

ANNE-MARIE SCHOLZ, *From Fidelity to History. Film Adaptations as Cultural Events in the Twentieth Century* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 227pp.

2013 has been a highly productive year for adaptation studies and has seen a number of publications addressing a broad spectrum of aspects of this field of research.¹ What distinguishes Anne-Marie Scholz's new book from these studies is her deliberate focus on the influence of the historic circumstances surrounding the production as well as the reception of filmic adaptations of literary sources. According to Scholz, the two paradigmatic approaches in adaptation studies—the "fidelity model" as well as the "model of intertextual dialogism" (2)—neglect, in their textuality-based analyses, "all notions of historical materialism in favor of a 'free play of signification'" (2) and have, in consequence, considerable shortcomings when it comes to the analysis of "the significance of film adaptations as social and cultural events in history" (3).

The title of the book—*From Fidelity to History*—is therefore programmatic: Scholz's analysis focuses on the question of how specific historic situations equally affect the processes of adapting literary works for the silver screen as well as the reception of these adaptations by audiences and critics alike. Drawing on the theories of Barbara Klinger and Janet Staiger, Scholz understands adaptation "as a form of reception [...] on the three-tiered level of, first, the relation between the literary work and the film director and production teams; second, between literary work, film, and historically specific audience reception; and, third, between the films and my own readings[.]" (3). This notion of adaptation provides the theoretical and methodological backdrop for a detailed study of two highly distinct bodies of film that Scholz

analyzes with a special accentuation on their transnational character.

The first of the two sections that constitute the book is entitled "Post-Cold War Readings of the Receptions of Blockbuster Adaptations in Cold War West Germany 1950-1963" and focuses on three classics: *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957) and *The Trail* (Orson Welles, 1962). These films can be seen as quintessential examples of mid-twentieth century cinematic transnationalism as they are all based on texts by European authors that have been adapted by Anglo-American producers for an international target audience. Scholz embeds her close readings in a vast number of extra-diegetic sources—production histories, advertising strategies, newspaper reviews as well as works on political and cultural history—in order to analyze particularly "the ways in which German audiences created interconnections between cultural and political issues in their responses to these films and what role the relationship between literature and film played in making such interconnections" (21) in the light of the Cold War.

The Third Man, released in 1949—the year in which the foundation of the two German states froze the political and ideological separation of the nation and the whole European continent for decades to come—provides an ideal example for this endeavor. Scholz's detailed case study sheds a light on the complex reciprocities between film-making as reception (of a then unpublished story by Graham Greene), done by an Anglo-American production team whose members "were all agents of the Cold War in some manner, either literally or figuratively" (36), and the popular reception of the film as a socio-cultural phenomenon against the backdrop of this historic moment. She elaborates convincingly that Reed's film cannot only be read as a propagandist contribution to Cold War politics as it also echoes the ideological and cultural ruptures within the "Western Block." On the one hand, the movie implicitly reflects the debate about "the cultural imperialist dimension of the U.S./European, especially the U.S./British relationship" (37) in that era by negotiating "the opposition between the concepts of 'high' and 'popular culture' and their political significance for the relationship between America and Europe during the Cold War" (44). On the other hand, the transnational character of the film in terms of production

¹ John Hodgkins. *The Drift—Affect, Adaptation, and New Perspectives on Fidelity*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013; Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen. Eds. *Adaptation Studies. New Challenges, New Directions*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013; David J. Jarraway. Ed. *Double Takes. Intersections between Canadian Literature and Film*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2013; Elisa Pezzotta. *Stanley Kubrick. Adapting the Sublime*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013.

circumstances, setting and story expresses the “hope for an internationalist alternative” to the Cold War dilemma, “even if that hope was largely confined to the realm of art” (50).

