

The Posthuman Turn in Adaptation Studies, or the Lack Thereof...

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Adaptation (2002)

- 'Spot Your Soulmate Flower':
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzJZ9Gd8rc>
- Dir. Spike Jonze. Starring Nicholas Cage, Meryl Streep, Chris Cooper
- Common reference in Adaptation Studies as a commentary on literature-to-film adaptation.



“Becoming-wasp” and “Becoming-orchid”

- Point is, what's so wonderful is that every one of these flowers has a specific relationship with the insect that pollinates it. There's a certain orchid look exactly like a certain insect so the insect is drawn to this flower, its double, its soul mate, and wants nothing more than to make love to it. And after the insect flies off, spots another soul-mate flower and makes love to it, thus pollinating it. And neither the flower nor the insect will ever understand the significance of their lovemaking. I mean, how could they know that because of their little dance the world lives? But it does. By simply doing what they're designed to do, something large and magnificent happens. In this sense they show us how to live - how the only barometer you have is your heart. How, when you spot your flower, you can't let anything get in your way. *John Laroche (acted by Chris Cooper)*



Rhizomatic relationships vs fidelity

- Deleuze and Guattari's definitions of "becoming-wasp" and "becoming-orchid" exemplifies a **rhizomatic relationship**.
- The relationship between the bee and the bee orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) as a powerful analogy for a renewed understanding of the relationship between literary texts and their screen adaptations.
- Removal of the constraints of "fidelity criticism" (i.e., the comparison of the film with the literary source to measure how faithful the supposedly 'inferior' film adaptation remains to the source text, the representative of the supposedly 'superior' art form)



Taking the turns

- Adaptation scholars have effectively focused on the rhizomatic relationships between and among texts, intertexts, metatexts, and, of course, contexts of all kinds; historical, social, economic, cultural, political, ideological, psychological, and economic.
- Adaptation Studies has been informed by almost all the turns (i.e., the linguistic, the cultural, the ideological, etc.) that the humanities fields it draws from have also taken over the past few decades. **All but the ‘posthuman turn’.**



Overview on Missed Opportunities

- An overview on
 - When and how contemporary adaptation theory came close to the gates of posthumanist approaches
 - How it failed to see those gates or invest substantial efforts to push them open.
 - Potential ways forward

AS at the Gates of Posthumanism 1

- Gary R. Bortolotti and Linda Hutcheon's "On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and 'Success': Biologically" (2007). Written by 'a biologist and a literary theorist.'
- The homology between **literature-to-screen adaptation** and **evolutionary biology** that they proposed was clearly persuasive for their purpose of freeing the study of adaptations from the unproductive and simplistic methods of **fidelity criticism**.
- However, a consideration of the **materiality of texts**, whether literary or cinematic, and the **biological constitution of their producers and consumers**, as well as a notion of the inseparability of nature and culture, and the nonhuman and the human in a complex web of interrelations, remained fundamentally remiss in their discussion.

AS at the Gates of Posthumanism 2.1

- Simone Murray's "Materializing Adaptation Theory: The Adaptation Industry" (2008). A 'promising' attempt to guide Adaptation Studies away from what she called its "tail-chasing and repetitive compulsion" (4).
- She argued that even after the three "waves of innovation" during its 50 years of history, first beginning with George Bluestone's *Novels into Film* (1957), "adaptation studies' founding critical text" (4), the study of adaptations still carried "all the hallmarks of a discipline in which adherence to an established methodology has become an endpoint in itself, insight and methodological innovation relegated to secondary considerations" (4).
- She suggested seeing adaptation as "a **material phenomenon** produced by a system of institutional interests and actors" (10). Her approach did not really engage **the *matter*** of adaptation.

Posthumanism and New Materialism

- Emphasis on **matter and materiality** is a sustained core in posthumanism
- Başak Ağin pointed out in her 2016 survey of the new approaches to posthumanism, “Recent Approaches in the Posthuman Turn: Braidotti, Herbrechter, and Nayar,” that the posthuman turn “in its current phase owes much to the new materialist paradigm” (105). Ağin aptly states that in its denotation of “a horizontal, rather than a hierarchical [...] **alignment of the human and the nonhuman,**” the posthuman turn resulted in the closing of “the gap between information and materiality, discourse and matter, and thus the human and the nonhuman” to a significant extent (106).
- No substantial resonance of new materialism in Adaptation Studies as of 2021.

