Tales of Twisters and Blurring Boundaries: Borders in/of Adaptation

Shannon Wells-Lassagne
Tales of Twisters and Blurring Boundaries: Borders in/of Adaptation

Shannon Wells-Lassagne

“The journey creates us. We become the frontiers we cross.”
Salman Rushdie, “Step Across This Line”, p. 351

1 Taking its cue from Kate Newell’s analysis of the film as “culture-text” (Newell 2017), the cover illustration of this special issue of Interfaces devoted to “Borders in/of Adaptation” focuses on an iconic image from The Wizard of Oz (1939), as our intrepid outsiders journey through treacherous poppy fields before arriving at the Emerald City to see its all-powerful wizard, the ostensible (but not actual) objective of their quest. Newell focuses on the complex network of influences, allusions, and texts associated with the film to better define the nature of adaptation, and though this question of definition will concern our authors, Thomas Leitch rightly pinpoints another aspect of this tale that is of interest to adaptation scholars: the movement of characters between different realms, notably between Kansas and Oz, and what this idea of migration might imply for adaptation theory. The moment depicted here seems evocative from more than one perspective: although Dorothy and company have overcome their fear of “lions and tigers and bears”, and think that the rest of their journey will be smooth sailing, there are dangers hidden in plain sight (the poppies) – and the end point of their journey is really just the beginning of a more difficult test of character to come.

2 Another fan of Oz, Salman Rushdie, reminds us of the film’s foregrounding of its own metafictional status: “While the house flies through the air, looking in longshot like a tiny toy, Dorothy ‘awakes.’ What she sees through the window is a sort of movie – the window acts as a movie screen, a frame within the frame – which prepares her for the new sort of movie she is about to step into.” (“Out of Kansas”, 2002, p. 16). The individual images on the screen evoke the different characters already introduced in the Kansas section of the film, and the sequence deployed some of the more advanced
film techniques and special effects for the time period. The final image on screen is that of Margaret Hamilton, first as Miss Gulch, the irritable schoolteacher with a dislike for small animals, and then as the Wicked Witch of the West. It is this final image that seems particularly evocative in relation to adaptation – the “movie screen” of the window shows not only the characters, but also their transformation into their Oz personas: what is represented is not just film and its possibilities, but film adaptation. Rushdie rightly notes that one of the most significant additions to Baum’s original story was “the expansion of the Kansas section, which in the novel takes up precisely two pages before the tornado arrives, and just nine lines at the end” (2002, p. 7), and it seems to me that these two things are linked: by making the Kansas section an echo of the future events in Oz, and by signaling the crossing of borders from Kansas to Oz through a movie screen that foregrounds the transformational possibilities of film before the dazzling egress from her Kansas home into the realm of Technicolor, The Wizard of Oz ultimately could be read as an allegory of adaptation. From this perspective, the transformational hurricane, where we see the ersatz movie screen, could be interpreted as a constantly shifting boundary between source and adaptation – as well as a vehicle for moving from one realm to the other. The twister is depicted as a literal boundary dividing the screen in two, and within its sway, farmhands will become scarecrows and tin men and lions, and life in black and white (be it on the page or on the screen) will be subject to all the innovations that film technology can provide. That initial image, where the tornado is both a danger and a possibility, a boundary and a vehicle for further exploration, is of course echoed by a similarly sinuous shape that occupies much of the film set in Oz: the Yellow Brick Road of our illustration, again both a means of travelling from one place to another and a signifier of the world of Oz, fraught with both danger and possibilities, as well as a means of crossing those borders.

