Since the publication of Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo's volumes *A Companion to Literature and Film* (2005) and *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (2005), along with Stam's own *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* (2005), film adaptation has been more than ever food for thought - and publishing -, it seems. Recently, adaptation studies has been enriched with a number of valuable volumes and works. For instance, there is the volume *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship* (2005), Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), and Christine Geraghty's forthcoming *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama* (2007). Two collections of essays that especially testify to the increasing institutionalization within academia are *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen* (2007), and the forthcoming volume *The Literature/Film Reader: Issues of Adaptation* (2007). Part of this relative boom of publications is Thomas Leitch's study of the problems of adaptation and adaptation theory, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ* (2007).

In spite of the apparent flourishing of adaptation study, Thomas Leitch predicts a bleak future for the field, if it continues down the road already taken. In his first chapter, he argues that adaptation theory has not only had little connection with film theory over the years, it has consistently tended to privilege literature over film as well (3). In short, the study of adaptation often goes against the grain of the principle of specific film adaptations, namely "that texts remain alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten and that to experience a text in all its power requires each reader to rewrite it." (12-13) Incidentally, this argument is very much in line with the moral of Linda Hutcheon's book, and her definition of adaptation as "repetition without replication". (Hutcheon 2006: 173) Leitch further borrows from Roland Barthes and Mikhail Bakhtin (topping it off with Wolfgang Iser) to point out the dynamic essence of adaptation. Pitching the readerly against the writerly, and "literacy" against "literature", he suggests (albeit in sometimes generalising terms) that his ideal of adaptation studies has the potential to act as a bridge between literacy and literature, as the keystone of a new discipline of textual studies (17-18).

According to Leitch, the failure of adaptation theory and study is caused by the notion of fidelity, and the underlying assumption that the original is a touchstone of value. In fact, Leitch shows that "fidelity as a criterion of value is based on a marketplace of competing models." (6) However, even though Leitch contends that...
he will steer clear of the project of fidelity that many adaptation theorists "routinely pursue as soon as they have disavowed it" (20), I am not entirely convinced that he has avoided the pitfalls of such binary thinking altogether. Incidentally, the long-drawn-out discussion on fidelity has become rather tedious in my view, in that practically every recent book on adaptation pretends it has revolutionized adaptation studies by deconstructing fidelity and the supremacy of the original. That leaves me wondering whether this alleged debate is a hot topic not so much in contemporary adaptation studies or word and image studies but on the 'marketplace' of competing academic books. Nevertheless, Leitch promises that his book differs from those other books, in that it examines "specific problems" that adaptations raise rather than the adaptations themselves (20). Indeed, he decides to study fidelity "rather than attacking or defending it", and treat it "as a problem variously conceived and defined by the filmmakers at hand, not as an unquestioned desideratum of all adaptations." (20) His underlying motivation to focus on "problems" is "to dethrone evaluation as the unmarked or central activity of adaptation study" (21), in order to shake off the negative influences of the literature department on adaptation studies, particularly its literary aesthetics and humanist values, although it remains to be seen whether aesthetic analysis should necessarily be evaluative.

This groundwork in the opening chapter forms the basis of Leitch's book as a whole. However, the twelve chapters are pretty much stand-alone analyses and discussions of various topics. In particular, Leitch deals with literature versus literacy, early silent short films versus the prestige of literature, adaptations of the Gospels, introductory adaptations of (Dickens's) literary classics, adaptation versus allusion by means of a model of intertextual references, fidelity as aberration in *Gone with the Wind* and *The Lord of the Rings*, fidelity as "Tradition of Quality" (for David O. Selznick, Merchant Ivory, and the BBC), adaptations of illustrated or visual texts, adaptations of the Sherlock Holmes franchise, the adapter as auteur (in the case of Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, and Walt Disney), "postliterary adaptations" based on nonliterary sources, and films self-proclaimedly based on "a true story" respectively. Due to the autonomy of each chapter, it is entirely up to the reader to recognize the threads running through Leitch's book. In the following sections, I will try to bring some of these leitmotifs to the foreground.

