


THE LITERARINESS OF MEDIA ART



WITH SUCH
A
WISTFUL EYE

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WORKS OF LITERATURE IN MEDIA ART

Wandering through the Central Pavilion at Giardini during the 57th Venice Biennale, one could enter a large exhibition space equipped with a free-standing projection screen, a sculptural object reminiscent of iron girders, and a bench enveloped by an art déco style brass mantle. The video screened in Korean-American **Sung Hwan Kim**'s mixed-media installation *Love Before Bond* (US 2017) presented an assemblage of scenes circling around three protagonists. At one point, a close-up depicts three passports in an odd perspective, filmed from above as each is paged through by a pair of hands. The passports have been issued by different countries: the Republic of Sudan, the U.S., and the Republic of Korea. The passport photographs appear to show the video's protagonists: two adolescents and a young man. The relationship between the three remains cryptic.

In one central scene, the teenage boy stands in front of a brick wall, looking down, while giving orders to the girl, such as: "Put your legs together. Weight on your heels, not on your toes. Stand straight." "Put your toes to the ground. Straighten your back. [...] Don't be afraid to show your body. Your body is beautiful. [...] It's interesting. [...] Turn around." Why he gives these orders and why the girl follows them remains a complete enigma. The scene creates ambivalent associations, ranging from instructions in an etiquette manual for respectable girls, to uplifting encouragement, to sleazy objectifications.

Kim also applies aesthetic devices discussed in previous chapters, such as choral speech and alienated pronunciation. He also uses different languages that produce semantic ambiguities to evoke defamiliarization. The French words "le pain invisible," for instance, are spoken by the young man within a monolog in Sudanese Arabic while we see a loaf of bread (French: *pain*) so that the images contradict what is spoken. The meaning of the words shifts when understood as English, which becomes clear when a subtitle presents the sentence "no one sees the pain" shortly after. The oral and written language of the video shifts from colloquial expression to a more literary style containing several provocative and unanswered questions: "Why don't you take me in your arms?" the girl asks twice. "And who has not dreamt of violence?" can be read two times while the Sudanese man asks the same question in Arabic. Although the characters interact, their dialog is utterly strange. It does not seem as if they are necessarily talking to each other, but as if words are put in their mouths, as if someone or something else is speaking through them.



FIGURE 5.1 Sung Hwan Kim. *Love Before Bond*. 2017.

This A-effect becomes clear when reading the informational text on the wall, which tells viewers that Kim's installation refers to literary texts by William Shakespeare, Joseph Conrad, and James Baldwin. However, only repeated examinations of the work—as well as a close familiarity with these authors' works—leads to the insight that Kim is directly quoting Baldwin's texts only. For instance, one of the questions noted earlier is from Joseph Conrad's novel *Victory* (1915) but as quoted in Baldwin's novel *Another Country* (1962). The function of the quotes remains opaque: Taken from their context and interwoven with text segments that Kim wrote himself, they create a dense intertextual web. To make sense of this web, viewers must become active interpreters: Perhaps the collage of text fragments from Shakespeare, Conrad, and Baldwin, and their collision with seemingly unrelated images of an Afro-American boy and an Asian-American girl attempts to highlight the underlying web of colonialism and racism that affects relationships in the postcolonial world? Kim's visual imagery—the protagonists' different skin colors; the ostentatious use of the colors white, brown, and black—would indicate this. Viewers are left to wonder: Is *Love Before Bond* a contemporary adaptation of Baldwin's works?

Just as in Kim's installation, media artworks quite often not only use poetic strategies or refer to literary genres in general—as Chapters 3 and 4 have demonstrated—but they also refer to concrete literary precursors, both prose and poetry. The manifold pieces discussed in this chapter quote or transform a variety of literary works, including Dante Alighieri's epic poem *La divina commedia* (1321), Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898), Maurice Blanchot's novel *Thomas l'obscur* (1941), Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Invitation* (1955), Christa Wolf's narrative *Kassandra* (1983), and Charles Bukowski's poem "The Man With the Beautiful Eyes" (1992). Such

references may be explicit—particularly if the literary work is used in its entirety or if its title appears in that of the media artwork—or, as Kim's video installation demonstrates, very opaque, entangled, and difficult to decipher.

Notions of fidelity, medium specificity, and originality have fueled the theoretical discourse on literature to film adaptations and shaped the quest for methodologies. This chapter links the writings of the Russian Formalists on the matter of adaptation in silent cinema to perspectives from contemporary adaptation studies. It also revisits some previously introduced concepts, such as intertextuality, dialogism, intermediality, and transcription. This theoretical prelude informs the subsequent analyses and carves out the specific perspective of the 'literariness of adaptation.'

In the realm of cinema, the term 'adaptation' distinguishes films that are based on a previously published literary work from those originating in an 'original screenplay,' as defined by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (cf. MacCabe 2011, 3). The cinematization of canonized classics and popular bestsellers has proven to be a successful business model for films and (reissued) novels alike (cf. Cartmell and Whelehan 2010, 22f; Kerrigan 2010, 94; Higson 2004, 35, 40f). This is by no means a new phenomenon, since screen adaptations are as old as film itself. Unlike contemporary feature-length adaptations, however, the earliest adaptations made sense only when the audience was familiar with the literary work. Due to the technical restrictions of a single reel with a running time of only a few minutes, many of them refer to literary sources by focusing on "peak moments" of pre-existing "theatrical performances" (Gunning 2011, 44f).

