept has thus brought a number of substitutes into focus. The proliferation of alternative terms includes intertextuality, remediation, transmediality, versioning and others. These terms, as is often pointed out, do not privilege literature over film *ante factum* – a bias for which aesthetics and pre-1980s adaptation studies have frequently been criticized. Moreover, they help articulate the vast multiplicity of relations that works of art form among themselves, and allow us to understand these relations not in evaluative terms, but for what they are: threads running through a semantically rich universe – the world of art.

³ A different assessment of the state of the arts comes from Thomas Leitch: “[A]daptation studies has made little progress in establishing itself as an academic field or discipline in its own right. ... [I]t remains a non-discipline, even an anti-discipline – a decidedly marginal field of study, if it is indeed really a field.” He connects this marginalization with “the exceptional reluctance of its leading practitioners to define its subject.” (Leitch 2025)

Still, one may want to ask: hasn't it happened that, with *adaptation*, new adaptation studies have thrown the baby out with the bathwater? I am not the first to raise this concern; in fact, there is a noticeable tendency within aesthetics and some parts of new adaptation studies to reconceive the notion of fidelity and recover it for the concept of adaptation. The just-quoted Sarah Cardwell, for example, notes that "[t]he concept of adaptation per se has necessarily been diluted as it expands to form a catch-all category for these permutations" (Cardwell 2018, p. 31). As a result, she observes, "potentially valuable distinctions between adaptation and related practices become blurred; and adaptation becomes harder and harder to pin down" (*ibid.*).

There is thus a notable suspicion that while rejecting fidelity may have been useful for embracing the diversity of remediation and transmediation practices, a narrower conception of adaptation is now needed. Against this backdrop, one may discern, from around 2010 onward, efforts within adaptation studies to reintroduce notions such as "fidelity," "authenticity," "truth," and "faithfulness" into the conceptual framework of adaptation. Parallel to this development, discussions of fidelity have also emerged within aesthetics. Paisley Livingston's 2010 paper "On the Appreciation of Cinematic Adaptations," published in *Projections*, was the first one within analytic aesthetics to suggest that faithfulness is an important evaluative feature of adaptation, and it was followed by others. This renewed interest in fidelity may signal a return to a more grounded – and perhaps narrower – understanding of what adaptation is.

The theoretical demand for a distinct conception of adaptation is matched by a practical concern. As many have noted, fidelity remains deeply embedded in the ways adaptations are understood, consumed, and evaluated. Despite its frequent condemnation in adaptation studies, critics continue to use fidelity as a criterion of successful adaptations. For example, TV miniseries *Ripley* (2024) by Steven Zaillian has been praised as truer to the original than the other adaptations of the novel (see, for example, Knight 2024 and Tallerico 2024).

Moreover, as a recent study has shown, fidelity is not only a concern in professional film criticism; it also features prominently in amateur reviews. The study conducted a computational analysis of 151,000 Goodreads adaptation reviews and found out that

fidelity criticism, an oft-dismissed critical mode, helps reviewers make comparisons between a book and film's concrete elements, like the plot structure and pacing or character personalities, to more abstract meditations about bias and affect. Fidelity criticism is an elemental tool for reviewers to ground assessment in book and film details, to justify their evaluation of a work. (Thalken, Mimno, and Wilkens 2024, p. 19).

In this paper, I take seriously the persistence of fidelity both in adaptation criticism and in audience experience, as well as recent calls for a narrower, more grounded concept of adaptation. In the account of adaptation that I wish to propose, a faithful rendering of a literary source into film is one that implicitly invites viewers to watch and read the film at once. Viewers often respond to this invitation by reading the original book (if they have not already) and by engaging in acts of comparison – or rather, by seeing one work in light of the other. I also suggest, though tentatively, that one can watch film adaptations of this kind in a different, more literary mode. To capture this intuition, the concept of fidelity is crucial.

In what follows, I first discuss the notion of fidelity and then present two examples of experiential adaptations – that is, adaptations that are faithful to the experience of reading. I then turn to two samples of aesthetic theories that adopt a skeptical stance toward adaptation. As I argue, for both Susanne K. Langer and Peter Lamarque, the more literary a film adaptation is, the less successful it is as a work of art.

2. Experiential Adaptation

The notion of fidelity I work with is etymologically close to its original meaning, dating back to the early sixteenth century and defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: “the quality of being faithful; faithfulness, loyalty, unswerving allegiance to a person, party, bond, etc.” (OED 2025). The film adaptations that I want to focus on express loyalty to their literary sources by inviting a distinct mode of viewing. I will later refer to these as experiential adaptations.

