

From Text to Screen: Assessing *SHREK* through the lens of Barthes' Narrative Functionalities and Eckart Voigt's Metadaptation

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Abstract

*The debate between fidelity discourse and cinematic interpretation has been a long one, wherein critics of each side have battled over the question of rightful ownership over adaptation studies since its time of inception. The production and reception of adapted films have always suffered an anxiety of influence: their merit was often judged through hierarchical comparisons with the source-text. Of late, critics like Thomas Leitch, Eckart Voigts-Virchow and Linda Hutcheon have pointed towards the prospect of adapted-screenplay being considered as an intermedial, intertextual work that claim artistic merit quite independently of its source text. Drawing upon the concept of narrative functionalities of Roland Barthes, Brian MacFarlane has argued that the on-screen narrative must re-invent the source-text to ply along the multimodal media of cinema. In fact, the prospect of multimodal representation itself gestates a feature of metadaptation—a term coined by Eckart Voigts, wherein the onscreen narrative has to draw upon intertextual and intermedial references, alongside self-reflexivity and subversion, to overcome the anxiety of influence and become a heuristic success among the audience. The present paper seeks to discuss the movie *Shrek* (2001) vis-à-vis its namesake source-text *Shrek!* (1990) by William Steig, in terms of narrative functionalities and metadaptive features, which, arguably, has contributed to it becoming a landmark in the tradition of fairy-tale cinema.*

Keywords: Adaptation; *Shrek*; Narrative Functionalities; Roland Barthes; Metadaptation, Subversion, self-reflexivity.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background: Adaptation Discourse and *Shrek*

The debate between fidelity discourse and cinematic interpretation has been a long one, wherein critics of each side have battled over the question of rightful ownership over adaptation studies. The production and reception of adapted films have always suffered an anxiety of influence, wherein the valuation of an on-screen text is often a function of hierarchical comparisons with the source-text. Despite the challenges in their reception, adapted films have never ceased to be produced, which clearly points at a deeper urge, both in the screen-playwright and the audience, to experience pure creativity—the one that involves negotiating a source text in multimodal format. Of late, critics like Thomas Leitch, Eckart Voigts and Linda Hutcheon have pointed towards the prospect of adapted-screenplay

being considered as an intermedial, intertextual work that can lay claim on its artistic merit quite independently of the source text. Drawing upon the concept of narrative functionalities of Roland Barthes, Brian MacFarlane (1996) has argued that the on-screen narrative must reinvent the source-text to ply along the multimodal media of cinema. In fact, the prospect of multimodal representation itself gestates a feature of metadaptation—a term coined by Eckart Voigts (2009), wherein the onscreen narrative has to draw upon intertextual and intermedial references, alongside self-reflexivity and subversion, to overcome the anxiety of influence and become a heuristic success among the audience. The present paper seeks to discuss the movie *Shrek* (2001) by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jensen vis-à-vis its namesake source-text *Shrek!* (1990) by William Steig, in terms of narrative functionalities and metadaptive features, which, arguably, has contributed to it becoming a landmark in the tradition of fairy-tale cinema.

1.2 Literature review and scope

Thomas Leitch, in his essay “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory” points out that adaptation discourse lacks a formal theoretical framework [Leitch *Criticism* 150]. This has given rise to a humungous corpus of case-studies that have actually based their evaluation on the degree of loyalty the cinematic rendition shows to the written source-text. Thus, the stance presumes a negative hierarchy existent between the filmic version and its source. The objective behind applying such metric, arguably, is to impart the filmic rendition with a cultural gravitas, since it can lay true claim to being a serious work of art only through its sincere reflection of the literary corpus [Leitch “Adaptation Studies at Crossroads” 64]. In order to situate adaptation studies within an evaluation system that denies such anxiety of influence, a proper, non-hierarchical framework is thus required. Linda Hutcheon, in her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), attempts to do exactly that. According to her, adaptation is a creative process in its own right, because what it renders is actually an “extended palimpsest” that allows readers to recognize the outlines of the source text on one hand, and engaging them with the dynamic ‘transcoding’ involved in the text-to-screen process on the other [Hutcheon 33]. The term ‘palimpsest’ contains the key to complexity here. Lexically meaning a text written on papyrus that is meant to be re-written with traces of the previously-written text being inter-visible, palimpsest in movies refers to the traces of the text/s that is/are transported to the screen. Since traces, or elements of intertextuality are an unavoidable phenomenon in any artistic representation [Juvan 45], the imposing of the source-text as an evaluative reference point to assess the artistic merit of the cinematic version is arguably unjust and insufficient. The cinema, being a composite language involving sequential photography, music, phonetics, etc., incorporates the art forms and traditions of each of these components [Stam, qtd. in Hutcheon 35]. In other words, the transcoding of the textual narrative to the screened version inevitably anticipates intermediality and intertextuality. Eckart Voigts, in his essay “*Metadaptation: Adaptation and Intermediality in Cock and Bull*,” actually celebrates this intermedial potentiality of the cinematic tradition by stating that adaptation can achieve “heuristic success” only by negotiating with the language of Intermediality. According to him, the language of the written text is potentially incompatible with the language of the intermedial elements of cinema. A screen-playwright negotiates this