Boris Eikhenbaum describes the reworking of a novel into a screenplay as one of the author's "obligations to culture" (Eikhenbaum 1973 [1926], 122) that ensures the continuation of the work's popularity and the writer's reputation. In mixing ethics and economics, Eikhenbaum anticipated a growing interdependence between film and literature, but he did not foresee that the popularity of film would also work against it. In the 1930s, Hollywood "provided a source of major income, if not artistic satisfaction, for every important playwright and author in the United States," yet film scholar James Naremore points to a "significant historical irony" (Naremore 2000, 4):

At the same time that the movies, the legitimate theater, and the book-publishing industry were growing closer together, sophisticated art in general was in active rebellion against bourgeois culture and was intentionally producing work that could not be easily assimilated into the mainstream. (ibid., 4f)

Film drew on literary sources to gain social prestige, to become a legitimate form of art. Yet, when cinema succeeded in capitalizing on the cultural value of literature, the conservatism of Hollywood and the advent of high modernist aesthetics with its ideal of pure art devalued film (again), and especially filmic adaptations.

Until recently, most theories and definitions of adaptation have been written with regard to mainstream feature films. Only in the past decade has a broader perspective incorporating such diverse phenomena as avant-garde film, musicals, TV shows, videogames, interactive e-books, apps, and YouTube clips emerged. The aesthetic routine of feature film adaptations therefore constitutes a norm. Media art is not subject to the same rules of success as commercial cinema, so appropriation in media art results in very different artifacts and processes. In contrast to William Verrone's book on avant-garde film adaptations that pitches experimental film against mainstream movies to argue for the former's artistic superiority (cf. Verrone 2011), this study understands established conventions of feature film adaptations simply as the background for media art's deviations.

The relationship to a literary text is not always overt in media art appropriations, so spotting the reference, the cues, can be tricky. Its success depends heavily on paratextual information (captions in the exhibition space, remarks by the artist, or databases) as well as the viewers' previous knowledge. For example, the allusion to Gertrude Stein's iconic line "a rose is a rose is a rose" in the title of Ulrike Rosenbach's single-channel video *Eine Frau ist eine Frau* ("A Woman Is a Woman") (1972) is apparent only to those who are familiar with Stein's work and detect the similarity in the syntactic structure. Yet even after the reference has been identified, the way in which literary work and media art relate is usually not self-evident either. Often short and abstract, media artworks do not rely, like narrative cinema, on actors playing characters (see Chapter 4, Section 3), on recognizable actions, or a *mise-en-scène* that attempts to meet the reader's imagination, reworking the source material in a way that bristles at unlabored recognition. Some present quotes from texts in the form of subtitles, animated words, or voice-overs, and combine quotations with images that seem completely unrelated. Others transpose multiple literary works into a single-channel video or—as in the case of Nalini Malani's *In Search of Vanished Blood*—even into an immersive multi-channel installation. Some artworks openly claim a link to a work of literature, yet their complicated form might nevertheless motivate the viewer to revisit the artworks and the source texts multiple times to gain an idea of just what is happening. In this type of appropriation, one might speak of the defamiliarization of the whole work as a device that prolongs the viewer's perception.

Adaptation as Appropriation

In general, 'adaptation' designates the relationship between an audiovisual entity and a work of literature—although other ties between source and adaptation exist under the same heading, for instance a musical composition based on a painting. The question of how this intermedial relationship is or should be revealed, as well as the very nature of this relationship, has produced a vast amount of research proposing heterogeneous definitions. Often, these definitions are based on a comparative approach between text and film, proposing various taxonomies of proximity. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan warn in the introduction to their anthology of literature on screen: "Hidden in these taxonomies are value judgments and a consequent ranking of types, normally covertly governed by a literary rather than cinematic perspective" (Cartmell and Whelehan 2007, 2). Even theories that explicitly challenge these assumptions rely on some form of proximity evaluation to demarcate adaptations from other forms of referencing.

Linda Hutcheon gives a threefold definition of adaptation: as "formal entity or product," "process of creation," and "process of reception" (Hutcheon 2006, 7f). Accordingly, adaptations are an "acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works," a "creative and an interpretative act of appropriation/salvaging," as well as an "extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (ibid., 8). Julie Sanders argues in a similar vein but emphasizes that the "more sustained engagement with a single text or source" distinguishes an adaptation from "the more glancing act of allusion or quotation" (Sanders 2006, 4). 'Glancing' here suggests a certain kind of superficiality associated with the act of quoting. Sanders continues, "Adaptation and appropriation are inevitably involved in the performance of textual echo and allusion, but this does not usually equate to the fragmentary *bricolage* of quotation more commonly understood as the operative mode of intertextuality" (ibid.). From Hutcheon's and Sanders's perspective, allusions, citations, samplings, and quotations are related to but not classified as adaptations or appropriations. While this latter differentiation might apply to some cases of conventional feature film adaptations, a brief allusion in media art does not necessarily imply a superficial relationship to the literary precursor. In Gary Hill's video *Incidence of Catastrophe*, the quoting of a single line