This understanding of fidelity differs from the interpretation of the term common in art-related discourse and epitomized by terms such as “high-fi” or “high fidelity” sound system. This meaning of fidelity, dating back to the late nineteenth century, reads (again, as captured by the *Oxford English Dictionary*): “The degree to which a sound or picture reproduced or transmitted

by any device *resembles* the original”. (OED 2025) Importantly, thus, my account of fidelity is not based on resemblance.

Experiential adaptations, I suggest, are faithful to their sources not through representational resemblance – whether of plot, character, or setting – but by preserving the mode of engagement proper to the literary source. I illustrate this claim with two examples.

First, *Diamonds of the Night* (1964), a Czechoslovak New Wave film by Jan Němec. It follows two teenage boys who escape from a transport train during the final months of the Second World War and struggle to survive – physically as well as mentally – while lost in the forest. The film centers on the deepening disorientation of its protagonists, both in space and in time. Their journey is punctuated by increasingly unreliable “visions” that interrupt the main action. As spectators, we are left unsure whether we are witnessing memories, anticipations, hallucinations, or dreams. And we are also often not sure whose visions these actually are.

I believe that this radical instability of perspective and time draws us into a kind of interpretative labor that resembles literary reading. We are not simply shown a space or a timeline; we must imaginatively reconstruct it. Moreover, this labor of reconstruction is never finished – it can always be destroyed by a new scene. The film resists transparency. Its time-space is neither stable nor fully visible – it flickers, dissolves, re-emerges. It is something that must be described in order to be perceived.

This quality, I suggest, is what makes Němec’s film an experiential adaptation – faithful not to a plot or a theme, but to the literary experience itself. In both the film and the short story upon which it is based, “Darkness Has No Shadow” by Arnošt Lustig (1985), the narrative is fragmented. In the short story, the narrator is as close to the protagonists as the camera is in the film. In both, we reconstruct space and time from the protagonists’ perspective – that is, from a place of pain, hunger, and hopelessness.

Interestingly, the literary narrative is more informative – the narrator not only observes the characters from the outside but also knows their thoughts; there is also much more dialogue. Němec strips his characters of speech – the protagonists barely speak. This is a radical decision, as dialogues in the film could have at least partially compensated for the absence of the literary narrator’s voice. And yet this decision helps the adaptation preserve literary fidelity: loyalty to

the fragmentation and allusiveness that, I would argue, is the defining quality of Lustig's literary narrative.

My second example has already been mentioned: *Ripley* by Steven Zaillian. One of the main points of praise among critics was the restrained and subtle performance of Andrew Scott. He never quite allows the viewers to step fully into his character. There is always something withheld – something elusive or opaque. He is, as one critic put it, “[a]n enigma, who is both compelling and frightening [...], resistant to explanations, labels, or pigeonholes” (McEntee 2024). Again, this quality, I believe, gives the series a distinctly literary character. The psychological opacity of *Ripley* draws the viewer into a mode of attention that is closer to reading than to traditional cinematic identification. In this way, Zaillian's adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) preserves not just the story, but a way of relating to the story – one that resonates with the literary experience offered by Patricia Highsmith's novel.

Experiential adaptations can be understood as a distinctive kind of adaptation; my proposal, however, goes further. I suggest that they exemplify the very core of what adaptation is. As I have argued here, both *Diamonds of the Night* and *Ripley* are faithful to the literary experience offered by their respective sources and reproduce particular features of the reading experience they provide. However, I believe that the fragmentariness, gaps, the greater demands on imagination, resistance to complete identification, and a higher degree of inaccessibility are also significant features of literary experience as such. In this way, both examples are emblematic for understanding adaptation as a bi-polar art form – one that characteristically engages a mode of film perception infused, or “contaminated,” by reading.

3. Adaptation Skepticism

In the standard account developed within new adaptation studies, discussed in the first part of the paper, it is aesthetics and art criticism that are often blamed for distorting the theory of adaptation by insisting on fidelity. As critics of fidelity have pointed out, the expectation that a successful film adaptation must remain faithful to its source was often paired with the claim that it could never truly do so. As a result, film adaptation was long deemed necessarily inferior – never able to fulfill the promise it is understood to make simply by being an adaptation.

Or so the story goes, at least as told by the critics of fidelity. And like many stories, this one is not entirely true. In fact, it is surprisingly difficult to find figures in aesthetics who regard film adaptation as necessarily compromised or, more precisely, who take the requirement of fidelity to imply that film adaptations should be seen as an inferior art form, if an art form at all.

Finding skeptics of film adaptation within aesthetics is thus difficult; it is not, however, impossible. Let me now turn to two accounts that, either directly or by implication, offer a skeptical perspective on film adaptation: those of Susanne K. Langer and Peter Lamarque. After briefly outlining and comparing their positions, I will move on to consider some recent treatments of fidelity within aesthetics.