aporia by taking calls in terms of either/or, or both [Voigts *JAFP* 137-152]. In other words, Virchow calls the filmic technique of self-consciously borrowing and adapting/subverting from various other intermedial sources as metadaptation. This actually opens up potential route for enriching the field of adaptation studies. Rather than remaining delimited to the vertical hierarchies of fidelity discourse, adaptation studies can now expand horizontally, focusing on change and exchange, transition and transposition incorporated *en route* from text to screen (Atkinson, Stadler and Mitchell xvi). A lot of studies have been conducted on Shrek after its release in 2001. The most important of them has been *Investigating Shrek: Power, Identity and Ideology*, which studies the dimensions of powerplay and destabilization of hegemonic discourse [Lacassagne et al]. Much focus has been rendered on the impact of Shrek in destabilizing gendered stereotypes and deconstructing normative narrative of fairy-tale discourse in terms of appearance, selection of hero, etc. [O'Brien; Troutman]. The movie has also been approached from the angle of disability and how it contributes to the discourse of awareness and acceptance towards the other-normal [Allis & Ellis]. Works have also been done from the angles of ecocriticism and racial implications in Shrek [Caputi; Pimentel & Velazques]. Using the film for reader-response in ELT classrooms has also been approached upon [Melchiori & Mallet]. But limited focus has been given to this movie in the aspect of its transliteration of the written narrative to on-screen version. The present paper investigates the theoretical ramifications of this successful adaptation from text to screen. However, the scope of this paper is limited to the first movie of the Shrek movie series of 3 films and 2 more in thematic adjacence. Further research on narrative functionalities and metadaptation in the rest movies would add up richly to the adaptation discourse of children's movies.

1.3 Methodology

The paper attempts to contribute to Adaptation discourse by analysing the factors contributing to the successful transposition of the written text Shrek! to the filmic narrative Shrek. In the process, two concepts have been used: First, Roland Barthes' concepts of Narrative functionalities and its application of filmic transliteration as given by Brian McFarlane; Second, Eckart Voigt's concept of Metadaptation that encompasses the features of intertextuality, Intermediality, subversion and self-reflexivity that makes an adaptive narrative a heuristic success.

1.4 Objective

1. To find how the filmic narrative of Shrek has incorporated the concepts of Narrative functionalities in filmic adaptation.
2. To find out how Shrek incorporates the features of Metadaptation (intertextuality, Intermediality, subversion and self-reflexivity) in the filmic version.

2. Discussion

2.1 Role of Barthes's Narrative Functionalities in Film Adaptation

Brian McFarlane, in his book *Novel to Film* (1996), has critically inter-related Roland Barthes' notion of narrative functions of cardinals, catalyzers, informants and indices proper with the discourse of adaptation, in order to meditate upon the process of adaptive