Between the lines Leitch especially searches for instances which debunk fidelity as the primary concept to examine adaptation. Central to his project is the observation that, contrary to adaptation theory, which persists in treating it as a norm, fidelity itself is in fact "the exception to the norm of variously unfaithful adaptations." (127) By examining a variety of case studies, Leitch shows convincingly that fidelity is subordinated to several other factors. Firstly, the notion of fidelity is not homogeneous, in that it is a conception which cannot apply to any adaptation in any absolute way. For instance, fidelity to Dickens's classics in entry-level screen adaptations "involves numberless choices concerning which elements of Dickens's story and its incrustations to be faithful to" (82), which effectively questions the label "Dickensian". Secondly, film adaptations often seem to embellish their source texts rather than replace them. In this way, they are illustrations, not faithful reproductions. For instance, the goal of early one-reel adaptations is "not to provide a faithful transcription of their original sources but to use those sources as inspiration or pretext for a digest, reminiscence, hybrid, or inflation" (25-26). D. W. Griffith's narratives, for one, did not follow their literary originals, but reduced them to their thematic essence (46). Other examples include some of the Gospel adaptations, "organized as illustrations rather than retellings of the Gospel story, which they count on to provide a
narrative armature for their versions." (50) Thirdly, by harking back to François Truffaut's essays on 'la qualité française', Leitch exposes fidelity in so-called faithful adaptations such as the productions of Selznick, Merchant Ivory, or the BBC, as "not an end but a fetishistic means, for every adaptation that aims at fidelity is really aiming at Quality." (178) The Merchant Ivory adaptations, for example, do not so much honour a past literary tradition as "address contemporary problems within a decorum of manners, visuals, and music that will make them palatable, even seductive" (171). Fourthly, Leitch argues that comic-book adaptations are not centrally concerned with visual fidelity. Instead, they concentrate on "the individual style of their particular source" (199) and its distinctive thematic traits such as the hero's personality, the morality of its world, or the nature of the trademark villains, so as to establish a particular relation to that source. Fifthly, as the Sherlock Holmes franchise indicates, the aesthetic criterion of fidelity may further be replaced by the pragmatic criterion of utility (218), or by the endeavour of the film adaptations "to become canonical members of the franchise themselves" (230), to be accepted in the canon. Sixthly, Leitch ultimately relativizes the concept of fidelity by examining a range of films that profess to be "based on a true story". These films use this label without any source text per se, for they announce "their fidelity to a text to which they can never be compared, one which just happens to be congruent with the truth" (301-302), in order to authenticate themselves.

In connection with these various factors, three larger threads can be discerned throughout Leitch's case studies. The first is that in the history of cinema, the epic or the spectacular has almost always taken precedence over fidelity in any form. Early films, for example, imply "that the ability to tell a story without parasitic reliance on an established literary source is less important than the ability to stage larger-than-life spectacles more resoundingly than any theatrical adaptation." (32) In other words, "cinema's epic pretensions precede its interest in developing coherent, self-contained narrative", as there was often "no concession to a hypothetical audience's need for background information or narrative continuity" (26). Accordingly, D. W. Griffith's goal was not fidelity, but the assumption of the scale or prestige of a literary original (46). Similarly, many Hollywood adaptations of the Gospels heighten the narrative elements of the material in order to foster their entertainment value (51). Or consider the Dickens adaptations produced by Selznick, which "were particularly successful at melding the novelist's aesthetic to the studio's proclivity for wholesome, star-studded spectacle." (156) Even Gone with the Wind and The Lord of the Rings, projects that sought to adapt their source texts as faithfully as possible, "repeatedly compromise their attempts at fidelity by their search for something more", a larger scale appropriate to the epic canvas of cinema (143). The second thread is the economic or financial side of fidelity. In fact, the primary motive for fidelity is financial rather than aesthetic (128). The different DVD versions of The Lord of the Rings, for example, suggest that "the ultimate goal of any adaptation that works toward an ever-more-comprehensive fidelity is an invitation to the audience to spend without end." (150) Also behind Hitchcock and Kubrick, alongside Disney, there are corporate models of auteurship, hiding signs of corporate production beneath their creative hand (256). According to Leitch, this economic imperative even underlies adaptations of Jane Austen (278) or so-called faithful adaptations of other literary classics, as anything with a historical basis "can be marketed as a Quality adaptation." (178) Throughout his book, Leitch justly draws attention not only to such capitalist motivations but to the phenomenon of transmedia synergy as well. Finally, the third emphasis is on the idea of 'play', which Leitch gives a positive evaluation as being dynamic, resourceful, and creative. Film adaptations displaying a sense of performance, playful energy and
pleasure - together with active critical thinking - encourage a view of source texts as writerly texts in Barthes's terms, which contributes to Leitch's ideal of a synthesis of literature and literacy.