As far as I know, Langer did not write directly about film adaptations. However, I am quite sure she would regard “adaptation” with some suspicion. Adaptation, in the preliminary sense proposed above, is based on the idea that hybrid art forms – combinations “of two or more arts” – are possible. Langer, however, firmly rejects the idea that one art form can be translated into another while preserving the distinct character of both.

When words enter into music they are no longer prose or poetry, they are elements of music. Their office is to help create and develop the primary illusion of music, virtual time, and not that of literature, which is something else; so they give up their literary status and take on purely musical functions. (Langer 1953, p. 150)

The metaphors that she uses when discussing her primary example – a song – are “swallowing” (“music swallows words”, *ibid.*, p. 152) and “annihilation” (“a composer [...] annihilates the poem and makes a song”, *ibid.*, p. 153). For poetry to become part of music, it must give up its poetic nature and become fully musical. The same, however, applies to other forms of art: dance, for example, swallows music; opera annihilates drama; and drama swallows all plastic art on stage. As she brutally sums it up: “There are no happy marriages in art – only successful rape” (Langer 1957: 86).

Similarly, we may infer that for a book to become part of a film, it must relinquish its literariness and become fully cinematic. A film adaptation achieves artistic status only when it entirely ceases to be literary. Within this framework, fidelity ceases to be a virtue and becomes a flaw – a sign of incomplete transformation. From this perspective, the film’s literary origin ought to be rendered irrelevant. The film is expected to annihilate its literary source. Or, even more

strongly, adaptations, strictly speaking, do not exist; only films do, and their origins are ultimately irrelevant.

Peter Lamarque, on the other hand, explicitly (though rather marginally) discusses film adaptation, and his position may at first appear less radical than Langer's, as he acknowledges adaptations, that is, cinematic works that render literary texts, are possible. However, he argues that what such adaptations preserve – or successfully render – is fairly limited: namely, only the plot. As Lamarque put it in an interview:

A prime example of transparent reading is an adaptation of a novel in film. Most people nowadays know Jane Austen's novels through the famous film adaptations. And these adaptations are fine and they introduce you to the characters, the story, the plot, and so on, but they do so, in my terms, transparently. They are not introducing you to this through Jane Austen's text, they are not concerned with the mode in which these characters were introduced originally. If your only knowledge of a Jane Austen novel, or any other novel that has been adapted, is through a film version of it, that is fine, it introduces you transparently to the story and the characters, but it is not part of literary appreciation. It could not be, because you are not looking at it, or attending to it, opaquely (Verheyen and Cools 2019, p. 18).

Film adaptation's rendering of literature is thus not only limited but necessarily compromised. To extract the plot, Lamarque argues, filmmakers must strip the literary work of, precisely, what makes it literary; they subject it to what he calls *transparent reading*. And since transparent reading, in his view, is antithetical to literature as art, the artistic status of adaptations themselves becomes doubtful.

Both Langer and Lamarque, then, subject adaptations to a dilemma: either we have an adaptation, but one that does not qualify as art; or we have an artistic cinematic rendering of a literary work, but one that is a full-fledged film and no longer has anything to do with literature. Stated even more forcefully: to the extent that a work succeeds as an adaptation, it fails as a work of art.

4. Adaptation as an Art Form

To avoid the conclusion that film adaptations are less, or not at all, valuable as works of art – as I believe one should – let me now turn to some recent discussions of fidelity in adaptation within aesthetics. Both Paisley Livingston and James Harold have examined the appreciative practices surrounding film adaptation. While their accounts differ in important respects, they share a key commitment: the appreciation of adaptations, they argue, naturally involves both literary and cinematic perspectives.

Livingston situates his argument within a broader Waltonian framework, which holds that “categorization is a necessary condition of the appreciation of art” (Livingston 2010, p. 124). On this view, the category of adaptation imposes specific constraints on how a work should be appreciated. He treats adaptations as necessarily involving the filmmaker’s intention to adapt a literary source and maintains that, because of this, evaluation must focus on the relationship between the literary and cinematic works.

Livingston’s emphasis on intention serves to distinguish adaptations, understood as “overt imitations of [their] model”, that is, the novel (ibid., p. 2), from works that may resemble earlier literary sources, but were not intended as their adaptations. For example, *Electra* (2023) by Daria Kashcheeva would not qualify as an adaptation in these terms, since the filmmaker did not intend to adapt a specific literary work, but rather to reinterpret and actualize the mythic theme of *Electra*.

