The Rewriting Model of Film Adaptation of Literature[*]

Liu Shimeng

Abstract: This paper applies Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation and Zhao Yiheng's theory of general narratology to propose a new way for understanding the film adaptation of literature—the rewriting model. As an attempt to transcend the adaptation model with its prejudiced connotations towards film, the rewriting model involves acknowledging the dual identities of adaptation both as a product and a process. It also involves realising that change is inevitable when moving from the adapted text to the film adaptation. In terms of the ternary model of narrative, the procedures of rewriting can be divided into two phases. The first phase happens in the adjustment from the pre-narrated text 1 to 2, which involves a modification from the adapted literature to an intermediate text, prior to cinematisation. In this phase of rewriting, there are four variables (who, why, where and when) that affect the selection of materials, forms, and contents in the pre-narrated text 1. The second phase happens in the movement from the pre-narrated text 2 to the narrated text. In this phase, two variables (what and how) exert the influence on the combination of materials and their representation in cinema.

Keywords: adaptation, rewriting model, ternary model of narrative, cinema

论文学改编电影的改写模式

刘识萌

摘　要：本文拟在琳达·哈琴的改编理论和赵毅衡的广义叙述学基础上

提出一种理解文学改编电影的新方式——改写模式。为了超越传统的改编模式，及其对电影的隐含偏见，改写模式首先承认改编的双重身份，即它同时是具体的文化作品，又是形成这个作品的过程。其次，改写模式意识到，从文学文本到其电影改编的过程中变化是不可避免的。以叙述三层次论的视角来看，改写的步骤可分为两个阶段。第一阶段发生在从底本 1 向底本 2 的转换中，也就是从被改编的文学文本向最终影像化之前的中间文本的过渡过程。在这一阶段的改写中，有四个变量（改编者、改编原因、地点和时间）会影响从底本 1 中对材料、形式和内容的选择。第二阶段发生在从底本 2 向述本的转换中，在这一步骤，有两个变量（媒介特性和受众）会影响所选材料的组合及其在电影中的再现。

Postmodern literary adaptation studies involve an attempt to escape the shackles of traditional "fidelity" discourse by converting the analysis of films either into a kind of supplementary literary criticism, or into a cultural criticism of modernity, in which films serve as the filter. In considering the ontology of media, it seems clear that trans-media adaptation involves more than the dramatisation and visualisation of content from the adapted text. Trans-media adaptation also demands a translation or transformation of the narrative and its aesthetic qualities between two essentially different media. The transformation of narrative aesthetics entails replacing the literary narrative conveyed by personalised discourse with a cinematic narrative which is conveyed by objective records combined with visual narration. By this process, cinematic adaptation reconstructs the "reading" experience of the recipients.

This reconstruction of the "reading" experience requires first a transformation of media specificities, and then a journey across space and time from the adapted text to the film adaptation. In moving the adapted text towards this destination, the experience expressed in the text must be rearticulated. The text must undergo a process of institutionalisation into the different cultural context of another space, time, and medium. According to Said (1983), this sort of transfer of ideas or

theories from situation to situation "necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalisation" (p. 226), producing expressions that differ from those of the originals. In other words, trans-media adaptation is not a pure operation of representative duplication in another medium. Instead, it is a second writing, with vestiges of paired transformations between mediations and temporal-spatial dimensions.

Traditional adaptation studies demand that adaptation be conducted with respectful fidelity to the adapted text in terms of its plot, characterisation, and meaning. Postmodernist adaptation theory, however begins to consider adaptation as a special kind of rewriting, on the grounds that cultural re-institutionalisation is an inevitable necessity in the transfer of artistic expressions across different times, spaces, and media forms. W. J. T. Mitchell explains that the heterogeneousness between the culture of reading and the culture of spectatorship is not limited to formal issues. Instead, for "the kinds of individuals and institutions" formed by a certain culture, such heterogeneousness holds "implications for the very forms that sociability and subjectivity take" (1994, p. 3). The forms of individual subjectivity and institutional sociability expressed in a culture of literary works are transformed when rearticulated in a culture of visual works. Those forms of expression connect differently with the individuals and institutions concerned, which means that the rearticulation involves a production of new cultural meaning. Trans-media adaptation is an operation that rebuilds the unity of economics and politics from the original text, and then translates the cultural meaning from the adapted text into the film adaptation. To transcend the limits of the "fidelity" discourse and to explore the potential for a richer kind of adaptation, it is worthwhile attempting to replace the traditional adaptation model with the rewriting model.

