
Intermediality and Adaptation: Exploring the Relationship between Literature and Film

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Abstract

The relationship between literature and film has long been a subject of critical inquiry in adaptation studies. Traditionally, film adaptations were evaluated in terms of their “fidelity” to the literary source. However, contemporary theory emphasizes *intermediality*—the interaction and transformation between different media forms. This paper argues that film adaptation should not be viewed as a secondary or inferior reproduction of literature but as an independent artistic practice shaped by the distinct semiotic systems of cinema. Drawing on adaptation theory and intermedial studies, this research explores how narrative, character, and theme undergo transformation when moving from text to screen. Through theoretical discussion and critical perspectives, the article demonstrates that adaptation is an act of reinterpretation rather than imitation. The study concludes that intermediality expands the scope of literary meaning by re-situating texts within visual, cultural, and technological contexts.

Keywords: Intermediality, Adaptation, Literature, Film, Narrative, Visual Culture

Introduction

The intersection of literature and film represents one of the most dynamic areas of modern cultural production. Since the advent of cinema in the late nineteenth century, literary works have served as a primary source of inspiration for filmmakers. From Shakespearean drama to contemporary novels, countless literary texts have been reimagined on screen. This relationship, however, has often been viewed hierarchically, with literature regarded as the “original” and film as a derivative form. Early criticism focused heavily on fidelity—how closely a film follows its literary source. Recent theoretical developments challenge this

perspective. Scholars of adaptation and intermediality argue that film and literature operate through different modes of signification: literature depends on language and imagination, while cinema relies on visuality, sound, and performance. As Linda Hutcheon asserts, “adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication” (7). This statement encapsulates the core idea of intermediality: when a story moves from page to screen, it does not merely change form but acquires new meanings shaped by medium-specific conventions.

This paper explores the concept of intermediality in adaptation and examines how literature and film engage in a dialogic relationship. The central argument is that adaptation should be understood as a creative and interpretive process rather than a mechanical translation. By analyzing theoretical frameworks and critical debates, this study highlights how narrative structures, themes, and characters are reshaped in the process of adaptation.

Concept of Intermediality

Intermediality refers to the interaction between different media forms and the ways in which one medium incorporates or transforms elements of another. Unlike adaptation, which implies a direct relationship between a source text and its cinematic version, intermediality emphasizes the broader cultural and aesthetic exchange between media.

According to Roland Barthes, a text is not a closed entity but a “tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes 146). This view supports intermedial thinking by suggesting that meaning is produced through networks of signs across various forms of expression. A film adaptation, therefore, becomes part of an intertextual and intermedial web that includes novels, theatre, photography, music, and digital media.

Intermediality also challenges the assumption that literature is inherently superior to film. Cinema does not merely “borrow” from literature; it transforms narrative through visual composition, editing, sound design, and performance. Thus, the relationship between literature and film is not linear but reciprocal.

Adaptation as Interpretation

Adaptation theory has shifted from fidelity-based criticism to interpretive and cultural approaches. Early critics often judged films by their loyalty to the original text, treating deviations as failures. However, such an approach ignores the specificity of cinematic language.

Hutcheon argues that adaptation is both “a product and a process” (8). As a product, it is a new work of art; as a process, it involves reinterpretation and recreation. Every adaptation reflects the cultural, historical, and ideological context in which it is produced. For instance, adaptations of Victorian novels made in the twenty-first century inevitably reflect contemporary attitudes toward gender, class, and morality.

Moreover, adaptation involves choices—what to omit, what to emphasize, and what to transform. These choices reveal the adapter’s critical stance toward the source text. Thus, adaptation becomes a form of literary criticism expressed through film.

Narrative Transformation: From Word to Image

One of the most significant challenges in adaptation lies in transforming verbal narrative into visual storytelling. Literature relies heavily on description, internal monologue, and figurative language, while film communicates through images, sound, and movement. George Bluestone observes that “the novel and the film are two different languages” (Bluestone 20). A novel can describe a character’s psychological state through introspection, whereas a film must externalize inner conflict through facial expression, gesture, and mise-en-scène.

For example, stream-of-consciousness techniques in modernist novels are difficult to translate directly into film. Directors often use voice-over narration, symbolic imagery, or fragmented editing to represent interiority. Such techniques demonstrate how adaptation requires innovation rather than imitation.

Character and Performance

In literature, characters exist primarily as linguistic constructs shaped by the reader’s imagination. In film, characters are embodied by actors whose physical presence influences interpretation. Performance becomes a crucial element of adaptation.

This embodiment can significantly alter the reception of a character. A villain described ambiguously in a novel may appear sympathetic or threatening depending on the actor’s portrayal. Thus, film adaptation adds a new interpretive layer to literary characterization.

Furthermore, cinema’s reliance on visual codes—costume, lighting, and setting—contributes to character construction. These elements function intermedially by translating textual description into visual symbolism.

Thematic Reinterpretation

Adaptations often rework the themes of literary texts to address contemporary concerns. For instance, themes of colonialism, gender, and identity may be foregrounded in modern adaptations of classic works. This thematic shift illustrates the dialogic nature of adaptation: the film speaks both to the source text and to its present audience.

Barthes’ concept of the “death of the author” suggests that meaning is not fixed by the original writer but produced by readers and interpreters (148). Film adaptations participate in this process by generating new readings of literary texts. In this sense, adaptation is not a secondary act but a continuation of literary discourse.

Cultural and Technological Contexts

Intermediality also involves technological transformation. The rise of digital cinema, streaming platforms, and transmedia storytelling has reshaped the relationship between literature and film. Stories now circulate across novels, films, television series, and video games, creating hybrid forms of narrative experience.

This phenomenon reflects what Hutcheon describes as “a culture of adaptation” (2), in which repetition and re-creation are central to cultural production. Literature and film are

no longer isolated media but interconnected modes of storytelling within a global visual culture.

Research Argument and Discussion

The central argument of this paper is that intermediality provides a more productive framework for understanding adaptation than fidelity-based criticism. By focusing on transformation rather than comparison, scholars can appreciate the creative potential of adaptation.

Film adaptations do not replace literary texts; instead, they coexist with them, offering alternative interpretations. This intermedial dialogue enriches both forms. Literature gains renewed visibility through cinema, while film gains narrative depth through literary heritage.

The discussion also reveals that adaptation is inherently ideological. Choices made in adapting a text reflect cultural values, political concerns, and aesthetic preferences. Therefore, studying adaptation is not merely an exercise in comparison but a means of understanding cultural change.

Conclusion

The relationship between literature and film, viewed through the lens of intermediality, emerges as a dynamic process of exchange and reinterpretation. Adaptation is not a subordinate practice but a creative and critical act that reshapes narratives for new audiences and contexts.

This study has shown that narrative structure, character, and theme undergo significant transformation in the shift from page to screen. By moving beyond fidelity criticism and embracing intermedial theory, scholars can better understand how meaning is produced across media. Ultimately, intermediality affirms that literature and film are not rivals but collaborators in the ongoing project of storytelling. Their interaction reflects the evolving nature of narrative in a visually oriented and technologically driven culture.

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