

Book Review: The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation

by Blog Admin

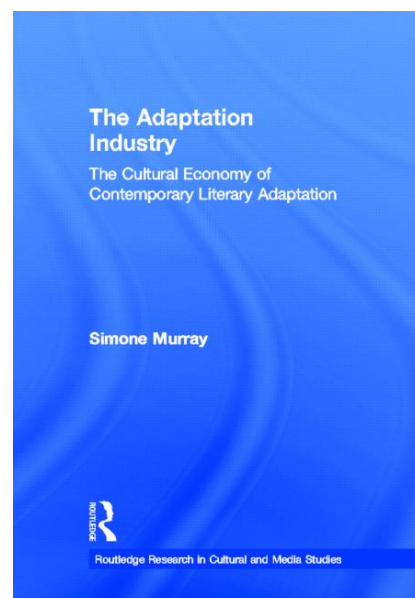
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*Adaptation constitutes the driving force of contemporary culture, with stories adapted across an array of media formats. Until now, adaptation studies has been concerned almost exclusively with textual analysis, in particular with compare-and-contrast studies of individual novel and film pairings. **The Adaptation Industry** re-imagines adaptation not as an abstract process, but as a material industry. It presents the adaptation industry as a cultural economy of interlocking institutions, stakeholders and decision-makers all engaged in the actual business of adapting texts. **Casey Brienza** finds that the book is a fantastic contribution to the social scientific literature on cultural production and highly recommends it to all scholars in that field.*

The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation. Simone Murray. Routledge. September 2012.

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Despite being widely-regarded as one of the greatest realist novels of all time, the official [Facebook page](#) for the 2012 feature film adaptation of *Anna Karenina* does not seem to assume the strength of the story alone will sell it to viewers. Instead, the description begins as follows: ‘The third collaboration of Academy Award nominee Keira Knightley with director Joe Wright, following the award-winning box office successes “Pride & Prejudice” and “Atonement,” is the epic love story “Anna Karenina,” adapted from Leo Tolstoy’s classic novel by Academy Award winner Tom Stoppard (“Shakespeare in Love”).’ This baggy sentence is nearly as long (46 words) as the brief plot summary following it (52 words), and it manages to drop the names of no less than three Hollywood types and three movies based upon classic writers or works of literature—all of them both popular and award-winning.



So, what in the world is to be made of these curious juxtapositions of money and prestige, page and screen? Enter [Simone Murray](#), Senior Lecturer in Communications and Media and Director of The Centre of the Book at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. Her new monograph, *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation* aims to understand precisely why such sentences exist by mapping out the industrial structures of production which turn works of contemporary literary fiction into major motion pictures.

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At its base, *The Adaptation Industry* is intended to be a theoretical and methodological intervention in the field of adaptation studies, where ‘adaptations’ are narrowly defined, as in the case of *Anna Karenina* above, as film adaptations of books. This niche offshoot of literary studies on the one hand and film studies on the other has thus far traditionally been dominated by humanistic textual analyses, such as questions about the textual fidelity or relative literary merit of screen adaptations, or comparative analyses to unmask the larger ideological structures of society. That, according to Murray, is highly problematic. Instead, she argues, adaptation scholars ought to consider other scholarly traditions in political economy, book history, and Bourdieu’s cultural theory, and pay better attention to the material and social conditions in which adaptations are made.

Over the course of six chapters, Murray accomplishes precisely that. The chapters are organized into particular themes in the study of the production of adaptations in the Anglophone world, such as the author as transmedia brand; the literary agent and intellectual property rights; book events; the role of literary prizes in the world of film; the screenwriter; and the strategies for marketing adaptations to (hopefully) ensure commercial success. The book then concludes with a brief meditation upon the prevailing disciplinary logic of the academic world, which hews off different media forms into separate fields of study. Murray has shown, persuasively in my view, such black and white divisions are no longer sustainable.

In fact, the great strength of this book is that it actually accomplishes what it has set out to do. Murray has provided a compelling conceptual framework and richly-described account of the contemporary cultural economy. In particular, she dispenses with the notion that the prestige of the original work of fiction and the commercial success of its screen adaptation are somehow separate or at odds. Anyone with any lingering misconceptions about the often symbiotic relationship between economic and symbolic capital in the cultural field needs to read *The Adaptation Industry*—now.

Unfortunately, the book's great strength is also its great weakness. By cleaving so closely to her scholarly project, Murray effectively alienates the non-scholarly reader. As a sociologically informed project, it is meant to shed a critical light upon the social world in which we are embedded. Thus, anyone who produces or consumes adaptations –and since adaptations are ubiquitous, that pretty much means everybody who produces or consumes entertainment media—might in principal have a stake in Murray's findings. Yet the text is so larded with citations and reviews of scholarly literature that I would not bother recommending it to a layperson. The first chapter, for example, is especially guilty of the standard academic sins; the important point Murray makes about the expanding role of the author is so stuck on Foucault that even I yawned a bit.

Nevertheless, *The Adaptation Industry* is a fantastic contribution to the social scientific literature on cultural production that I recommend highly to all scholars in that field. The author's insights on adaptation are well-suited for wide adaptation of their own, and I look forward eagerly to that work. It's bound to be forthcoming shortly.

Casey Brienza is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Cambridge and member of Trinity College, Cambridge. She received her AB from Mount Holyoke College in 2003 and her MA from New York University's Department of Media, Culture, and Communication in 2009. Her doctoral thesis, fully funded by an External Research Studentship from her College, is being written under the supervision of John Thompson on manga publishing and the transnational production of print culture. Casey also has refereed articles in print or forthcoming in journals such as *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *Publishing Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, and *The International Journal of the Book*. She may be reached through [her website](#). [Read more reviews by Casey](#).

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