transmutation. According to him, Barthes provides with two major narrative functions that hold the structure of a narrative: distributional and integrational. Distributional functions refer to the actions and events narrated in the story. They move horizontally, thus rendering linearity to the flow of narrative. Distributional functions are further divided into two subtypes: Cardinal Functions and Catalyzers. Cardinal functions contain the ‘risky moments’ of plot movement that throw up opportunities to the readers to construct meaning out of the text. They are rooted in Catalyzers—the general, average-level actions in the narrative that provide moment-by-moment minutiae. The Cardinal functions, when linked together, provide the irreducible, bare bones of a story. Gestating these cardinal functions are the catalyzers, like the prince / pop star declaring a ballroom-dance / contest to select his life / dancing partner; the search for the missing damsel / contestant; and, the trials and errors with the other spinsters / contestants encountered *en route*. Catalyzers offer the directors and playwrights a huge scope to play upon the story or motif of a prior-text to situate it conveniently in different spatio-temporal contexts [McFarlane 13-14]. Thus, Barthes’s notion of distributional functions holds the scope of changing the dimension of narrative discourse in an adapted text. On the other hand, Integrational functions refer to the functionality of *being*, i.e. embedding the characters in specific spatio-temporal reality. Integrational functions are further subdivided into two types: Informants and Indices Proper. Informants include character details like the name, age, profession, etc. of the characters. Indices proper involves character development through dialogues and other narrative hints [McFarlane 14-15]. Interrelating the narrative functionalities with the adaptation discourse, McFarlane opines that the best way to negotiate with the receptive-image of a prior text is through keeping the major cardinal functions intact and manipulating the catalyzers, informants and the indices proper instead [McFarlane 13-15; 21]. The consequence: the audience’s imagination is engaged dynamically through the palimpsestic portrayal of the source text that is still recognizable over the creative modifications in time, space, situations and characterization.

2.1 *Shrek* Text vs Screen: Applying Barthes’ Narrative Functionalities

Shrek (2001) happens to be the first animated movie to win both the BAFTA and the Academic Awards for Adapted Screenplay. A case study of the movie reveals how manipulations in the narrative functions play a significant role in transmuting a source-text into a successful on-screen representation.

i. Modifications in the Catalyzers

The basic story-outline of Steig’s short-fiction *Shrek!* consists of the following cardinal functions:

1. A Green-bodied Ogre, Shrek, moves out of his parents’ swamp in an unnamed land to find his own hovel of filth.
 2. He encounters a witch, a Donkey, a Dragon, a knight, a gothic castle on the way, the witch being a future-teller of Shrek’s nuptial prospects with an ugly princess and Donkey being the guide to the castle where she lives.
 3. Shrek ousts the knight, gains entrance to the castle, meets and marries the ugly princess.
- Major innovations are done with the Catalyzers and the Indices Proper alongside appropriate modifications over Informants and minor Cardinal functions to enrich the shallow prior-text.

The effect thus achieved is the portrayal of a love-able ogre-hero whom we can empathize with, in contradistinction to Steig's Shrek, who only affords a de-automatized perspective from the vantage point of an ogre anti-hero. In fact, some of the reviews on *Goodreads* give a glimpse of the kind of reader-response the text has evoked: a delightfully dreadful [Kathryn] anti-hero narrative [Calista], which, one would prefer not to read if given the option of watching the movie [Alex Deranged KittyCat]. The filmic version involves manipulations in the catalyzing functions in the following areas:

1. Shrek is driven out of his happy-life in the swamp by a melee of fairy-tale creatures dumped by the human residents of the kingdom of Duloc. This displacement elicits commiseration for Shrek, as he is represented as a clueless victim of state machinations.
2. Pitted against Shrek is the human villain Farquaad, the ruler of Duloc, who sends him on a mission of compulsion to rescue the object of his matrimonial interest, the beautiful Princess Fiona from the Dragon-guarded castle at the kingdom's periphery. The quest is forced upon Shrek and not taken up by him voluntarily.
3. Shrek rescues Fiona, and both eventually fall in love. The divergence lies in the introduction of gradual development of affection between the ogre and the princess: it allows more room for character development than the phenomenon of instant, mutual attraction in the source-text.
4. On the way to Duloc, Donkey (Shrek's companion) comes to know that Fiona is cursed with a transformational charm at sundown, which makes her an ogre. Element of on-screen anthropomorphism is introduced to engage the empathy of the audience, which is a modification over the dissociation engaged by the ugly princess in the source text.
5. Overcoming minor misunderstandings, Shrek retrieves Fiona from Farquaad's clutches and marries her, leading to her permanent transformation into ogre-form. De-automatized perspective is engaged thus, but this time to align the sympathy of the audience in a subverted way. The un-ogre human—Farquaad—is morally reprehensible, and thus deserve dissociative engagement, while the morally upright ogre-couple evokes sympathetic engagement from the audience.