Ⅰ. From Adaptation Model to Rewriting Model

The term "adaptation model" refers to the traditional approach for handling the conversion of literary texts into cinematic expression, and to the set of assumptions behind this approach. In evaluating such adaptations, the standard method used in comparative studies is to identify what has been lost in the film, rather than what has been created or enriched. The criteria used in this model are moralistic, with a focus on determining what offense has been done to the literature. If there is any

deviation in content, the critics typically accuse the filmmakers of "infidelity", "betrayal" or "vulgarisation" (Stam, 2000, p. 54). For example, Virginia Woolf criticises the "monosyllabic nature" of visual language (Elliott, 2003, p. 195). She complains that films reduce the complexity of "love" to "a kiss", "jealousy" to "a broken cup", and "death" to simply "a hearse" (Woolf, 1972, p. 88). Such belief in the superiority of literature and the crudeness of film is the most dominant presupposition in the adaptation model.

It is generally admitted that numerous literary classics have been distorted into mediocre films that cater to the philistine tastes of the entertainment industry. However, a biased assumption concerning the inferiority of visual signs does little to clarify the working principles of trans-media adaptation. These criticisms against visual culture provide little insight towards improved expression through films. It is therefore more rewarding to study "how stories travel from medium to medium" (Ray, 2000, p. 41). The notion of travel implies a distance to be covered from one point to another, from one situation to another, and from one narrative programmed for a specific medium to another medium.

Adaptation is a flexible concept, which describes an essential duality that blends both similarity and difference, as in using both the noun and verb forms of words. Trans-media adaptation is simultaneously a finished product and a transformative process, and the freedom to transform is a means to guarantee the adapted text's "after-life" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 71). To accept the inevitability that adaptation involves change means viewing adaptation as rewriting, and this kind of awareness calls for intelligent application of the rewriting model.

In adaptation, transformation is just as essential as replication. As defined by United States copyright law, adaptation involves the production of a "derivative work," which is "based upon one or more pre-existing works". In such works, the adapted text is "recast" or "transformed"[①]. Rewriting, rather than simple replication, is what defines an adaptation. Adaptation is the journey of a story as it transcends the specificity of a particular medium, with its limited dimensions of time and space. This kind of journey implies a dynamic rather than a static process of

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① This definition of "derivative work" is given by the *United States Copyright Act* in Title 17 of the United States Code, 101, http://www.copyright.gov/title17/.

adaptation.

Hutcheon's（2006） definition of adaptation highlights the transformative dynamics involved in the journey of a story, because she splits the concept of adaptation into two parts—the product and the process. First, as a "formal entity or product", the adaptation is "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works." Second, as a process, adaptation refers to the（re-）interpretation and（re-）creation of the product, which involves an intertextual conversion（Hutcheon, 2006, pp. 7－8）. This double definition extends the concept to include the entire process of adaptation, from the cultural product to the adapters' interpretative and creative transcoding, and finally to the audience's experience and evaluation of the new expression. In framing the process of adaptation, Hutcheon identifies six variables—what, who, why, how, where and when—as the keys to explaining the dynamics involved. A close consideration for each of these variables is helpful for understanding what should be rewritten, and how to present the rewritten account in the adaptation.