Upon its release in 1959, David Lean’s *The Bridge on the River Kwai*—an adaptation that transformed Pierre Boulle’s successful novel *Le Pont de la Rivière Kwai* (1952) “from primarily a satire to a melodramatic tragedy” (69)—immediately became one of “the most controversially discussed [film] of that year” (59) in West Germany, whereas it “did not lead to public controversy or political debates” (55) in America. The German debate centered around the question of the film’s stance on militarism and war—a fiercely disputed topic against the backdrop of the Federal Republic’s recent rearmament and NATO membership in the mid-1950s. Scholz has undertaken substantial research in order to identify three camps amongst West German critics: it was either read as “a bona-fide war film” (65), “as an ‘anti-war’ film” because of “its tendency to downplay national interests and to emphasize that in ‘war’ everyone was a loser” (66) or as “essentially *ambiguous*” (66). The main reason for the heated debate of the film lies in the fact that it touched upon “the legacy of war and militarism on German society, and demonstrated the conflicted ways U. S. popular culture shaped the ways Germans sought to grapple with that legacy” (75).

The specter of the German past also haunted the reception of Orson Welles’s film version of Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, which was dominated by what Scholz calls the “Kafka vs. Welles” debate (101). The key questions of this controversy amongst movie critics was if Welles “linked Kafka almost directly to the issue of German fascism” (95) and if such a reading of Kafka as a “prophet of fascism” (101) was adequate for a writer who was (at least in Germany) largely considered an ahistorical “metaphysician whose stories raised general questions of the meaning of existence” (101).

The second part of the book is entitled “Postfeminist Relations between Classic Texts and Hollywood Film Adaptations in the U.S. in the 1990s” and deals with a completely different set of films: the Hollywood adaptations of several novels by Jane Austen and Henry James that enjoyed a high amount of popularity in the 1990s. Scholz explains her selection with the films’ ability to “provide fascinating insight into shifting conceptions of gender identity when they are looked at in relation

to both the original works and to each other” (118). Her decidedly post-feminist interpretations of Ang Lee’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and Roger Michell’s TV adaptation of *Persuasion* (1995) read these two highlights of the “Jane-Mania” (123) of the 1990s “as a response to, rather than a manifestation of, the society-wide backlash of the 1980s: the New Right’s efforts to reprivatize male and female relationships” (127). The Henry James adaptations of that period—*The Portrait of a Lady* (Jane Campion, 1996), *Washington Square* (Agnieszka Holland, 1997), and *The Wings of the Dove* (Iain Softley, 1997)—function in a similar way. They constitute “a continued experimentation with the costume drama genre begun with the Austen films” that (critically) reflects and negotiates “the status of contemporary male and female identity” (165).

Scholz concludes her book with a chapter that aims, as its title clearly states, at making “a case for the case study” (192) that, as she argues, has been largely eliminated from the methodological arsenal of adaptation studies by the hegemony of approaches from media studies, communication studies and literary theory (cf. 192-93). She warns that if scholars refuse to take into account “the specifics of adaptation as a historical phenomenon with an ahistorical conception of ‘intermediality’ or ‘intertextuality’” (198) they will overlook certain significant factors that inform the process of transmedial adaptation.

Although one has to criticize Scholz’s claim that approaches to the study of film adaptation inspired by media, communication and literary theory are per se ahistorical as too generalizing, *From History to Fidelity* undeniably demonstrates the benefits of the historical case study as a method to show how the factual, cultural and political circumstances of a certain period inform the public and critical response to the films but also the act of adaptation-as-reception.

Unfortunately, however, Scholz’s binary juxtaposition of the scholarly paradigms she rejects on the one hand, and her vehement, almost passionate re-invocation of the historical case study on the other hand results in a somewhat problematic dead-end. Adaptation studies has always been a disciplinary hybrid, an equally unwanted child of literary studies and film/media theory that, as John Hodgkins recently put it, “draws heavily on both disciplines, yet is embraced by neither” (2). In its interdisciplinary character it was and is always

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open to influences from other academic disciplines. By so rigidly pitting “history” against “textuality” and “fidelity”, Scholz misses an opportunity to negotiate how the case study could be a useful addendum to the analytical toolbox of this field of research. In summary, one has to assert that *From Fidelity to History*

is not fully convincing as a contribution to the theory of studying film adaptations but is definitely a thoroughly researched and—especially in the first part—highly insightful work on the cultural history of transnational cinema.

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