For Livingston, then, fidelity itself is not a sufficient condition for classification a work as an adaptation. However, once that categorization is established, he argues that fidelity plays an important role in the work’s evaluation. In particular, the viewer is expected to reflect on the challenges involved in translating certain literary devices, such as unreliable storytelling, into cinematic form, and to assess how the filmmaker has addressed those challenges. More strongly still, Livingston argues that viewers must do this if they wish to “appreciate the film as an artistic achievement” (ibid., p. 106).

No doubt many spectators have greatly enjoyed cinematic adaptations while remaining oblivious to the existence of the sources. For some purposes, there is nothing wrong with

this kind of enjoyment in which an adaptation is not recognized as such. Yet for other purposes – for example, if one’s concern is to appreciate the film as an artistic achievement – the rules of the game change. (Livingston 2010, p. 106)

This stands in sharp contrasts with Langer’s view according to which appreciating film as an artistic achievement requires the opposite: not that the viewer search for its literary source, but rather that they become unaware of it altogether.

Similarly, James Harold promotes fidelity as central to understanding the specific value of adaptations. In his account, he distinguishes between *story fidelity* and *thematic fidelity*: while the former, he argues, does not constitute an aesthetic merit, the latter is always praiseworthy and should be pursued by the filmmaker. Achieving thematic fidelity, for Harold, is in itself a mark of artistic merit.

Transposing a theme from one medium to another is never an obvious or straightforward matter. The transposition of a theme into a screenplay poses a very different set of challenges than transposing a story. In the latter case, the main challenge is preserving the audience’s experience of the sequence of fictional events. In the former case, the goal is to preserve the audience’s experience or the thematic ideas presented by the literary work. (Harold 2018, p. 98)

By highlighting theme as what is to be adapted and contrasting it with story, Harold offers a markedly different account of adaptation from Lamarque’s. For Lamarque, film adaptations are condemned to a transparent reading of the literary works on which they are based and therefore necessarily exclude literary values from the evaluative picture. For Harold, by contrast, cinematic adaptations of literary works seek to “preserve audience’s experience” – that is, as I understand it, the experience of opaque reading characteristic of literature as an art form. Although Harold’s account differs from mine, since I find the notion of theme too indeterminate, his emphasis on preserving the mode of experience points directly towards the concept of experiential adaptation.

It is important to note that while both Harold and Livingston discuss fidelity as a significant feature of adaptation, they frame it in different ways. For Livingston, fidelity functions as a norm – something one can reasonably expect an adaptation to fulfill. Yet violating this norm – that is, not being faithful in certain respects – does not automatically make a film worse: in fact,

departing from the literary source may at times be a more appropriate strategy than strict obedience. For Harold, by contrast, fidelity is a merit under all circumstances. Such a strong claim is made possible by significantly narrowing the scope of fidelity: it is therefore only natural that Harold concludes that thematic fidelity alone constitutes a genuine artistic value of cinematic adaptations.

5. Conclusion

I read Livingston and Harold as addressing two distinct levels of the discussion on adaptation, and I believe their accounts can be understood in complementary terms. Livingston effectively highlights specific points of rupture, moments when a call for comparison between literary source and film adaptation emerges and becomes meaningful. His is, in essence, a stance characteristic of the critical approach to adaptations and, as such, makes sense only when adaptations are already understood as a distinct art form. Harold, on the other hand, offers a more global perspective – one concerned with what a successful adaptation should ultimately aim for. By identifying thematic fidelity as the central value, he provides a framework in which departures from fidelity at lower levels can be interpreted not as failures but as artistically justified strategies. Without such a framework, a critical practice along Livingston’s lines would not be possible.

In my terms, Livingston’s normative understanding of fidelity corresponds to fidelity based on resemblance, while Harold’s account of overarching thematic fidelity is rather akin to the term’s more archaic sense – and the one that I also adopt – which associates fidelity with loyalty. Like Harold, I understand fidelity as something that adaptation should strive to achieve: it is integral to what adaptation, in my sense, is. However, I do not consider the “theme” a convincing candidate for this role. Themes transcend their individual artistic renderings, they are not bound to a particular literary text and readily invite reinterpretation. Basing an account of adaptation on thematic fidelity would, I believe, broaden the category of adaptation beyond usefulness. Thus, like Livingston, I believe that the link to a particular literary source needs to be maintained.

Rather than locating fidelity in local resemblances (as Livingston does) or in global *thematic* continuity (as Harold does), I propose that what matters is the mode of engagement an adaptation invites. In this sense, fidelity concerns less what is preserved from the source than how the adaptation calls upon viewers to relate to it. It is this invitation – to see the film both as a film and as a continuation of a literary experience – that I take to be the mark of a faithful adaptation. Such cinematic adaptations – what I have called experiential adaptations above – draw viewers into fragmentary imaginative worlds, less continuous and less complete than those of conventional cinema. In short, they invite the viewer to read.

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