Ⅱ. What Gets Rewritten: From Pre-Narrated Text 1 to 2

In adapting literature to film, Zhao Yiheng explains that the original text and the adaptation have some overlapping areas in the pre-narrated text 1, but probably the pre-narrated text 2 is quite independent of its earlier expression（2013, pp. 136, 141）. The pre-narrated text 1 is basically a borderless and plotless realm of materials of various forms and contents, which is organised under the principle of relevance. The pre-narrated text 2, however, is a realm of plot-related materials with clear borders, which have been selected from text 1, but have not yet been represented for the new media（Zhao, 2013, p. 141）. In the journey from pre-narrated text 1 to 2, which is a transition from the adapted literature to an intermediate text before the final cinematisation, there are four variables（who, why, where and when）that strongly affect the selection of materials, forms, and contents.

The subjective force for rewriting an adaptation comes from those who perform this task, and the intentions they bring to the work. It makes a difference which people are doing the adaptation, and why they are doing it. It is no doubt vital to recognise that the original author is the sole creator of a literary text, and that he or

she is fully responsible for the content, and for any ethical or legal issues it raises. However, with the more complicated medium of film, no single individual has full control, as the industrial mode of film production requires a collaborative team. The screenwriters, music composers, costume and set designers, actors, editors, and directors must interact as an ensemble of cinematic creators. Nevertheless, the screenwriter and the director play principal roles, and they are the primary conscious adapters. It is arguable that actors, when playing in adaptations of prestigious literary works, may consult historical and literary sources to help them interpret and create their own incarnations of the adapted text. However, as with other artists whose roles are tangential to authorship, "their responsibility is more to the screenplay and thus to the film as an autonomous work of art" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 85).

In terms of interaction with the adapted text, the screenwriter plays a more basic role than the director in choosing how to interpret the text and arrange the script. However, the stability of the screenwriter's authorship is always at the risk. The screenplay might never be produced at all. Several screenwriters might be assigned to work on one project; or the original writer might reject the screenwriter's proposed alterations. Despite these limitations in authorship, the screenwriter still has the greatest chance to apply his or her subjectivity for rewriting the adapted text. For example, in adapting *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the screenwriter Horton Foote was inspired by a review that imaginatively compared the novel to *Huckleberry Finn*, in terms of its dramatisation of Scout's growth (Foote, 1988, p. 7). Through Foote's subjective vision, the novel was rewritten onto the screen as a bildungsroman for a female version of Huck.

In filmmaking, however, it commonly happens that the final cut of the film turns out different than the shooting script. For example, the utopian ending in the adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*—"We're the People"—was not the invention of the screenwriter, but the result of a "post-production revision" by the producer, Darryl F. Zanuck (Cassano, 2014, p. 164). The director, therefore, has a more stable role than the screenwriter in terms of authorship, and he or she holds ultimate authority in determining "the overall vision" of a film adaptation (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 85).

As a leading agent in rewriting the adapted text, the director is motivated by

various intentions, which may be pecuniary, cultural, personal, political or aesthetic. Inevitably, the context of creation and interpretation for an adaptation is ideological, social, and historical (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 108). When monetary gain is the primary consideration, the adaptation is shaped more by concern for profitability than by the director's creative passion. The main objectives in that case are to protect a financial investment, secure a manifest audience, and generate profits from a franchised commodity. The potential for translating stories into diverse money-making products can be seen in the way that comic books about the superhero Batman have been repackaged to engage all of the young audience's senses through Batman films, capes, promotional wrappers, fast-food, and Batman toys (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 68). Adaptations of this kind can easily devolve into mechanical reproduction of kitsch products and cheap entertainment.

In the early history of film, most adaptations were made to increase the respectability of cinema and elevate its cultural status. At this point, the cinema was still an immature art form. One of the most common intentions for literary adaptations has been to acquire cultural capital, transmitted symbolically from literature, and then to convert that cultural capital into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241 – 258). The intention to multiply the financial gain from literature through cinematic production reflects the logic of capitalism, and where such logic prevails, the intentions of the producer can overwhelm those of the director.