ii. Modifications in the Informant functions

Massive alteration is done in the informant functions in commensuration with the changes in the catalyzing functions of the on-screen narrative. First, the princess-in-castle is interchangeably, both human and ogre. This makes her an object of quest for both a human and an ogre, which in turn allows the audience to adopt a comparative reviewing of their moral stances and develop a response of scorn / sympathy. Second, the on-screen princess is given a name—Fiona—which individuates her character through the differential vocatives of Shrek and Farquaad. Shrek, calling Fiona by her name, indicates his interest in the person that she is, while the tyrant calls her 'Princess', thus revealing his sole interest in her social rank. Third, Shrek is divested of the two superpowers he has in the original text: laser-beaming eyes and fire-breathing capacity. The only 'super-power' he has on-screen is physical strength, and that too with limits. He is shown vulnerable when Lord Farquaad's men point arrows at him in the fighting arena. Also, he cannot fight off the guards when Farquaad orders him and Fiona to be imprisoned, and has to depend on Dragon to save the day. This limitation actually wins the sympathy of the audience, since Shrek appears more human than

super-human. Fourth, the castle is guarded by a dragon, and not a knight. This changes the power-dynamics for Shrek in the rescue process of the princess, as a dragon is arguably a tougher adversary than a human knight (castle-guard in the source-text). That he wins by strategy instead of brute force makes him more credible as an object of audience's admiration. Apart from such modifications in the main characters, alteration is also done in the setting of the narrative. The on-screen version enriches the bare-bone setting of the prior-text by making a palimpsestic portrayal of the Fantastic and the Real. Duloc is populated by fairy-tale creatures and folk-heroes of continental Europe, and is beset by the material conditions of Medieval Europe and the modern world. This renders a spatio-temporal fluidity to the on-screen narrative, which, according to Hoffman, is a characteristic feature of postmodernist representations [17-18]. Features of Medieval Europe are indicated through the costumes of the characters: abbreviated woolen tunics, woolen hose and ankle boots for men; covered helmet, shoulder couter, linen coif, pauldron and breastplate for the soldiers; silk /woolen gown with low, squared neckline, teamed off with central-parting hair for women [Britannica "Europe: 1500-1800"; Elgin *Costume and Fashion Sourcebooks: The Medieval World* 35]. Pitchforks, javelins, crossbows refer to weapons used between 12th to 15th century [Medieval Spell authors "Medieval War-Weapons"]. Gothic architecture of Medieval Europe is referred through the Dragon's lair (high turrets, surrounding moat, pointed arches) and Lord Farquaad's wedding hall (pointed arches, tainted glasses) [Stewart and Richman-Abdou "Aesthetic of Gothic Architecture"]. However, the town-layout of Duloc, with its queue, turnstile, box office, souvenir shop and Main-Street USA type pristine street, resembles American theme parks of the 20th century (Furby & Hines 147). Lord Farquaad, a tyrant of short stature with sheer intolerance towards non-human fairy-tale creatures that are "poisoning" his "perfect kingdom" (*Shrek* Perf. John Lithgow), strongly resembles the anti-Semitic German leader Adolf Hitler of the twentieth century. This point is augmented by Aurelie Lacassagne in her essay "Representing Political Regimes in the Shrek Trilogy" (2011), where she points out that Lord Farquaad, with his low social background (non-nobility) and his propensity for totalitarian propaganda does actually resemble Hitler [19-21].

iii. Modifications in the Indices proper

Innovations in the indices proper are introduced through the usage of language codes, aural codes, cultural codes and shot angles.