If the tornado of The Wizard of Oz represents adaptation, then its ever-shifting form can be seen in the many shared borders between adaptation theory and other disciplines, from Andrea Reisenauer’s use of translation theory (which Rushdie reminds us that Nabokov referred to as “verbal transmigration”, 2002, p. 371), to Robert Geal’s use of ecocriticism, Camila Figueiredo’s application of transmedia studies, and Rebecca Anastasi and Dagmar Brunow’s use of screenplay studies. The blurring of boundaries between different disciplines seems appropriate for this volume from multiple perspectives, given adaptation theory’s own shifting boundaries as studies of under-explored media like television, video-games, or non-fiction proliferate and one-to-one case studies give way to increasingly complex relationships within adaptation networks, while Simone Murray notes the increasingly transnational nature of adaptation’s most common object, film: “the highly transnational nature of contemporary feature film and television financing, production, and distribution makes such international appeal virtually a prerequisite for any large-scale adaptation project.” (location 232)

Arguably, adaptation studies have never had such a wealth of possible subjects of study, given studios’ appreciation for known quantities in their search for new content. Indeed, some suggest that this is a symptom of postmodernism, highlighting the différance popularized by Derrida, the insistence on reworking previous texts that is characteristic of postmodernism – but in fact, like the physical borders between nations, the reshaping of texts, the retelling of tales, has accompanied us from Homer’s retellings of myth (and ekphrastic emphasis on the Achilles’s shield, for example) to Shakespeare’s reworkings of history and legends, to the many theater adaptations that
introduced Victorian audiences to the newest novels (much to the chagrin of said novelists). Like the physical borders that are drawn and re-drawn according to climate and conquest, there is a constant flux in the means and nature of adaptation (notably, for example, in Charles Dickens’s efforts to curtail the aforementioned Victorian adaptations by means of international copyright) – but the presence of these retellings never wavers.

Of course, one of the fundamental criteria in establishing the analysis of a given subject is defining its scope and limitations; in adaptation studies, where neither medium, genre, nationality, time period, nor content are fixed, our efforts at definition are recurrent, using both example and metaphor, but ultimately boil down to adaptation’s tendency to cross borders, most often between media, but also inevitably between creators: adaptation is a testament to the extent to which art, whatever its form, touches its audience, inspiring new creations in turn, where the frontier between source and adaptation is an opportunity for further exploration.

Indeed, in keeping with our subject matter, the nature of this volume, “Borders in/of Adaptation”, was intentionally broad, meant to encompass the many facets of contemporary adaptation studies for the annual conference of the Association of Adaptation Studies in October 2020, which was to be held in Dijon, France. Of course, other (border-spanning) events intervened, and this collection has become a testament to what might have been, highlighting the absence of physical encounters as borders between countries became physical impediments in a way unprecedented in most of our lifetimes, as international (and indeed intra-national) travel became strictly regulated or even prohibited. This context has made this collection of articles timely in a way that it perhaps might not otherwise have been, as the global pandemic claimed victims regardless of nationality or culture, but where different national responses produced vastly different outcomes for their citizens. We are proud to be publishing this collection in the bilingual and bicultural journal Interfaces, which has historically sought to overcome the borders, be they linguistic, cultural, or medial, between Francophone and Anglophone cultures, and their relationship to text and image.

Indeed, in their work on transnational cinema, Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowdon offer the possibility that narratives allow us to transcend borders:

> Because narrative film as a dramatic medium relies largely on emotional identification to do its work, the sense of familiarity with other cultures and with the natives of those cultures as people worthy of the two or three hours of intense emotional investment that a given cinematic text demands weakens the ability of cultural authorities to deploy the binarized us/them narratives upon which xenophobic nationalisms depend. (2006 p. 4)

Arguably, this argument is true not just of film, but of fiction more generally, and offers hope that this proliferation of texts and their subjects of study might allow us not only to transcend borders, but also to better understand them, the specificities that create them, and the possibilities involved in crossing them.