In many situations, however, the director's personal intent becomes the most powerful drive involved. When the director is legitimised as the auteur, his or her personal subjectivity tends to be valued more highly than any "barriers to its expression" (Sarris, 1996, p. 31) that may arise in the relentless business culture of Hollywood filmmaking. In adapting five Shakespeare plays into the film *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), the director Orson Welles sought to salvage the rich Shakespearian language from being reduced to photographic realism. His strategy was to increase the poetics of cinematic images by charging them with suggestions beyond their visual appearance (Naremore, 2015, p. 254). Welles' stylish and expressive approach to manipulating the camera grew out of his understanding and interpretation of Shakespeare, which had developed since the start of his career on Broadway. In adapting Shakespeare for film, he was motivated primarily by a desire to express his personal vision. In the same way, his adaptation of *Macbeth* (1948)

involved visually communicating his own interpretation. Welles viewed the play as the story of a man deciding to regress from civilisation to savagery, and going backward on the evolutionary chain (Brode, 2000, pp. 175 – 194).

Literary adaptations can also serve to express a director's social or cultural critique of a literary artwork (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 94). In adapting Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, Sally Potter rejected the easy approach of making a feminist film that would ideologically match the novel. Instead, she set out to explore a larger sphere beyond the adapted text, and expressed the story as a satirical criticism of the English class system and its colonial mentality (Potter, 1994, p. xi).

Some observers might doubt the possibility that a director's personality can prevail over the studio regarding the decisions involved in adaptation. The studio structure is often a constraint on the director's creativity. Therefore, the director's power to rewrite the adapted text and create textual fluidity often grows stronger if the studio structure and the authority of the producer are removed. Instead of resisting the intent to rewrite as a potential betrayal of the text, a critic suggests that a truly artistic literary adaptation must destabilise the literary text, simultaneously disclosing and disguising the source (Cohen, 1977, p. 255). Chief adapters have various reasons choosing the works they convert to film. However, their own personal and political motives are ultimately critical in those decisions. Therefore, adaptation studies need to account for these decisions. Such choices indicate why an adaptation to a particular media culture, at a particular historical time, is significantly different from another adaptation (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 111).

Another two variables in film adaptation that trigger the rewriting process are the "when" and the "where" in which the adaptation is produced and received. As it is impossible for any artwork to exist in a vacuum, any work of adaptation is always positioned in "a time and a place, a society and a culture" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 142). The journey that the adapted text makes across temporal and spatial dimensions can be either short or long, and either transcultural or culture-bound. A wider historical span allows more freedom in creation. Almost three quarters of the twentieth century elapsed between James Joyce's novella *The Dead* (1914) and John Huston's cinematic adaptation (1987). In addressing the altered frame of reference since Joyce's time, the film emphatically treated the myth of passionate love, building a sense of historical realism by carving out a temporal niche for its

contemporary audience and engaging them in an unusual meditation on death (Varela, 2005, pp. 145 – 162).

Other adaptations are made shortly after the original texts are written, and in these cases the original text can exert a dominating influence on the film. For example, three years after the publication of Margaret Mitchell's Pulitzer prize-winning novel *Gone with the Wind* (1936), the film was produced by David O. Selznick in 1939. Selznick chose and dismissed a succession of screenwriters and directors, frustrating the artistic drive of his filmmaking team. He insisted on remaining literally faithful to the novel, due to its vast popularity and familiarity for many readers, and the producer's sensibilities prevailed (Sarris, 1973).

Not only distances in time, but also distances in space—between different societies and cultures—can have a major influence on the creation and interpretation of an adaptation. In *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), Gurinder Chadha rewrote Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* according to the conventions of Bollywood film studios. This adaptation highlighted rather than cloaked the conflicts between Western and non-Western cultures, and between the Hollywood and Bollywood film industries. Chadha, a Kenyan-born Indian-English director, applied the conventions of Bollywood film to articulate the cultural identity of otherness within the context of Austen's comedy of manners. This approach updated the original novel's social critiques on class distinctions to include distinctions based on race (Wilson, 2006, p. 324).

