

Evolution and Future Trend of Film Adaptation Art Under the Background of Digital Media

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Abstract

The study of film adaptation has become an important branch of film theory, but as an independent discipline, it lacks a complete historical review. This paper attempts to explore the development context and transformation reasons of film adaptation theory, and explore the future trend under the background of digital media. The study of literary film adaptation can be divided into six periods and three stages. The first stage is the embryonic stage. Influenced by the independent appeal of film art, theorists reveal the uniqueness of film media by comparing it with other arts, laying the foundation for adaptation research. The second stage is the mature stage, when theorists recognize the limitations of the film medium and the study of literary adaptations enters the "literature-centered" doctrine. The third stage is the transition period, in which the introduction of modern and postmodern theories questioned and deconstructed the "literary centralism", and the study of adaptation faded away in the trend of multiple theories and deconstruction. With the change of understanding of literature and film media, the study of adaptation presents a law of oscillating development between the two kinds of arts. Under the current digital media, film shows strong discreteness, constructiveness and interactivity, which echoes the trend of deconstructing "literature-centric" doctrine. At the same time, it also reminds adaptation studies to be alert to the trap of formalism and pay attention to the positive significance of literature to the development of film art.

Keywords: film adaptation, film theory, literary-centered doctrine, digital media, discreteness, formalism

1. Introduction

1.1 The Process of Film Adaptation and Artistic Development

Since the birth of technology in 1895, film has experienced a hundred years of development. Initially, the Lumiere brothers did not have high expectations for the film, dismissing it as merely "fancy tricks". For a long time, the upper class and the literary and art circles have generally despised film, believing that "film is not art", which has seriously hindered the development of film art.

Georges Meriai is one of the pioneers who broke through this dilemma, he greatly enhanced the expression of the film by integrating the dramatic method into the film, and proved that the introduction of traditional arts, such as drama, literature, music, etc. into the film is conducive to the development of the film art. In the 1930s and 1940s, influenced by social, economic, technical and other factors, the film industry ushered in an explosive and vigorous development, especially the Hollywood Golden Age, when adapted films became an important part of the film art and further promoted the prosperity of the film art.

Up to now, films adapted from literature still occupy an important position in film creation. Not only has the number of adapted films increased year by year, but their quality has also been widely recognized. In major film awards such as the Academy Awards, many winning films are adapted from literary works. From the inception of the Academy Awards in 1929 to 2020, about 26% of the best picture nominations and 33% of the winning films have been adapted from novels, indicating that literary collaboration is an important way of artistic achievement in film.

Reviewing the history of film development, adaptation has always been the key to promote the development of film art. Especially after the rise of digital media, adapted films ushered in a new wave of upsurge, adaptation research has also become the focus of academic attention. It should be pointed out that although the film adaptation and film art were born almost at the same time, the relevant theoretical research was not formally proposed until

1956 by the American film theorist Bruce East in his book *From Novel to Film*. Prior to this, the discussion of adaptation had mainly occurred in comparative studies of literature and film, such as Giotto Canudo's *Seventh Artistic Manifesto* and Yugo Munsterberg's *Film: A Psychological Study*, which helped scholars to recognize the differences in the characteristics of the medium between film and other art forms.

With the development of the theory of adaptation studies, scholars such as Bela Balazs, the Soviet Montage School and the documentary school have deeply explored the media differences between the two art forms, and gradually developed the comparative study as the main paradigm of adaptation studies. After 1956, structuralism film theory summarized and deepened the study of adaptation. By the end of the 20th century, the post-modernist deconstruction trend introduced multiple theories for adaptation research, and promoted the deconstruction of the centrality of the original work. In his *Film Adaptation: Theory and Practice*, American scholar Robert Stamm traces and deconstructs the roots of the concept of "literary center" by introducing social and cultural theories. Multitheory has greatly expanded the field of vision of adaptation research, but its abuse has also brought about a counter-effect, gradually dispelling the focus of adaptation research.

