

Is Adaptation a Medium—and If Not, Why Not?

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Adaptation has been defined by many interested parties, including myself, as an attempt to replicate or transfer narrative components like characters and events and settings or entire narratives from one presentational medium to another—from page to stage, from the live theater to the movie theater, from radio to television, from comic books to theme parks, from canonical fiction to online fanfiction, and, to take the intermedial transfer that remains most often studied, from novels to films. This model assumes that media are stable and knowable, with borders as clearly demarcated as those of nations, and that adaptations cross these borders at their peril, risking opprobrium from purists devoted to the texts they adapt and rejection by partisans of the media in which to seek a new home.

Revolutionary developments in digital media and the challenges they pose to older media and to ways of thinking about media generally have raised fundamental questions about this model. Henry Jenkins's highly influential work on intermediality traces the ways texts like *The Matrix*, originally conceived in a single medium, colonize other media so successfully that it is no longer possible to think of them as works in a single medium that have been adapted partially to other media, but require us to think of them as multimedial or transmedial texts. Peeter Torope and Maarja Ojamaa, going further, define transmediality in terms of the complex interrelations between texts in what they call the mental space of culture.

Now that investigations of transmediality have so radically challenged the distinctiveness and independence of different presentational media and their distance from the cultures that generate, police, and consume them, I'd like to ask whether adaptation itself is a medium—or, to put it more precisely, whether it is a transmedial, an intermedial, or a medial practice. This proposition flies in the face of three generations of discussions among adaptation

scholars, and indeed over two thousand years of discussions of presentational media. And the consensus to date among scholars, reviewers, fans, and the general public is that adaptation is an intermedial practice, period, full stop. But since adaptations have from their earliest days raised questions about the relations among apparently irreconcilable media, and since these questions have been multiplied and intensified by the rise of transmedia and transmedial studies, I invite you to consider whether *media* is a term that might be applied to discursive practices like reproduction, translation, and adaptation as it already routinely applied to specific texts whose uniqueness they call into question and traditional media whose discreteness they challenge.

This argument may sound pointlessly counterintuitive. But imagine how our ways of thinking about the contemporary mediascape and its historical antecedents might change if we thought of adaptation as a medium like the psychic mediums who offer to put grieving relatives and friends in touch with the loved ones they have lost to death. Although psychic mediums cannot bring the dead back to life, they can provide them further opportunities to speak across what might seem to be an unbridgeable divide. Pursuing this analogy would suggest that adaptation is both valedictory and celebratory, an act of border-crossing that bridges gaps between worlds widely recognized as incapable of speaking to each other by providing specific transmedial, intermedial, and ultimately medial affordances that allow new dialogues between the living and the dead.

Consider the case of Madame Kali, the medium whose seance creates such a stir in the second episode of *Penny Dreadful*. Invited to give the gentlefolk assembled at Ferdinand Lyle's party the sense that they have been vicariously in touch with the spirit world, she summons malignant spirits that swiftly infect Vanessa Ives, who begins to speak in the voice of Mina, the missing daughter Sir Malcolm Murray is seeking. Madame Kali's fearsomely, uncontrollably contagious activity is associated with shock, horror, sensationalism, and discontinuity, but also with a powerful vision denied other characters unless the medium

herself, all unwilling, shares it with them or infects them with it. Going further, we can see *Penny Dreadful* itself as a medium whose gleefully boundary-breaking mashup brings together characters from different nineteenth-century English novels, characters, and memes from *Frankenstein* to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the process, its adaptation reveals unexpected kinships among them by casting a given character like Victor Frankenstein in different roles in different simultaneously unfolding stories and retrospectively reveals a counter-tradition to the socially cohesive tradition long associated with the contemporaneous novelists Scott, Austen, Thackeray, Dickens, Gaskell, Eliot, and Trollope: a counter-tradition whose hallmarks are trauma, monstrosity, isolation, transgression, uncontrollable transformation, and revolution, one that implies a view of adaptation as a liminal conduit or medium quite as potent and suggestive as more traditional views of adaptation that emphasize fidelity, coherence, continuity, and transparency.

Don't get me wrong: I'm no more ready to endorse the view of adaptation I've proposed here than I am to place my faith in psychic mediums. I'd merely invite you to consider the implications of using the second as a metaphor for the first in order to raise several questions. Has adaptation from its beginnings been a distinctive medium? What would be gained and lost if we thought of adaptation as a medial rather than an intermedial practice? Since the word "media" comes from the Latin *media*, meaning "in the middle," what does our increasing reliance on the notions of intermediality ("between middles") and transmediality ("across middles") suggest about possible hierarchies among different kinds of middles? To push this last question to its logical extreme: if you're certain that adaptation isn't a medium, can you say what makes it different from the traditional media whose members are assumed to exclude it?