AS at the Gates of Posthumanism 2.2

- Murray definitely opened up a new strand of discussion for the study of adaptations that was based on the materiality that governs political economy and the question of value.
- Not a materializing of Adaptation Studies in the posthumanist sense, which would have attributed actual agency to the nonhuman and natural entities that are involved in the production and consumption of adaptations.
- Despite her frequent use of phrases such as “**cross-pollination**” (13) in explaining her attempt to account for the roles of various actors in studying adaptation, or her employment of other phrases such as the “contemporary literary **adaptation ecosystem**” (7) or the “**symbiosis**” (7) among “the powerful institutions comprising” (7) that ecosystem, Murray apparently also missed an opportunity to see not only the literal materiality, but also the biological dimensions of adaptations.

AS at the Gates of Posthumanism 3.1

- When Kyle Meikle followed up on Murray's work several years later in his essay "Rematerializing Adaptation Theory" (2013), Adaptation Studies did come very close to taking "the material turn."
- His central question: "What happens, for instance, if adaptation scholars consider the ways in which filmmakers adapt physical – as well as textual – matter?" (174).
- Meikle suggested that "rethinking adaptation in terms of raw materiality would allow for **nonhuman actors to take their rightful place** alongside the adaptation industry's more literal and literary agents" (174). "Rematerializing adaptation theory to account for such actors," Meikle continued, "would recast Murray's adaptation industry as a Latourian collective of humans and nonhumans..." (174).

AS at the Gates of Posthumanism 3.2

- In fact, going back to the beginnings of the study of adaptations, to the work of Bluestone who had reflected that in the film medium “the distinction between and object is obliterated. Man and object become interchangeable, and inanimate joins the animate as an actor” (Bluestone qtd. in Meikle 176-77), Meikle seemed to be developing the conceptual tool, namely what he called an “***intermaterial model of adaptation***” (175), that was necessary for “an anti-anthropocentric *adaptation*” (177) theory.
- Meikle sustained his argument for the “quasi-objectness” of films in the Latourian sense. By engaging the example of Martin Scorsese’s 2011 film *Hugo*, for the making of which “15 automatons,” “100 miles of electric cable,” and “750 large hanging lamps” alongside the “500 extras,” “144 set builders” and “28 principal actors” (Selznick qtd. in Meikle 181) contributed, he contended that “[t]his combination of ‘things’ – this assemblage of ‘things,’ this collective of humans and nonhumans, this procession of quasi-objects – points the way toward a more material understanding of the adaptive process...” (Meikle 181). However, **Meikle did not walk that way.**

Conclusions 1

- The works of Gary R. Bortolotti and Linda Hutcheon on the one hand, and of Simone Murray and Kyle Miekke on the other, represent the major moments when Adaptation Studies almost took “the posthuman turn” by closing in on the actual evolutionary biological and material aspects of the human and nonhuman entities involved in the process of adaptation, but failed to do so.
- Kamilla Elliott in her recent book *Theorizing Adaptation* (2020): “‘Post-’ theories have not necessarily or unilaterally produced progress for theorizing adaptation; concomitantly, returning to earlier theories has not always been a regressive or reactionary move. Even the **newer theories of the theoretical turn engage in theoretical return**. These dynamics are articulated in the proliferation of post- and neo- prefixes attached to theoretical stem words, as in poststructuralism, postmodernism, **posthumanism**, postfeminism, and postcolonialism and neo- narratology, neo- Marxism, and neo- feminism. Both prefixes undertake operations akin to adaptation: both repeat aspects of the theories they vary to suit new academic and cultural environments. Undoubtedly, the theoretical adaptations of neo- and post- theorization have helped theories that might otherwise have **become extinct to survive**” (163).
- Adaptation Studies has not yet adapted itself to the posthumanist paradigm.

Conclusions 2

- The main reason for this failure can be explained with reference to what Cary Wolfe points out as “a fundamental problem with the liberal humanist model” (91) which is **essentially anthropocentric in its constitution** and deep-rooted in all humanities fields, including their interdisciplinary field of Adaptation Studies.
- Wolfe aptly suggests that we need “new lines of empathy, affinity, and respect between different forms of life, both human and non-human, [which] may be realized in ways not accountable, either philosophically or ethically, by the basic coordinates of liberal humanism” (91).



Potential ways forward

- Affect Theory
- Empirical Ecocriticism
- Neuroaesthetics
- Cognitive Narratology

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