Whether an adaptation involves rewriting across a bridge between the past and the present, or between the places of here and there, the practice of adaptation always includes a set of assumptions that are deemed correct concerning the historical backdrop. The rewriting practice of adapters is thus initiated on a foundation of "historical material realism", on which the adapter imposes a series of "anachronistic ideological 'corrections'" of the adapted text. The effect of such rewriting is to "authorise these modern ideologies as historically authentic" (Elliott, 2003, p. 177).

Ⅲ. How to Present the Rewritten: From Pre-Narrated Text 2 to Narrated Text

After the materials, forms and contents have been selected and plotted in the

pre-narrated text 2, the journey of the narrated text involves combining selected materials, and representing them through the medium of cinema (Zhao, 2013, pp. 141 – 142). For film adaptations of literary works, the two variables of media specificity and spectatorial reception are vital in determining how materials are combined and represented.

In general, the transformation of the material and the formal specificity of the medium determine the style of presentation in the rewritten text. In this case, the transformations involved are from the print media of literary works to the performance media of films, and from the mode of telling to that of showing. Beyond these inherent differences in the material means of expression, there are of course many shared interests between the author and the director. However, the dissimilarity of formal conventions necessarily demands that the text be rewritten for film adaptation. As novelist Graham Swift described the cinematic adaptation of his novel *Last Orders* (by director Fred Schepisi), "our abiding obsession was the same: the mysteries of storytelling—of timing, pacing and the exactly judged release of information and emotion" (Swift, 2002). Still, the ways of telling the same story and the means of expressing shifts in the sense of time or space are by no means identical in literature and film. These media each possess their own "communicational energetics" in exploiting, combining, and multiplying the materials of expression, such as "rhythm, movement, gesture, music, speech, image, writing" (Gaudreault & Marion, 2004, p. 65).

In terms of semiotic differences, writers of novels, short stories, and written plays are dealing with the verbal medium of word symbols, and they can operate with fewer constraints in terms of the environment, imagination, time or budget. The film director, however, deals in a more inclusive and synthesising medium, with its multi-track properties of expression that involve interaction between written and spoken words, photographic images, sound effects, music, camera movements, lighting, and editing. Film production is also more intensely constrained by industrial moral codes, time limits, and finite financial resources. Briefly put, literature is primarily verbal with high creative flexibility, but film is a synthesis of the verbal, the visual, and the aural in a medium with more production-related restrictions.

In rewriting for film adaptation, the writing is both a product and a process.

The audience, as a constructive participant, interacts with other elements in affecting the meaning-making process of a film adaptation. For the audience, the mode of engagement particular to narrative literature is the telling mode, and the mode in film is the showing mode (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 23). Both literature and film share the common aim of immersing the audience in a meaning-making practice, but they do so through different modes of engagement. Critics have a basic consensus on the ways that literature and film immerse their audiences. The telling mode of narrative literature does it through imagination, and the showing mode does it through aural and visual perceptions (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 22). The visual details in literature are presented by assertions, and in cinema by depictions, or renditions in pictorial form (Chatman, 1980, p. 128). Word symbols are suitable for conceptual and discursive representation, and visual symbols are for perceptual and presentational expression (Bluestone, 1971, pp. 1-5).

Although these different modes provide alternative means of expression, with their own special perspectives and grammars, literature and film both have the function of narration and signification, and both require the audience's cognitive involvement in decoding. For literature, the reader accumulates signs concerning context, characters, and events sequentially, through the irreversible succession of discourse in linear order (Cameron, 1962, p. 145). For film, sequentiality is a less important narrative device than simultaneity. Therefore, cinematic techniques such as parallel editing and montage deploy multiple lines of activity into the same chronological moment, suggesting the simultaneity of events (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2005, p. 174) or creating a juxtaposition between spaces, themes, and meanings.

