

THOMAS LEITCH'S *TWELVE FALLACIES IN CONTEMPORARY ADAPTATION THEORY* - A CONTEXTUAL STUDY

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Adaptation is a very common phenomenon in film studies. However, it is considered to be a marginal enterprise in the scholarly discourse. Theories have been introduced by the experts, and in the year 2003, Thomas Leitch identifies the fallacies in the Film Adaptation Theory. This paper attempts at a contextual study of Thomas Leitch's *Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory*.

1. *There is such a thing as contemporary adaptation theory.*

Leitch (2003) opines that adaptation studies have been practised without “a presiding poetics”, a term suggested by Robert B. Ray (2000). Leitch is not satisfied with the scholarly articles in *Literature / Film Quarterly* and academic courses like “Dickens and Film” and “From Page to Screen” (150). He cites Brian McFarlane (1996) who comments that the adaptation theory is in a ‘limited, tentative stage’ even if scholars are writing about adaptations for nearly sixty years (194).

He also expresses his discontent over the ‘empiricism’ of Morris Beja to the ‘neo-Aristotelianism’ of James Griffith. He remarks that George Bluestone’s categorical and essentialist analysis of literature and films in his tendentious half-a-century-old book *Novels into Film* has raised crucial questions (Leitch 150).

In Tamil film industry, Kamal Haasan is well-known for adapting foreign movies. Still now he uses either the word ‘inspiration’ or ‘remake’ to refer to his adapted movies. Leitch seems to be right when he says that “several fundamental questions in adaptation theory remain unasked, let alone unanswered” (150).

2. *Differences between literary and cinematic texts are rooted in essential properties of their respective media.*

Leitch (2003) is not convinced with Siegfried Kracauer’s statement in his 1960 work *Theory of Film*, “Each medium has a specific nature which invites certain kinds of communications while obstructing others” (1). Leitch also objects Seymour Chatman’s essay *What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (and Vice Versa)* in the Oxford anthology *Film Theory and Criticism* (1980). Chatman insists that novels and films are suited to different tasks: assertion and depiction, respectively. He states that descriptive voiceover commentary in films is ‘uncinematic’ as it is ‘merely a description by literary assertion transferred to film’.

Chatman argues that close-up shots don’t exalt artistic reflection as they are hermeneutic rather than descriptive. But Leitch opine that close-ups ‘do invite aesthetic contemplation because they are descriptive and assertive’ (152). He affirms that “Though novels and films may seem at any given moment in the history of narrative theory to have essentially distinctive

properties, those properties are functions of their historical moments and not of the media themselves” (154).

3. *Literary texts are verbal, films visual.*

It is obviously untrue not because literary texts are not verbal, but because films are not restricted only to visuals (Leitch 154). Any movie buff will remember the ‘movie dialogues’ as he/she remembers the interesting scenes and characters in his/her favourite movies. Kattabomman’s bold speech to Jackson Durai in *Kattabomman*, Kannagi’s speech in *Poombugar*, court scene in *Parasakthi*, and climax scene in *Manohara* movies are best remembered even today for the ‘powerful dialogues’ uttered by the Tamil actor Shivaji Ganesan.

McFarlane observes that the novel relies on ‘a wholly verbal sign system’ while the film involves ‘visual, aural, and verbal signifiers’ (26). While novels allow the readers to read the verbal texts ‘paced and inflected any way they like’, films provide ‘prescribed, unalterable visual and verbal performances’ (Leitch 154).

The ‘written text’ (screenplay script) has to be interpreted (verbally) by the team of director, actors, cinematographer, lyricist, choreographer, and editor to translate it into ‘performance text’ that demands (verbal) interpretation by the cast as well as the audience whereas ‘a literary text requires (verbal) interpretation only by its readers’ (155).

4. *Novels are better than films.*

It takes less time for the audience to watch a movie, but it does not mean that films are not better than novels. No one can ever deny that English movies like *Casablanca*, *Godfather*, *Psycho*, *Citizen Kane*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Midnight in Paris*, *Titanic*, and *Avatar* or Tamil movies like *Apoorva Raagangal*, *Sindhu Bairavi*, *Naayagan*, *Mouna Raagam*, *Muthal Mariyaathai*, *Vedham Pudhithu*, or *Moondram Pirai* are more than ‘marvelous’.