2. Method

This paper will review the theoretical development of adaptation studies since the birth of film, focusing on the theories that have had a significant impact on adaptation studies, and divide the time according to the development stage of film theory. At the same time, the research will be closely related to the development of film media. Adaptation studies involve cross-art fields, and the media characteristics of different arts are crucial in the study, because the development of film art is closely related to media innovation. Every media innovation will have a profound impact on the art and research of adaptation. As McLuhan said, "the impact of any medium on individuals and society is produced by a new scale", which affects the creation, communication and even the generation of the meaning of the work. Communication theory emphasizes that the creation of an artistic work does not mean the realization of its aesthetic value, and the work must be accepted in order to show its value. The process of communication is not only the transmission of information, but also the process of "production of meaning". Harold Innis pointed out in his research that the nature of media affects the bias of civilization. Heavy and durable media is conducive to the inheritance of culture in time, while light and easy to consume media is conducive to the spread of culture in space. Therefore, the media participate in the creation of its aesthetic value. Under the background of digital media, there are new phenomena in the creation and dissemination of literary adapted films. However, due to the lack of media perspective, domestic and foreign adapted films fail to deeply analyze the artistic nature of these phenomena. Based on the review of the development of adaptation studies and the impact of media innovation, this paper will reflect on these new phenomena and make suggestions to fill the gaps in modern adaptation studies.

2.1 Theoretical Exploration of Film Adaptation and Reality Representation

In the middle of the 20th century, the documentary theory of film advocated the return of film to its photographic nature and emphasized the objectivity and authenticity of film. Different from Vertov's theory, the documentary theory school does not advocate the reconstruction of social reality through film, but focuses on how to reproduce the complete reality through film aesthetic means. Krakauer noted that film "is the only art, like photography, that can preserve the integrity of its material" and argued that film should show unadorned reality, without montage. This trend of thought provides a new perspective for the emergence and development of adapted films. Although adapted films are criticized as lacking originality due to their reliance on original works, documentary film theorist Bazin proposes that adapted films faithful to original works can promote the maturity of film art. Bazin pointed out in the *Impure Film Argument - Defense of Adaptation* that the film can make better use of its own aesthetic means by faithfully restoring the original, which marks the maturity of the film art. Especially in order to pursue the true aesthetic height, the film re-examines the non-film works in the process of adaptation, and promotes the development of film art to a higher level. Bazin uses Robert Bresson's film *Diary of a Country Minister* as an example to illustrate this theory. The film is adapted from the novel of Georges Bernanos, although Bresson claims to strictly follow the original, the actual film on the basis of faithful to the original, the deletion of pictorial passages, compression of the psychological description and drama of the original, making the film more abstract than the novel, but still through the combination of sound and picture successfully reproduced the essence of the original.

Bazin emphasized that the "reality" of film is not limited to the visual realm, but the text itself can also represent reality. By presenting literary works as a part of reality, literary adapted films overcome the difference between text and image in the form of expression and realize the representation of "soul". This theory breaks through the previous concept of "picture first" and provides a new way of thinking for film adaptation. Bazin's adaptation thought further promoted the artistic innovation of film, and made his theory exert a profound influence on the

adaptation research at that time and later. In contrast, Krakauer does not regard the original work as an objective reality in the study of literary film adaptation, but juxtaposes the original work with film art to explore the similarities and differences between the two in reflecting reality. He believes that both movies and novels use stories as clues to connect reality, but movies represent material continuity, while novels represent spiritual continuity. Therefore, film adaptation should try to choose the original content that can be expressed through film means, and avoid those parts that are difficult to be expressed through film. This view of Krakauer reflects his clear understanding of the expressive force of film art, but also exposes his tendency of "literary center" which puts literary art above film. He stressed that film adaptation should retain the basic content of the original, but his insufficient understanding of the potential of the film medium limited the development of film art.

Although Krakauer and Bazin share a "literary-centric" view, their positions in the film adaptation differ. Bazin pays more attention to the independence and potential of film art, thinks that film adaptation is the re-creation of the original art form, and emphasizes the artistic value of film. Krakauer, on the other hand, puts more emphasis on the limitations of the adaptation, believing that the film should retain the spirit and story of the original, but there is insufficient recognition of the potential of film art. Therefore, Bazin's adaptation thought is more open and innovative, and plays a more far-reaching role in promoting the study of adapted films.

