A Study on the Adaptation of My Fair Lady from Pygmalion from the Perspective of Linda Hutcheon's Adaptation Theory

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Abstract

Adaptation can give a classic work a contemporary flavor, thus giving it a new vitality. Nowadays, with the continuous enrichment of the practice of adaptation, the theoretical value of Linda Hutcheon's A Theory of Adaptation, as a pioneering work in the field, has become more and more prominent. The purpose of this paper is to use Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory to analyse the film My Fair Lady, which is adapted from George Bernard Shaw's drama Pygmalion. Through combining the core points of adaptation theory, it will analyse the adaptationss of the scenes and the functions of music addes in this work, and then discuss the adaptation strategy from the drama text to the film.

Keywords

Linda Hutcheon, Adaptation Theory, Pygmalion, My Fair Lady.

1. Introduction

The famous Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw has been recognised as the "Molière of the 20th century" and "the greatest English dramatist after Shakespeare". Pygmalion is one of the most well-known masterpieces of George Bernard Shaw to the Chinese audience. Based on *Pygmalion*, the king of the island of Cyprus in the Metamorphoses by the Roman poet Ovid, the play tells the story of a linguist named Higgins, who makes a bet with his friend, Pickering, that he will turn Eliza, a flower seller with a country accent, into a lady within six months, and then attends the royal ball without being exposed. After its publication, *Pygmalion* received great attention and has been rehearsed as a stage play numerous times, as well as being adapted into a film many times, the most successful and famous of which is *My Fair Lady*, directed by American director George Cukor in 1964. The film, starring Audrey Hepburn, was nominated for three Academy Awards at the 37th Academy Awards and won eight awards, including Best Picture, Best Director and Best Actor.

Although there are many similarities between the two texts in terms of content and framework, there are many differences in terms of scene portrayal. The purpose of this paper is to take Hutcheon's theory of adaptation as a guide to analyse the differences between drama texts and films in terms of scene portrayal due to the different characteristics of the art forms, as well as the role and advantages of music in films.

This paper is based on Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006; rpt. 2013). In this book, Linda Hutcheon initiated to perceive the adaptation as both a product and a process. The introduction of the process aspect allowed Linda Hutcheon to further develop three modes of engagement: telling, showing and interacting. All three modes engage the audience. The three modes are intertwined, and adaptations can originate from the same mode as well as from other modes. Hutcheon pointed that, "In adapting, the story argument goes, 'equivalences' are sought in different sign systems for the various elements of the story: its themes, events, world, characters, motivations, points of view, consequences, contexts, symbols, imagery, and so on.."[1]

As Linda Hutcheon has noted, most theories of adaptation assume that "the story is the common denominator, the core of what is transposed across different media and genres, each of which deals with the story in formally different ways and [through] different modes of engagement"[1].

The adaptation from the telling to the showing mode is considered to be the most common practice, which is presented by the change from print to performance. This is exactly the mode of adaptation that this paper is talking about.

2. Literature Review

Generally, the author would like to do the literature review from two aspects: the study of *Pygmalion* and the study of Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*.

According to my own research results, there are numerous studies on *Pygmalion*, but the perspectives of these researches are focusing on linguistics or translations.

Zhao Fang analyses the English dialect in the play Pygmalion and explores the social significance of English dialect in depth [2]. Yu Min analyses the pivotal role that social language plays in reflecting one's social status and even in determining one's fate from a sociolinguistic point of view by comparing the discourses of the female protagonist and her changing status in the film *My Fair Lady* [3].

Through analysing *Pygmalion* translated by Lin Yutang and Yang Xianyi, Xie Li aims to elaborate how the factor of theatricality affects the translator's choice of drama translation strategy, leading to the differences between the translated texts at the level of language, style, etc., and to explore the principle of drama translation attributed to theatricality and its influence on the performance effect [4]. Zhou Jiamin compares two Chinese translations of the play, analyses them in terms of naturalisation and alienation, functional and formal equivalence, and the translation of vulgar language, summarises the contexts and methods of different translation techniques in the translation of this play, and sums up the styles and characteristics of these two translations [5].

These studies are comprehensive and productive, but have not touched the process of adaptation from the drama to the film. However, these studies still help us to understand the significance of *Pygmalion*, which has considerable reference value and should not be ignored.

Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, as a pioneering work in the early stage of adaptation research, has attracted many scholars after its publication. However, after carefully reviewing the literature concerned, it is found that the research results are mostly introductory review articles, while there are relatively few systematic studies of Linda Hutcheon's theories of adaptation. The details are as follows:

Dianne F Sadoft's overview of the main points of adaptation theory and her argument that Hutcheon's work is a fundamental text in adaptation theory research [6]. While Michael Evans Kinney's paper concentrates on the significance of Hutcheon's theory for operatic adaptations. Both of them focus on an introduction to the content of *A Theory of Adaptation*, contributing to promote the theory [7].