The lengthy descriptions about a *recherché* setting the novelist gives in pages can be visualized in a single shot planned and designed by the art director. The extended character-descriptions the novelist presents in long passages can be visualized by an elegant artist dressed up by a talented cosmetician. Films can give as many ‘telling details’ as novels. They can show ‘intricate’ stories and ‘display behavioral traits and background details more fully’. During their more limited running time, they are ‘capable of commanding closer attention from a mass audience’. One significant aspect about films is that they are ‘comprehensible even to less attentive viewers’ (Leitch 156).

5. *Novels deal in concepts, films in percepts.*

Bluestone (1971) observes that ‘the moving image comes to us directly through perception while language must be filtered through the screen of conceptual apprehension’ (20). He argues that ‘the verbal sign, with its low iconicity and high symbolic function, works conceptually, whereas the cinematic sign, with its high iconicity and uncertain symbolic function, works directly, sensuously, perceptually’ (26-27).

Moving images in films are percepts, but the films that are ‘fictional narratives’ deal with concepts. James Cameron’s *Titanic* not only contains percepts (visual effects) but also concepts like historical re-creation, epic sweep, class warfare, vanity, adolescent romance, rivalry, etc. Kamalhaasan’s *Uthama Villain* not only contains percepts (colourful visuals) but also concepts

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like meta-cinema, faction (mixing real events with fictional narrative), dance fusion (Kerala's *Theyyam* with Tamilnadu's *Koothu*), relationship complexities, illegal affairs, self-scrutiny, 'eleventh hour' confessions, etc.

Leitch (2003) rightly says that 'the films invoke not only visual codes but also auditory, narrative, and fictional codes, along with rhetoric of figuration'. 'Interpreting and integrating these codes into the single signifying system of a film require as much conceptual initiative and agility as interpreting the verbal signifying system of a novel' (157).

6. *Novels create more complex characters than movies because they offer more immediate and complete access to characters' psychological states.*

Leitch (2003) accepts that 'the ability to enter into the minds of fictional characters directly is one of the glories and constitutive distinctions of prose fiction'. Only its conventions allow sentences beginning with 'I thought' or 'he/she thought' to reveal the inner thoughts of the characters. It is indeed 'hard for movies to compete with novels in this regard' (158).

Leitch does not want to argue whether thoughts 'externalized' (through soliloquies and asides) in drama are no longer 'thoughts'. But he affirms that the specialty of non-novelistic media is that it allows the audience 'to infer what the characters are thinking on the basis of their speech and behaviour'. He remarks that 'the thoughts which are inferred can be as subtle and profound as thoughts that are presented directly' (158).

It is absolutely true as anybody can understand the psychological states of *Neerkumizhi* Nagesh (uncertainty of life), *Arangetram* Prameela (poor Brahmin girl forced to become a prostitute), *Aboorva Raagangal* Srividya (married woman's love with an adolescent boy), *Aval Oru Thodar Kathai* (desperate condition of a middle class spinster), *Kalki* Geetha (silent dreams of a childless woman), *Muthal Mariyadhai* Sivaji (old man's platonic love with a young village girl), *Naayagan* Kamal (grief of a father who lost his son), *Mouna Raagam* Mohan (pain of a forsaken husband), *Uyirae* Manisha Koyraala (torn between terrorist anger and terrific love), etc. without any description.

Any type of writing will have omissions which Wolfgang Iser (1978) calls 'gaps' or 'blanks' that allow the audience to 'fill in exclusively with one's own projections' (167). In Leiche's view, characters display gaps which 'allow readers or viewers to project for them a life that seems more vivid, realistic, and complex than their explicitly specified thoughts and actions' (159).