In short, from the perspective of reader response, written narrative (i. e., the adapted text) engages its reader through the mental act of imagination by using conceptual and discursive word symbols. The film medium has goals which are functionally identical, but achieves those goals with the different means of cinematic narrative, which involve the audience through perceptual acts of hearing, seeing, and presenting visual symbols.

IV. The Rewriting Model Compared with Other Models

To redress the inferior cultural status that has long been assigned to adaptation, due to the static and incomplete definition previously given to this art form, it is

important to build on Hutcheon's framework of adaptation and on Zhao's ternary model for rewriting. These approaches share a postmodernist conceptualisation of adaptation, viewing it as both a product and a process. Such a view shifts the focus of inquiry from asking which parts of the adapted text have been cut or degraded, to asking why and how these variations happen. James Naremore proposes to juxtapose the study of adaptation with studies of "recycling, remaking, and every other form of retelling in the age of mechanical reproduction and electronic communication" (2000, p. 15). In that context, adaptation could become one of central concerns of contemporary media studies, and a vital element in the theory of repetition.

Naremore's proposal aims to promote understanding concerning one side of adaptation, i. e., the archetype that is recurrent and reproductive, but it ignores another side, i. e., the unavoidable difference incurred in the process of translation. The rewriting model focuses attention on the incongruities between the adapted text and the adaptation. This model enables conscious decisions concerning the lines of divergence by incorporating consideration of the six variables and the three layers of narrative involved.

Adaption studies have proposed a number of other models that also challenge the cultural elitism of traditional adaptation models. The models of reading and commentary have not directly asserted, but have simply implied the superiority of the adapted text. They have suggested that the main cultural function of adaptation is to add annotations to the literary source, thereby contributing, not to the adaptation itself, but to a deeper revelation of the literature. In this view, adaptation is considered a "fictional response" (Denman, 1996, p. iii) to another work of fiction, with layers of meaning added to its sensorial, emotional, psychological, and intellectual aspects.

The models of transvocalisation and dialogisation, being the fruits of intertextualised adaptation, attempt to establish dialogical associations between the context that applies in the situations where the text or the adaptation are produced, and the context that applies where they are received. These models point out changes in context, but at the risk of ignoring the adapters' motives for actualising those changes from one context to another. The implicit assumption is that "it is language which speaks, not the author", and "only language acts, 'performs,' and not 'me'" (Barthes, 1977, p. 143).

The model of translation directs attention to the issue of media specificity, by suggesting that the process of adaptation involves transposition between two semiotic systems. However, this model has a tendency to reduce the intricacies of adaptation to a question of forms. Other theoretical discourses on translation still prioritise the value of literal faithfulness to the original text, on the assumption that translations are supposed to be "substitutes" (Bellos, 2011, p. 37) for the source documents.

The rewriting model is by no means flawless. Surely it presents dangers, and can lead to various shortcomings. For instance, this model seems to dismiss the relevance of evaluating film through juxtaposition with literature. The rewriting model also provides no set of standards for assessing the success or failure of a film in adapting literature for the screen. Nevertheless, the rewriting model acknowledges the dual identities involved in adaptation. It strives to pinpoint the variables and conversions involved in the shift from pre-narrated to narrated texts, and to explore how these factors should affect the productive process of adaptation. The use of "writing" as the metaphor for the adapter's creation also echoes auteur theory, in that it emphasises the subjectivity of film directors, who are conditioned by the society and culture around them as they seek to reinterpret both the media and the meaning of the adapted text. For both of those kinds of interpretation, rewriting is an appropriate and necessary practice.

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Author:

Liu Shimeng, Ph. D. in English Language and Literature at Sichuan University, and her research focuses on the Western culture. From Aug. 2014 to July 2015, she visited the University of Pennsylvania as a Fulbright researcher in Cinema Studies of the Department of English.

作者简介：

刘识萌，四川大学外国语学院英语语言文学专业博士，富布赖特访问学者，研究方向为西方文化。

Email：shimengliu_4177@163.com