2.2 The Golden Age of Hollywood and the Commercialization Tendency of Film Adaptations

After the introduction of sound technology, the film experienced an artistic regression. Bruce East, an American film theorist, believed that in the early 1930s, audiences were more inclined to enjoy the pleasure of listening to actors than the quality of the film's story. This phenomenon reveals the causes of Hollywood's golden Age, and also reflects the transformation of the art of film from visual to auditory.

During this period, Hollywood rose rapidly, not only dominating the global film market, but also playing an important role in the wave of adapted films. From 1934 to 1935, major film companies such as RKO, Paramount, and Universal produced numerous film adaptations of the novel. According to Lester Asheim, between 1935 and 1945, about one in five films was adapted from a novel, and many of them, such as *Wuthering Heights*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, were not only artistically successful, but also profitable. Hollywood adaptations, however, often promote fidelity to the original works, but actually focus on financial gain. Filmmakers often choose dramatic, conflict-filled literary works, and reinforce their character, build star power, weaken the radical themes of the original works, and incorporate universal values. While this was successful in attracting audiences, it also led to the film adaptation becoming more stylized, less creative, and sometimes even destroying the artistic quality of the original. For example, although *Gone with the Wind* strives to be faithful to the original in terms of investment, screenwriting and director, the description of Scarlett in the film strengthens the love line and weakens the female independent theme in the novel, reflecting the commercial tendency of Hollywood adapted films at that time.

After the practice of film adaptation in the golden Age of Hollywood, American scholar George Broston published *From Novel to Film* in 1956, which marked a new stage of independent development of film adaptation research. Inheriting the comparative research method of his predecessors, Bluston extensively discusses the differences between literature and film, especially in the expression of time and space. He believes that time is the structural principle of fiction, while film is dominated by space. In the novel, time is abstract and expressed through words, while the film presents the flow of time through concrete pictures. In addition, film has a natural advantage in the presentation of space, but it needs special means to create the illusion of time when expressing the flow of time. This discovery by Brosten innovatively compares the differences between film and literature in time and space.

Despite this, Broston did not completely abandon the "literary-centric" doctrine, arguing that film adaptations must "betray" the original, but that films can create unique structures. He does not require the film to be faithful to the original, but respects the creativity of the film creator, and believes that the ultimate goal of film adaptation is to create novel works according to the characteristics of the film medium. However, he also criticized the excessive changes in the original works in Hollywood adaptations, especially the cuts and adaptations of the original works due to the influence of the economy and censorship. Similar to Krakauer, he believes that the performance of film is limited, and it cannot be faithfully adapted to certain literary works, which shows the deep-rooted "literary center" doctrine in the study of adapted films.

2.3 The Influence of Digital Media on the Creation of Film Adaptation

The emergence of digital media has a profound impact on film creation, especially in literary adaptation films, where digital technology breaks through the creative bondage of traditional films and greatly reduces the distance between film and literature. Traditional film technology is based on film and analog signals, which limits the ability of film to express reality. The smallest unit of film creation is the grid, and every frame shot through film

represents a certain detail of reality, and it is impossible to freely choose discrete materials like literature. However, the introduction of digital technology provides more freedom for film creation. Digital media, through the dispersion and constructiveness of information, enables films to transcend the limitations of traditional painting and enhance the expression of reality. Digital films have the freedom to modify each frame and even create completely computer-generated images, such as *Toy Story* and *Final Fantasy*. This makes the unit of film creation no longer limited to the traditional physical picture, but can be freely spliced and created through digital means.

The biggest advantage of digital technology is its discrete and constructive nature, which allows filmmakers to freely navigate between the real and the surreal and create more diverse works. In traditional films, due to the mechanical reproduction nature of film, film cannot express abstract spiritual or conscious levels as flexibly and freely as literature. It is often difficult for traditional films to reproduce the deep emotions and complex streams of consciousness in novels, especially in science fiction or surrealism. However, the construction of digital media breaks through this limitation, and movies can present richer audio-visual effects through computer-generated virtual worlds or by splicing reality and virtual. For example, *The Lord of the Rings* digitally created a virtual Middle-earth, and *Forrest Gump* digitally combined multiple actors into the same frame. These films demonstrate the great potential of digital technology in the visual arts, and the freedom and expression of film creation have been improved in an unprecedented way.

Digital technology has also changed the way movies are told, especially when it comes to the movie-going experience. The viewing experience of traditional movies mainly relies on static screens and mono sound effects, and the audience is only a spectator in the movie theater. Digital films, on the other hand, create a more immersive viewing experience through stereo effects and multi-channel surround sound. The emergence of 3D films has broken the limitations of the screen, enabling the audience to participate in the world of the film. This three-dimensional viewing experience makes the audience part of the narrative of the film, enhancing the audience's sense of participation and interactivity. This change brought a new aesthetic perspective to the film, so that the film no longer just rely on the attraction of the plot, but through the attractive form of presentation to attract the audience's attention.

Digital media has promoted the innovation of film in the aspect of narrative. Through the fine control of picture and sound, the film can freely create a virtual world, breaking the space and time constraints of traditional film narration. Digital technology, for example, can use digitally generated images or virtual reality technology to transport viewers into a world entirely designed by the creators of the film. This makes the narrative of film more rich and multi-level, and also makes the narrative ability of film closer to the narrative ability of literature.

However, with the popularization of digital technology, film is also at risk of formalism. The abuse of digital technology has led many films to focus more on visual effects and spectacle at the expense of narrative depth and emotional expression. The popularity of spectacle films has gradually shifted the narrative of films from realism to postmodernism, and the narrative of films is often overwhelmed by visual effects and technological innovations, resulting in the depth and emotional expression of the storyline becoming secondary. The high development of digital technology has made film creation a process full of visual wonders, but if it relies too much on visual effects, the film may fall into the dilemma of formalism.

Under this background, the creation of literary adapted films is also facing new challenges. Digital media enables film creators to create freely, breaking through the imitation of reality by traditional films, but this free creation also leads to the deconstruction of "literary-centered" doctrine. The three-dimensional and participatory nature of digital film makes film creation no longer limited to faithful original works, but pays more attention to the free expression of film art. Director Ang Lee pointed out that movies and novels are different mediums, and adaptation often requires changing the structure and presentation of the story, and fidelity to the original is not the only goal. In the digital age, the creation of film is no longer a simple copy of literary works, but through digital technology to give the film a new meaning and expression. Speaking about *Life of Pi*, Lee said that digital technology allows the film to allow the audience to enter the world of the film, thereby gaining a sense of identity and participation. This new viewing experience and creation method indicates that the distance between film and literature has been greatly narrowed, but at the same time, it also reveals the freedom of film creation and the great change of narrative mode.

With the development of digital media, film no longer relies solely on the narrative mode of literature, but has developed a new narrative mode. This approach places greater emphasis on visual effects, sound effects, and audience participation, factors that often conflict with the abstractness and inner description of literature. Therefore, film creation is no longer simply aimed at being faithful to the original, but pays more attention to the artistry and

creative freedom of the film itself. Digital technology has brought about profound changes in the form and content of film and promoted the development of film art.

3. Results

Through the study of adapted film, the trap of "literatorialism" and film formalism in the theory gradually emerged, warning the development and research status of adapted film art in the digital age. As digital media become increasingly discrete and constructive, film adaptations may, as Stamm suggests, eventually dissolve into the digital stream. At present, although literature is slower to accept digital media than film, it is also gradually trying to digitize, such as hypertext experiments in foreign countries and online novels in China. In the IP development of network novels, film and television adaptation has become a part. This provides a common media basis for the study of adapted films, but whether it will lead to the complete integration of literature and film art is still unknown.

From the perspective of the development of film art, digital media has brought unprecedented creativity and immersive movie-watching experience to films. Today, 3D movies have become a common viewing mode, and theaters are constantly seeking new experiences, such as 4D and 5D interactive movies. These films not only contain passive experiences, but also pursue actively engaged interactive experiences, such as 2018's *Detroit: Human*. Combining these two experiences, we can see the application prospects of virtual reality (VR) technology. VR is not only an extension of immersive experiences and interactions, but also has the potential to simulate complex realities, such as the digital ecosystem embodied in the movie *Lord of the Rings* and the game *Monster Hunter World*. In the future, literature, film, painting, music and other arts may become the pillars of the construction of the virtual world, which is similar to the way of combining traditional art, and may also be the form of future adaptation. Although this conjecture needs further development of science and technology and more in-depth theoretical research, it provides a new perspective for the development of adaptation art.

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