Leiche remarks that 'novels and movies are not condemned to certain kinds of gaps that are specific to their media, or that one sort of gap is better than another'. "What determines the success of a given work is neither the decision to withhold nor the decision to specify a character's thoughts, but the subtlety, maturity, and fullness of the pattern that emerges from thoughts and actions specified or inferred. These are not criteria on which any particular medium has a monopoly" (159).

7. *Cinema's visual specification usurps its audience's imagination.*

In the Tamil movie *Mudhalvan*, hero Arjun describes how his future wife should be: "A girl with hair like *clouds*, eyes like *fish*, nose like *parrot's*, lips like *fig fruit*, neck like *conch*, and legs like *plantain stem*". The hero's father, who is a cartoonist, draws a picture following the verbal descriptions given by his son. He ends up drawing a picture like this.



The scene closes as the son rolls with laughter along with his loving parents. The hero uses all the classical similes used in Tamil language in describing a beautiful girl. When all these similes are objectified, it turns out not to be a beautiful girl but an ugly monster.

In the same manner, McFarlane (1996) notes the impossibility of translating Dickens's descriptions to the screen despite their apparent wealth of visual details. Wemmick's 'square wooden face carved out with a dull-edged chisel' or Scrooge's home 'playing hide-and-seek with other houses' may seem 'like a rich visual invitation to a film-maker'. In reality, it 'offers little in the way of actual physical detail and a good deal of purely verbal energy working toward a sense of the grotesque' (133).

Leitch argues that the reader 'does not translate such passages into visually realized or narrativized images' but 'enjoy them as concepts whose sensory appeal is at least as much to the ear as to the eye'. He asserts that 'the dauntingly rich visual field of films does not inhibit viewers' imagination, because imagining cannot legitimately be reduced to 'picturing' alone (161).

8. *Fidelity is the most appropriate criterion to use in analyzing adaptations.*

Leitch (2003) opines that fidelity to the source material - whether it is making a replica of the whole text, adapting specific textual details, or re-creating only the essence of the source text - is a dispiritedly deceitful assessment of the adaptation's quality because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a superficial sense (161).

Leitch declares that fidelity is 'an appeal to anteriority', the 'primacy of classic over modern texts', scrutinized often by the teachers of literary studies who are interested in the adaptations of their favourite literary texts.

He comments that even the cinema studies is spared of 'evaluation' as a critical project; only the adaptation study, whether it uses or does not use the source text as a touchstone, 'remains obsessed with asking whether the adapted film is any good as a preliminary, a precondition, or a substitute for asking how it works'. He remarks that 'the theoretical poverty of fidelity as a touchstone of value which begs analytical questions might bedevil other approaches to adaptation studies' (162).

9. *Source texts are more original than adaptations.*

Fidelity establishes itself as a 'criterion for evaluation' as adaptations rely on the 'bulwark of fidelity' to answer the questions about the nature of authorship. Instead of answering the 'thorny questions of what constitutes the originality' of the source text, it is 'easier to dismiss adaptations as inevitably blurred mechanical reproductions of original works of art' (Leitch 163).

Popular film-makers like Orson Welles, Stanley Kubrick, Hitchcock, and Walt Disney 'escape the label of adapter', but are 'sanctified by the name of auteur'. Shakespeare is appreciated for 'seeing the artistic potential of inert source materials' and recognized as 'an alchemist, not an adapter'. This defense may demonstrate that 'some adaptations are better than others' and 'not that the best adaptations aren't really adaptations at all' (163).

Using Mikhail Bakhtin's observation that 'all texts quote or embed fragments of earlier texts, typically without explicit acknowledgment, often without conscious intention, and never with any attempt at straightforward replication of the original's force' (324), the literature has 'long been eclipsed by the junkyard aesthetics of the cinema'.

While adaptations are objurgated for fidelity to source texts, the question of 'originality of written texts or their fidelity to source materials' is very conveniently 'dismissed with the observation that all texts are intertexts' (Leitch 164).