By subverting fidelity in these ways, Leitch wants to direct the attention of adaptation studies "away from films that present themselves as based on a single identifiable source" and "toward the process of adaptation" (302). However, Leitch approaches the problems of adaptation predominantly from the angle of the production process, as the previous quote already indicates. At times he loses himself in recounting production details, instead of examining how the case studies actually function. He explains his point of view as follows:

Instead of constantly seeking answers to the question, "Why are so many adaptations unfaithful to perfectly good sources?" adaptation studies would be better advised to ask the question, "Why does this particular adaptation aim to be faithful?" (127)

My main objection, in short, is that Leitch often bases his arguments on the film producers' views on fidelity, since to discuss fidelity as a goal often means to limit the perspective to that of the filmmakers. Personally, I would have liked to see more aesthetic analysis of the actual relations between the film adaptations and their intertexts, which does not necessarily entail any evaluative position, in my opinion. Furthermore, besides producers or filmmakers, Leitch also appeals occasionally to the opinion of reviewers for his arguments. As a result, there is not always a clear demarcation between the subjective (evaluative) discourse of film reviews and the academic discourse of adaptation studies. All in all, I would argue that Leitch's study is in need of a distinction between different kinds of fidelity, namely fidelity as goal (from the perspective of film production), fidelity as evaluation (from the perspective of reviews), and fidelity as comparison (from the perspective of adaptation studies), in order to criticize the concept successfully.

For these reasons I am not altogether sure whether or not Leitch's book has come up to the high standards he had set himself in his excellent article "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory" (Leitch 2003), which points out twelve crucial problems in adaptation studies. I do not think that he himself has overcome each of those fallacies, although the book certainly deals with approximately the latter half of the twelve. However, it is not an expansion of the article, in that Film Adaptation and Its Discontents is not structured as a book as such. It does not contain a distinctly shaped or built-up argument, besides the various threads left for the reader to discover, as discussed above. Hence Leitch's book also lacks a clearly defined methodology or unity of methodology. This methodological quibble further has repercussions on certain chapters, too. For instance, chapter six provides a lengthy comparison between Gone with the Wind and The Lord of the Rings, on the basis that both Selznick and Peter Jackson wanted to produce a faithful adaptation. But because of their thoroughly singular contexts, this seemingly redundant comparison sways constantly back and forth between the similarities and differences between both productions, without reaching a convincing conclusion. My final point here is that Leitch's book is probably better appreciated as a collection of essays, which try to put into practice his view on what contemporary adaptation studies should do.

In conclusion, I would highly recommend Leitch's study, in particular for its diversity and complexity. The author demonstrates that he is familiar with a large and heterogeneous corpus, including canonical as well as popular or marginal films and texts, which adaptation studies can only benefit from. A few weaker parts and chapters aside, Leitch's arguments are compelling and thought-provoking.
Moreover, he has thoroughly researched and examined his case studies. Especially noteworthy are his discussions of Gospel adaptations, postliterary adaptations, and based-on-a-true-story films. Finally, Leitch reaches the conclusion that adaptation studies and its students "will need to focus less on texts and more on textualizing (the processes by which some intertexts become sanctified as texts while others do not) and textuality (the institutional characteristics that mark some texts, but not others, as texts)" (302). Ultimately, the study of adaptation should not concentrate on fidelity to the alleged original source text, but on the various practices of literature and literacy that surround adaptation, such as rewriting and rereading.

Works Cited


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