The situation is similar for domestic studies. In 2008, domestic scholar Li Yang published an article in *Foreign Literature*, which firstly promoted Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* to the Chinese people. He argues that "Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* attempts to break down the traditional prejudice against adaptations, including literary works, and to do justice to adaptations" [8]. In the article Adaptation Theories: A Key Word in Critical Theory, Chen Hongwei comments on Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, arguing that "it further emphasises the inherent duality of the creation of rewriting" [9].

3.   The Adaptations of Scenes in My Fair Lady

As we all know, drama is a kind of stage art, which has strict restrictions on space and time. Films, on the other hand, are subject to relatively few restrictions on narrative time and space, and they do not have spatial restrictions. First of all, it is worth mentioning the scene of horse-racing. In fact, in the theatre *Pygmalion*, the scene of horse-racing does not exist, which should be attributed to the limitation of stage performance in terms of scene. The same cannot be true of the film. In *My Fair Lady* the horse-racing scene is vividly depicted, and the image of the ladies, especially their different hairstyles and their ornaments, such as umbrellas, straw hats, handbags and so on, creates an image of the upper-class characters, which makes a deep impression on the audience. In addition, their behaviour and the way they speak are the same, which allows the audience to perceive the hypocrisy of the upper class: it seems that they all wear uniforms, they are always acting, and their lives are far from the words "simple" and "natural". The author's critique of reality can be seen in this. Whereas the dramatic text lacks this advantage and relies on symbolic or implied narratives, the absence of time and space constraints in the film is a great advantage for the narrative.

Drama and film also have different characteristics in terms of narrative pacing. For example, the depiction of the banquet scene. The banquet scene can be said to be the climax in both theatre and film. Unlike the direct statement of the scene in the text of the play [10], the film describes Eliza's participation in the banquet in detail and uses suspense to provide the audience with room for imagination: the beginning of the beginning seems to be a smooth start. When Higgins meets one of his former students, a Hungarian named Nepommuck, says he can recognise anyone's background by speaking. At this point the audience begins to worry about Eliza, especially when the hostess asks Nepommuck to check where Eliza is from, and the audience sweats for Eliza. The tension escalates again when Nepommuck whispers Eliza's identity amongst the people. The audience has no way of knowing what he is passing on. He delivers the message to the hostess and the audience will assume that Eliza is being punished for impersonating a lady. The tension reaches its peak at this moment, there is no music, no song. And then it turns out that the prince wants to ask Eliza to dance, because Nepommuck says that Eliza is a Hungarian princess. The audience is surprised and the tension is relaxed. The pacing of this scene in the film is more conducive to leaving a deep impression on the audience than the flatness of the dramatic text.

The different choices of ending scenes also reflect different value tendencies. In order to show the real social conflict, the romantic element is not reflected in the text of the play. Eliza becomes more independent and her relationship with Higgins becomes a bad one. There is no "love" between them at all. The most important thing is that Eliza's desire for freedom and her pursuit of personal independence can be manifested in the text of the play. However, In order to meet the audience's emotional needs, the romantic elements of the film version are more clearly reflected, especially in the scene where Eliza returns to Wimpole Street after the party. The return of the heroine as a lady in this version appeals to the sentiments of the majority of the audience. In addition, the hero Higgins' performance at the end of the play is even more original: he is deeply saddened by Eliza's departure, and when he learns of her return, he covers his face with his hat. Of course, the act of "covering" gives the audience infinite room for reflection, providing a romantic semi-open-ended ending for the audience.

4. Music added in My Fair Lady

According to Linda Hutcheon, "soundtracks in movies enhance and direct audience response to characters and action, as they do in videogames, in which music also merges with sound effects both to underscore and to create emotional reactions. Film sound can be used to connect inner and outer states in a less explicit way than do camera associations."[1]

The use of music in a film can add to the narrative of the film. In *My Fair Lady*, a large number of songs are added to the dialogue, hence the film is also known as a musical. The beauty of the music enhances the storytelling of the film and contributes to the development of the plot. The audience is also able to feel the inner world of the characters naturally.

For example, Eliza objects to Higgins teaching her how to pronounce vowels. Because she thinks it is a very difficult job. She expresses her anger through the song *Wait and See*. In the scene of horse racing, knights, dukes and duchesses sing together. To a certain extent, the song not only distinguishes the class people belong to but also the culture of their respective classes. In addition, every appearance of Doolittle in the film is accompanied by music, thus showing the comedy of the character. At the end of the film, when Higgins is on his way home, the audience can tell by his appearance that he is filled with anger. However, the addition of the song *I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face* allows the audience to perceive the complexity of Higgins' feelings towards Izasha. It is evident that music makes the film more expressive compared to the dramatic text.

5. Conclusion

Due to the different narrative characteristics of different media, adaptors can choose how to portray a scene, add to it, or even delete it. The suitable way of portraying the scenes will also add more meanings, so that the audience can understand more comprehensively the connotation of the original and the values it wants to convey. The *My Fair Lady* makes adaptations of scenes from the dramatic text from the narrative characteristics of the film medium that break through the limitations of time and space, the excellent narrative pacing and other factors that influence the choice of the direction of the adaptation, making the film uniquely appealing. Moreover, music as an expressive element, which can be considered in particuliar when practicing adaptation.

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