Our study of borders in adaptation first focuses on displacement, be it chronological, geographical, or metaphysical, thus foregrounding the idea of the border in a geopolitical sense as represented in different iterations of a narrative. The initial article by Thomas Leitch puts paid to any supposition that this geographical conception of the border might leave aside considerations about the borders of the discipline of adaptation studies, however; though borders may initially call up images of concrete
things (going through customs, or lines on maps), again and again our authors focus on abstraction, on the process of adaptation rather than its product. As Leitch rightly notes in his article, the metaphor of migration might allow us to do away with the tired fidelity debate once and for all:

Unlike emigration and immigration, whose vectors are linear, migration can be temporary, cyclic, or aleatory. Which of these models best describes adaptation? Although both teachers and scholars of adaptation have tended to treat it as a linear process like emigration and immigration, there is no reason why it could not be defined more broadly in terms appropriate to migration. Is there a point at which adaptations change from migrants to immigrants? Presumably that happens when they find receptive audiences that accept them as new arrivals and perhaps even offer them full citizenship, like movies like *Touch of Evil* and *The Graduate* that have eclipsed the texts they adapt and become accepted as the definitive versions of their stories.

10 Cordula Böcking’s analysis of Anna Segher’s and Christian Petzold’s renditions of *Transit* also focuses on migrant populations, and associates the crossing of borders with exile; these borders are not just geographical, but chronological as well, from the crisis in World War Two to the contemporary issues surrounding migration. In so doing, she highlights the profoundly unstable (and ultimately metaphorical) nature of national boundaries. She adopts Marc Augé’s notion of “non-places”, transit points as varied as airports, train stations, and refugee camps, transforming the conception of the border as a line to be crossed into a place to exist, a limbo that both foregrounds cultural identity (be it the local trinkets sold to tourists on their way home in airports or the national laws imposed on foreign refugees despite their transitional status) and evacuates it.

11 This emphasis on national identity is particularly acute in both Andrea Reisenauer’s analysis of Spanish literature adaptations in the United States and Polina Rybina’s study of the Russian animators and directors who helped create *Shakespeare: The Animated Tales* (BBC, 1992-1994). Both authors focus on transnational film, present here as the interaction between two different cultures within a single adapted text. Reisenauer’s thoughtful study of how Spanish film narratives arrive on American shores (and the possible impact of/on its translated literary counterpart) takes quantitative data and extrapolates important truths about the relationship between Translation and Adaptation Theories, offering new borders for media scholars to cross in considering these adaptations as intercultural translation; Rybina offers a practitioner’s perspective on the ways in which the cultural borders of a transnational adaptation, where British actors and a British script met Russian directors and animators, ultimately offered new readings of the ever-so-canonical Bard, creating a version of Homi K. Bhabha’s third space where canon, culture, and constraints collide to create novel aesthetics.

12 Finally, Robert Geal offers up another border that adaptation theory might explore, giving an ecocritical analysis of what Dennis R. Cutchins and Dennis R. Perry have called “the Frankenstein Complex” in his treatment of different versions of the Pygmalion myth, from *Frankenstein* and *The Terminator* to *Toy Story*. This is another avenue allowing scholars to foreground adaptation as proof of social discourse on a given subject rather than as a binary or hierarchical relationship between source and adaptation, and to reposition the boundaries of adaptation theory.
Our second section foregrounds these liminal spaces and thresholds of adaptation more explicitly, but the first author in this section, Dagmar Brunow, also eschews a close analysis of the relationship between source text and adaptation as the alpha and omega of adaptation studies; indeed, Brunow argues that one of the advantages of studying little-known texts (and adaptations) is that it allows us to focus on the process of adaptation rather than any one-to-one comparison: “not being familiar with Wägner’s novel or the film adaption will allow the readers of this article to focus on the adaptation process as such, without comparing them to each other.” Although she deplores the fact that adaptation scholars have not yet fully embraced the study of screenplays, much of the focus of her analysis of Åsa-Hanna is not just on the screenplay as a kind of intermediary between novel and film, a “border zone” in the movement from text to screen, but on the depiction of this border zone as a constantly shifting no man’s land, where the notion of a singular screenplay, a fixed border, is ultimately a fallacy. Studying different versions of the screenplay, she posits, allows us to better understand the collaborative authorship inherent to the enterprise of film adaptation.