1. Language codes—There is a melee of accents present in the movie. Shrek's Scottish, Robin Hood's French and the three little pigs' German bear evidence to this fact [Minutella 131]. Coupled with it are registral variations in the dialogues of Donkey (African American Vernacular English) and Fiona (American English; archaic Middle English) [Minutella 130]. The accent and registral variations clearly reflect an atmosphere of trans-nationality, migration and globalization in the film.
2. Aural and musical codes are the strongest factors to engage the audience's empathetic connection with Shrek. The non-diegetic score of rock-music ("All Star"; "Bad reputation") foiling Shrek's general actions highlights the amiable, free-spirited nature of the ogre who has a 'bring-it-on' attitude for most things in life. The slow pop-song "Halleluah" highlights the melancholic mood of Shrek in the moments of emotional distancing with Fiona. Thus, the

objectively hate-able monster of the written-text becomes a love-able, identifiable persona in the movie.

3. Camera angles become a strategic factor in rendering depths to the characterization and the ambience. Positioning the camera contributes to the nuances of power dynamics, point of view, engagement of attention over specific features on the screen, etc. [San Philippo “Types of Camera Shots and Angles”]. Applying the concept of camera angles, the character of Shrek is developed in multiple dimensions: the over-the-shoulder shot at the beginning of the movie (when Shrek looks into the mirror) establishes the camera’s point-of-view to be belonging to the ogre. It is followed by medium, low angles shots, which establish Shrek to be strong and tall, and the ruler of his swamp. This is contrasted with the high-angle shot focused on Shrek in Duloc’s fighting-arena, where Shrek—the ogre—is portrayed to be unjustly powerless to the scheming maneuvers of Farquaad—the human villain. The illustrations in the book *Shrek!*, if directly translated on screen, would have just had over the shoulder, medium shots, indicative of the undefeated, prevailing journey of the ogre through ‘minor’ obstacles.

Thus, applying Barthes’s notions of narrative functionality, the directors play with the informants, the catalyzers, and the indices proper to invest the cinematic rendition of *Shrek!* with density and richness.

2.2 *Shrek* Text vs Screen: Applying Voigt’s concept of Metadaptation

As indicated by Eckart Voigts (2009), adaptation, in order to be called Metadaptation, requires the following four aspects: i. inter-mediality; ii. intertextuality; iii. self-reflexivity; iv. subversion. The discussion will now evaluate how *Shrek* fares along these lines.

i. Intermediality

The movie borrows from many modern-day American TV shows and Hollywood blockbusters, which evoke the material conditions of the contemporary world. The wrestling match between Farquaad’s men and Shrek is a rip-off from the movie *Gladiator* (2000) and the American TV show *WWE* (“Iron Man match”). The slow-motion fight-sequence of Fiona in the Monsieur Hood scene refers back to *Matrix* (1999). The magic mirror, displaying the eligible females for Lord Farquaad, is a pastiche of *Dating Game*, an American TV show that was aired between 1965-1986 (Turan 217). The levitation-scene, where Donkey starts flying after getting a sprinkle of pixie dust, is a reference to Disney’s *Peter Pan*, while his exhilarated reaction at people being awestruck at his flight is a throwback to *Dumbo*, another Disney-production. The boost-up dialogue uttered by Shrek after Donkey crosses the rickety bridge to the Castle is a takeoff from the movie *Babe*. Finally, Fiona’s ogre-to-ogre transformation scene towards the end of the movie, taking up ‘true love’s form’ after ‘true love’s first kiss’, is a parody of the Beast’s animal-to-human transformation in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*.

ii. Intertextuality

The movie borrows from a large number of folk literature and fairy-tales across the continental Europe, alongside local legends like Robin Hood and his Merry Men. The fairy

tales of Charles Perrault, the Grimm Brothers, and Hans Christian Anderson are the seminal features of intertextual borrowing. Cinderella; Snow White; Pinocchio; the Little Donkey; the Gingerbread Man; Peter Pan; Three little pigs; Goldilocks and the Three Bears are a few examples of the huge milieu of intertextually-borrowed characters in the movie.