10. *Adaptations are adapting exactly one text apiece.*

It might seem reasonable to presume a one-to-one correspondence between a film adaptation and its source text. In reality, when a novel becomes a source for hundreds of adaptations, each adaptation becomes a source for its corresponding adaptations (Leitch 164). Manirathnam's *Nayagan* which is loosely based on the real life of Bombay underworld don Varadharajan Mudhaliar has been influenced by Coppola's *Godfather* too; both *Godfather* and *Nayagan* serve as inspirations for numerous gangster movies.

Kamalhaasan (2016), in an interview, says "We had thought Hollywood was the zenith. Then we found various pockets of genius, where even Hollywood picks up [ideas] from. We got introduced to Japanese, Chinese, Dutch cinema, and they have all been inspirations in my career." Cartmell and Whelehan (1999) observe that in a source text like *Hamlet* which is subjected to numerous adaptations, one can recognize 'in untangling one adaptation from another', 'many sources outside both the play and its subsequent adapted films' (17).

Leitch remarks that adaptation study may require a comprehensive and in-depth study of the film's precursor texts; 'no intertextual model is adequate to the study of adaptation if it limits each intertext to a single precursor' (165).

11. *Adaptations are intertexts, their precursor texts simply texts.*

Director Manirathnam's most expected question in any interview is "Is your movie *Nayagan* inspired by the movie *The Godfather*?" An interesting fact is that Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) is based on the crime novel *The Godfather* (1969) written by Italian American author Mario Puzo. Honoré de Balzac's novel *Le Père Goriot* (1835) has been the inspiration for many significant quotations in the Puzo's novel. Puzo's novel is based on the real life of "Five Families", a Mafia-organization in New York. Protagonist Don Vito Corleone's character takes inspiration from the real gangster Frank Costello. Those who are interested in questioning the adaptation's fidelity don't seem to bother about the 'intertextuality' of its precursor text.

Leitch (2003) remarks that “Although it is certainly true that adaptations are intertexts, it is equally true that their precursors are intertexts, because every text is an intertext that depends for its interpretation on shared assumptions about language, culture, narrative, and other presentational conventions” (167). Cartmell and Whelehan (1999) suggest that instead of scrutinizing whether a film is ‘faithful’ to the original literary text or not, adaptations can be analysed for ‘their generation of a plurality of meanings’ (28).

12. *Adaptation study is a marginal enterprise.*

Leitch (2003) claims that this is the only one of his twelve fallacies that is actually true. He declares that adaptation study has been ‘marginal to the study of moving images’ for so many years (167).

Andrew (1984) calls adaptation study ‘the most narrow and provincial area of film theory’ which can be ‘integrated into cinema studies’. Its unique feature of balancing the cinematic sign system with literary signs or codes can be used to signify ‘representational cinema’. He suggests ‘a generalizing of adaptation study to cover all the varieties of signification, quotation, and reference that make cinema possible and an analysis of connotation and a sociology of adaptation to complement its aesthetic assumptions about fidelity’ (96).

Leitch laments that nothing of that sort has happened in adaptation studies. Even scholars like McFarlane and Chatman who have condemned the reliance of adaptation study on fidelity and claims of literature’s superiority to film emphasize on notions of essentialism, originality, and cinematic equivalents to literary techniques (168).

To avoid adaptation studies ending up at the very centre of intertextual (i.e.) textual studies, scholars will have to find answers for these questions:

- ❖ In what ways does and should an intertext resemble its precursor text in another medium?
- ❖ How and why does any one particular precursor text or set of texts come to be privileged above all others in the analysis of a given intertext?
- ❖ What gives some intertexts but not others the aura of texts?
- ❖ In what ways are precursor texts rewritten, as they always are whenever they are read?

“Adaptation study has been marginalised because it wishes to be... It will emerge from its ghetto not when cinema studies accepts the institutional claims that would make cinema a poor relation of literature or succeeds in refashioning analysts of adaptation into loyal citizens of cinema studies, but in some larger synthesis that might well be called ‘Textual Studies’ - a discipline incorporating adaptation study, cinema studies, and literary studies, now housed in departments of English, and much of cultural studies as well” (168). Leitch claims that adaptation studies will gain importance if both dialogism and adaptation study are extended in vitally important ways.

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