Rebecca Anastasi, too, offers an analysis of the screenplay as a “boundary object” between the novel The Namesake and Mira Nair’s film adaptation. Her research object, which recounts a tale of migration and assimilation, allows her to approach the notion of the border as a political and cultural entity, as an intermedial practice, and as a focal point for the hybrid identity characterized by the “transcendental homelessness” of immigrant communities. Her focus on director Mira Nair and screenwriter Sooni Taraporevala is a defence of authorship, particularly in a postcolonial context: “in the case of postcolonial adaptations, the poststructuralist ‘death of the author’, to use Barthes’ term, just won’t do, since it strips away the possibility of agency – and, thus, of the power to speak – away from the writers and filmmakers who face systemic obstacles to getting their work made and distributed.”

Juliane Blank offers the television adaptation Babylon Berlin as an example of the small screen’s tendency to reset assumptions about the mechanics of adaptation, focusing on expansion rather than condensation, and repeatedly creating and crossing boundaries (between episodes, notably, but also between cultural traditions of television storytelling in Germany and in the Anglophone world) in its quest to recreate 1920s Berlin. Camila Augusta Pires de Figueiredo furthers this idea of television expanding the boundaries of adaptation by looking at two transmedial furtherances of television series, Sherlock and Watchmen. The idea of ongoing narratives blurring boundaries between one work and the next (be it between books and series, or individual episodes and series) is pushed further in the innovative studies of thresholds that make up our last two articles. Eli Løfaldli examines the importance of paratext as a means of suggesting a reading of texts as adaptations. He examines the Hogarth Shakespeare project, an industrial initiative which invited well-known authors to recreate their favorite Shakespeare play as a contemporary novel. Løfaldli argues that the name of the author essentially guides the reception, an impression largely confirmed by contemporary reviews. Armelle Parey argues that a similar phenomenon is at play at the end of a given work: she studies source texts characterized by their fragmentation (whether it be the unfinished texts of Love and Friendship or Sanditon, or the voluntarily non-linear texts of Olive Kitteridge and Case Histories), and focuses on the way that their adaptations bring closure not only to the narrative, but to any thematic or generic ambiguity inherent to the initial texts. While film may have begun by fragmenting
narratives, with silent films focusing on key scenes to convey canonical stories on screen (and arguably one could say that short video platforms like Youtube and Tiktok have returned us to this tendency), the narrative impulse that dominates film and television has often demanded that their fictions strengthen those borders left abandoned or incomplete in their previous iterations. Thus, for example, Short Cuts (1990), Robert Altman’s adaptation of Raymond Carver’s short stories, not only wove a coherent narrative from these disparate fictions on screen, but ultimately created new borders in text as well, as the short stories were gathered into a collection of their own. As such beginnings and endings themselves become blurred, and the source is given new life through the editorial paratexts that Løfaldli studies. Whether they are beginnings or endings, political or metaphorical, as Rushdie tells us in the epigraph, borders are fundamental to identity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited


AUTHOR

SHANNON WELLS-LASSAGNE

Université de Bourgogne

Shannon Wells-Lassagne is a professor at the University of Burgundy, where she specialises in film and television adaptation. She is the author of Television and Serial Adaptation (Routledge) and co-editor of Adapting Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid’s Tale and Beyond (Palgrave), Filming the Past, Screening the Present: Neo-Victorian Adaptations (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier), Adapting Endings (Routledge), Screening Text (Mcfarland), Premières pages, premiers plans (Mare et Martin), De la page blanche aux salles obscures (PU de Rennes), as well as special issues of revues like The Journal of Screenwriting, TV/Series, Interfaces, Series, Screen, and les Cahiers du GRAAT. Her work has appeared in The Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance,