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ENOUGH ABOUT ADAPTATION. LET'S TALK ABOUT ADAPTING. Thomas Leitch

*Literature, Film, and Their
Hideous Progeny: Adaptation and
ElasTEXTity* by Julie Grossman
(London: Palgrave Macmillan,
2015). Pp. 228. \$99.00 cloth. \$34.99
paper.

Any eyebrows that are raised by the authorship of the volume that inaugurates Palgrave Macmillan's new series on Adaptation and Visual Culture, edited by R. Barton Palmer and Julie Grossman, should immediately be lowered because Grossman's approach to the subject of adaptation is novel, illuminating, and provocative. A brief perusal of the table of contents might suggest that this is just another collection of case studies ranging from the latter-day quasi-human creations of *Gods and Monsters* and *Hugo* to the intertextual daisy chain running from *Cape Fear* to the "Cape Feare" episode of *The Simpsons* to Anne Washburn's *Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play*. But Grossman's case studies are so inventively conceived, intelligently organized, and imaginatively analyzed that together they mount a formidable challenge to received wisdom about adaptation.

A writer seeking material or inspired by earlier reading produces an adaptation of that earlier material. The two texts—books or plays or comics or movies or television shows—are alike in some ways, different in others. Knowing audiences, in Linda Hutcheon's resonant phrase,¹ are invited to enjoy both the similarities and the differences, and critics are invited to compare and contrast the two texts and the two experiences of encountering them. Grossman does not reject this model, but she

complicates it by emphasizing the agency of the adapted and adapting texts over that of their adapters. These texts, “hideous progenies” like Frankenstein’s Creature whose births are difficult and often “monstrous,” are marked by “elasTEXTity,” a “state of being for sources and adaptations that are indivisibly connected” (2).

The central insight that drives Grossman’s analysis is the scandalously intimate connection between these two seemingly opposite qualities. On the one hand, adaptations are deformed monstrosities, often delivered under considerable stress, that the authors of the original texts may well regard as parodies rather than duplicates. On the other, their very existence demonstrates the tropism of the original texts toward replication, rejuvenation, and renewal, all qualities that emphasize their chameleon fluidity and call their very status as originals into question.

Adaptation studies has grappled with this problem before, most notably in the model Kamilla Elliott has derived from Lewis Carroll of “verbal/visual looking glass analogies . . . predicated on the reciprocal power of words and of pictures to evoke verbal figures in cognition” (153)² and in Robert Stam’s application of an intertextual model derived from Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva to discuss adaptation as one of a legion of processes by which texts are inevitably

produced, inflected, deformed, and recreated by other texts in an “ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation” (186).³ What Grossman adds is a shift in emphasis from *adaptations* as a series of texts variously participating in these intertextual revels to *adapting* as an often monstrous practice of textual generation, degeneration, and regeneration. The “state of being” of elasTEXTity turns out to be indistinguishable from a state of becoming, whereby texts are most truly themselves when they spawn unholy offspring that challenge their primacy, integrity, and identity.

Grossman has chosen a series of case studies that dramatize this process and arranged them to mount an increasingly sweeping series of challenges to models of textual integrity that have long served as a basis for Western aesthetics, more general models of identity that continue to anchor theories of selfhood and humanity, and the canons and methodologies of adaptation studies itself. Beginning with the Frankenstein’s Creature and *Hugo’s* Automaton, mechanical creations who paradoxically “illuminate the importance of human bonds and creativity” (32), she considers the transformative journeys, sometimes adaptive, sometimes anti-adaptive, undertaken by both the heroes and the creators of *Apocalypse Now* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Next she turns

to the anatomies of marginal identity in the two film versions of *Imitation of Life*, "The Yellow Wallpaper," and *[Safe]*, and films like *Dogfight*, *Far From Heaven*, and *Kinky Boots* whose hideous progeny include Broadway musicals and the formally gratuitous production numbers that simultaneously disrupt the integrity of their Hollywood heroes and seek to ameliorate the transgressive identities that drive them. Finally, she considers the challenges of immersive theatrical productions like Punchdrunk Theater's *Then She Fell*, avant-garde museum installations like Christian Marclay's 24-hour metafilm *The Clock*, and Anne Washburn's take on *The Simpsons*' take on Martin Scorsese's take on J. Lee Thompson's take on John D. MacDonald's take on *The Executioners*, or *Cape Fear*, or *Cape Feare*, focusing on the challenges each transformative moment poses to audiences' assumptions about the stable identities of both the texts and the selves they thought they knew.

As Grossman casts off from the unmarked novel-to-film model of adaptation studies to explore the relatively uncharted waters of the stage musical and the museum installation, a singular pleasure of her analyses is the free-spirited abandon with which she interrupts her announced case studies to indulge in asides about even more marginal cases. Aileen Wuornos,

the murderous heroine of Patty Jenkins's film *Monster*, "is indeed a 'monster' in her murder of the innocent . . . but she is also a part of a process of exploitation, objectification, and a machinery of destruction put in play by class and gender assumptions leading to her miserable fate" (21). Eleanor Coppola's Romantic glorification in *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* of her husband's obsessive determination to complete his Vietnam epic is punctured by Thomas C. Grane and Victor Davis's waggish sendup *Hearts of Hot Shots! Part Deux—A Filmmaker's Apology*, which reveals "the potential of even fringe popular culture . . . to bring elements of critique to a level of self-conscious analysis" (49). Grossman's epilogue offers one final case study: the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda's hip-hop historical "exploration of what it means to be a 'founding' body—a founding text or a founding father" (194).

Throughout this adventurous tour of adaptations increasingly off the beaten path, including several texts that many observers would not consider adaptations so much as stories about adapting, Grossman never loses sight of her leading argument: that thinking about texts' tropism toward adaptation offers liberating ways to think about the fluidity, the irreducible instability and multiplicity, of group and individual identity. If she does not offer any solutions to

the leading problems of adaptation studies—what is adaptation? what are the differences between sources and adaptations? what are the relations between adaptation and other intertextual and intermedial practices?—she provides a series of stellar examples of how to do things with adaptation, whether you’re a hero, a text, an adaptation scholar, or a bemused bystander who wonders what all the fuss is about. In the process, she offers outsiders an unusually generous and extroverted account of what happens in adaptation and what it means, offers adaptation insiders the reassurance that their field is inexhaustible, and furnishes observers on both sides with persuasive strategies for breaching the institutional walls between adaptation studies and the rest of the world.

Colin Clive’s *Frankenstein* supplies the perfect blurb for Grossman’s approach to the theory and practice of adaptation: “It’s alive!”

Thomas Leitch is professor of English at the University of Delaware. His most recent books are Wikipedia U: Knowledge, Authority, and Liberal Education in the Digital Age and The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies. He is currently working on The History of American Literature on Film.

NOTES

1. See Hutcheon, with Siobhan O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 120.
2. See Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 211.
3. See Stam, “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation,” in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 66.