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**In Umbra Voluptatis : Shades, Shadows, and their
Felicities / Film Adaptations, New Interactions**

Introduction

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Introduction

Cristelle Maury

- 1 In the last forty years, a large number of Hollywood movies have been drawing on new kinds of sources such as science fiction, videogames, graphic novels, comic strips, or even non-fiction. This issue of *Miranda* aims to look at these fields¹ in the light of the recent research on adaptation. Adaptation studies have indeed taken a new turn² on two accounts: they have enlarged their scope to objects of study taken from popular culture and they have broken away from the question of faithfulness to the source text — the so-called “fidelity issue” (McFarlane 8). The articles contained in this issue are not intended as discussions about the degrees of proximity to the sources. Their aim is to understand how the filmmakers read and interpret their sources. As such, they participate in the reorientation of adaptation studies from the “fidelity issue” to a view of primary sources as intertexts, “freeing an adaptation from unprofitable ‘eye for an eye’ comparisons” (Cartwell and Whelehan 3). Our field of investigation is therefore located at the outskirts of the “usual suspects ‘the novel, short story and play’” (Cartwell and Whelehan 4). Our aim is to offer some useful ways of evaluating the process of adaptation itself.
- 2 The adaptations discussed here differ from traditional book-to-film adaptations in two ways. First, as Federico Pagello has shown, there is a multiplicity of sources at work in the adaptations of superhero comic books. According to Pagello, these adaptations rely for coherence on a range of sources, putting serialisation at the heart of the process. Likewise, Julien Achemchame, in his analysis of science fiction thriller *A Scanner Darkly* (Richard Linklater, 2006), Matthew Bolton in his study of the adaptation of graphic novel *American Splendor* (Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, 2003), Nicolas Labarre in his analysis of Terry Zwigoff’s adaptation of *Ghost World* (2001), and Vincent Souladié in his essay on *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006) all draw attention to the presence of multifarious sources, be they autobiographical (Achemchame and Bolton), generic (Labarre), or historical (Souladié). They form the different layers of a complex setup of intertexts.
- 3 Secondly, these popular sources do not rely on strong narrative threads. As Pagello has shown, comic books consist of collections of loosely related pieces. The graphic novels

analysed by Bolton and Labarre, — respectively *American Splendor: The Life and Times of Harvey Pekar* (Harvey Pekar, 2003) and *Ghost World* (Dan Clowes, 1998) — do not form continuous stories, because the former is largely autobiographical and follows a “sprawling episodic series of vignettes” and the latter has a fragmented episodic structure marked by discontinuity: “[le roman graphique] *Ghost World* [...] porte la marque d’une fragmentation, d’une structure épisodique, parcourue de discontinuités.” Achemchame describes Philip Dick’s science fiction novel as a strange mix of autobiographical material and “scrambled” plot about multiple identities. Finally, Souladié explains that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 are a scopic event, and that Oliver Stone precisely took great pains to not turn it into a coherent narrative. Souladié’s point is to prove that Stone’s aim was to highlight the impossible encounter between Hollywood fiction and real tragedy (“désigner l’impossible rencontre de la fiction hollywoodienne et de la tragédie réelle”).

- 4 So, logically, for those two reasons, the adaptations under study should break away from traditional story-telling techniques, and more generally from the codes of classical Hollywood cinema. However, the collection of articles provides a more qualified answer to that question. It is true to a certain extent that the presence of intertextual elements undermines the illusion of reality. However, some of these works acquire some narrative coherence as they are adapted to the screen. It is the case for *Ghost World*. Nicolas Labarre’s minute analysis of the ways in which Zwigoff rearranged the narrative and aesthetic perspectives of the graphic novel shows that the passage from one medium to the other results in the creation of a new transparent universe. Likewise, according to Matthew Bolton, narrative cohesion in *American Splendor* is achieved through the “reinterpretation and repurposing of the source material”. The very process of adapting these cultural productions results in adding force to the “novelesque” dimension. That is precisely what Christian Metz observed when he noted that “the total invasion of the cinema by novelesque fiction is a peculiar striking phenomenon, when one thinks that film could have found so many other possible uses which have hardly been explored by a society that is nevertheless forever in pursuit of technographic novelty” (Metz, 45). Bolton and Labarre show that the semiotic codes of classical cinema are actually retained. Federico Pagello’s conclusion is less clear-cut, diagnosing a “new balance between narrative and digital fantasmagoria” and a “reworking and reactivation of classical narrative structures in innovative ways”.
- 5 On the other hand, the five authors have all underscored the presence of intertextual elements. This draws attention to the status of films as self-conscious artefacts, posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. Pagello has emphasized the “never-ending increasing complexity” and the “increasing reflexivity” of superhero universes. Julien Achemchame has shown that the rotoscoping animation technique used in Linlaker’s *A Scanner Darkly* is intended as a reflection on the power of images. It interrogates the status of reality, and thereby questions the identity of cinema. Moreover, the complex plot of *A Scanner Darkly* undermines the suspension of disbelief. Matthew Bolton has pinned down the metafictional dimension of his object of study which strives to recreate narrative cohesion out of a scattered “series of vignettes”. This entails displaying its own status as a reinterpretation of the comics, which “undermines this teleological momentum”. The composite representation of Harvey Pekar in *American Splendor*, and of the superheroes of comic adaptations constitutes a reflection upon identity and a blurring of reality and fiction. Nicolas Labarre’s study of colour enables him to conclude that *Ghost World* is a reflection on the ability of artists to

turn reality into an aesthetic experience. Moreover, the intertextual parameters linked to the casting of Thora Birch and Scarlet Johansson, and to the genre of the teen-movie introduce a reflexive dimension into an otherwise perfectly well-knit plot. At last, Soulatié has introduced a new dimension to the hackneyed fidelity issue by showing how Oliver Stone has applied the notion to a historical event.

- 6 In fact, the introduction of a reflexive dimension may indicate that the filmmakers are aware that they are treading on unstable ground. To this extent, the films could very well constitute oblique comments on the “fidelity issue” that has put adaptations at the bottom of a hierarchy of art forms. The presence of metafictional elements may indicate an intention to question the notion of a canon in literature, film and other cultural forms. While being more narrative than their sources, all these works challenge classical story-telling techniques. In that respect, they could well be some sorts of countercultural objects, displaying a set of symbolic actions that challenge and criticize official or dominant culture according to literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s definition of counterculture. The scope of this study still needs to be enlarged to other forms of popular culture such as television adaptations and videogames to go deeper into the questions raised by adaptation studies.

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NOTES

1. For a study of adaptations of comic books, see the first section of the 2007 collection of essays *Film and Comic Books*.
 2. See for example the contributions of Brian McFarlane, Linda Hutcheon, Deborah Cartmell, Imelda Whelehan, James Naremore, and Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo.
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