iii. Self-Reflexivity

There are a number of instances which reveal the on-screen characters to be aware of being camera-watched and playing expected roles in a prototypical fairy-tale drama. In the beginning, Shrek scares off the village-hunters after giving a terrible scream saying: “This is the part where you run away” (*Shrek* Perf. Mike Myers), which clearly highlights his consciousness of the way he and the humans ‘should’ act in the monster-hunt drama. The aspect of self-reflexivity is further seen in two scenes towards the end of the movie. The first one occurs after the transformation of Fiona into a permanent ogre when Shrek kisses her. The Donkey comments, “I was hoping this would be a happy ending” (*Shrek* Perf. Eddie Murphy), suggesting that the present fairy-tale in which he is playing a part is off kilter in terms of the expected ending. Immediately following this dialogue, Shrek covers the screen with his hand before kissing Fiona again. This implies his clear awareness of being camera-watched.

iv. Subversion

The movie doesn’t delimit itself to borrowings only. It also makes lithe subversions of the traditional fairy-tale motifs propagated by mainstream fairytale movies, where normative concepts of physical beauty, villain, sex-dynamics, and male-female role in society are majorly propagated. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enlist all of the subversive instances. Only a major few are listed below:

1. The princess is rescued by an ogre, not a handsome prince. The focus is thus on a person with strategy and personal endeavor instead of social rank.
2. Slaying the dragon is rendered an unnecessary option to rescue a princess. It is arguably a poignant effort to incorporate an inclusive point of view, as the mythical “other” is invested with the possibility of reason and compassion.
3. Donkey sweet-talks Dragon, and wins her amorous attention. The latter then courts him, and eventually overpowers him in a sexual relationship. This is a prominent reversal of the gender-oriented perception of human coitus—as standardized by various elements of popular culture, wherein female passivity is paired up with male vigor.
4. In the scene involving Monsieur Hood and his Merry Men, Fiona spurns off the gratuitous rescue attempt mounted by the knights by employing self-defense tactics. This is a poignant subversion of two popular motifs--damsel in distress, and in requirement of impromptu saving.
5. The self-rescue scene of Fiona is comparable with the self-rescue of the donkey in the dragon-castle on grounds that they both subvert two gender-oriented perceptions:
 - a. A male can find a sexual situation uncalled-for, and a female can find a rescue-attempt unwelcome.
 - b. A male uses speech while female uses force for self-defense.

6. Finally, and most importantly, the movie redefines the concept of beauty. When Fiona gets permanently transformed into an ogre, Shrek allays her confusion of by saying that she is perfect in the way she is already. This indicates the movie's attempts to establish beauty as a function of self-confidence, which emerges from one's acceptance of self-identity, physical attributes and social status.

All such brilliant, lithe subversions of fairy-tale motifs and traditional gender roles firmly appropriate the story in the modern-day context. The huge success in the reception of the movie highlights the changing taste of the audience. Even Willam Steig himself acclaimed it as a wonderful, witty job (Wikipedia Authors "Shrek"). Jack Zipes, the prominent critic of children's literature and fairy-tale cinema, hails Shrek for upending the culturally homogenizing stereotypes propagated by the Disney movies. He opines that the movie exactly fulfills the fairy-tales' need of the hour—to acquaint children with the complexities of life rather than candy-coating over it (Craig and Green "Interview with Zipes" 2).

3. Conclusion

The paper has discussed how the narrative functionalities—the distributional and integrational functions prescribed by Roland Barthes, prove to be essential elements to adapt a written text for a film narrative. The cardinal functions align the bare-bones of the written text with the adapted version, while the catalyzers alter the scope of the narrative by adding desired details to the basic plot-line. Integrational functions include informants and indices proper, which embed the narrative in specific spatio-temporal reality. The juxtaposition of the material conditions of Medieval Europe and the modern world renders the on-screen text with a post-modern, spatio-temporal fluidity. Manipulations in the indices proper is done through language (accents and registers), aural codes (rock music foiling Shrek's actions) and camera angles (showing Shrek in differential power dynamics with his surrounding). The metadaptive attempt of the film is seen through intertextual and intermedial borrowings, self-reflexive referencing of fictionality, subversive upending of normative expectations related to gender beauty, and the unknown other. Thus, the directors Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jensen have spun a complex, palimpsestic weave of cinematic metadaptation in *Shrek* that is much richer in interpretive potential than its source-text *Shrek!*. The receptive success of the film has proven that audience are happy to trade off a bit of the receptive image of the source text, if the adapted narrative affords a consummate engagement of their critical and perceptive faculties.

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