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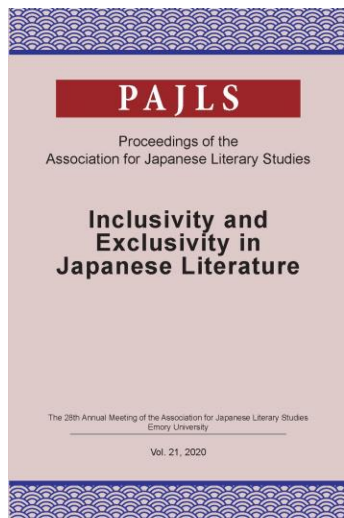
Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 21 (2020): 161–169.



PAJLS 21:
Inclusivity and Exclusivity in Japanese Literature.
Editor: Cheryl Crowley
Managing Editor: Matthew Fraleigh

RESEARCHING ADAPTATION: READING/WATCHING "THE HELL SCREEN"

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> "In the workings of the human imagination, adaptation is the norm, not the exception."
> (Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*)[2]

INTRODUCTION

From 2016 to 2018, when I taught Japanese Literature at a university, my students sometimes brought suggestions of *manga* and *anime* based on Japanese mythology and literature. Not being a *manga*/*anime*-addicted scholar, I was sometimes ashamed of confessing that my knowledge of the subject would be so narrow that I could count on my fingers the number of characters I recognized: Doraemon, Sazae-san, Astro Boy (*Tetsuwan Atomu*), Saint Seiya, Crayon Shin-chan… Anyway, I became curious about a specific *anime* suggested by a student once: we were studying several of the short stories of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, among them the famous (or infamous?) *The Hell Screen* (Jigoku hen 地獄変, 1918). My student mentioned that he knew the story, because he'd seen it in an *anime* adapted from Japanese literary works. As we talked about the anime, I found that the episode has many similarities to the short story whose name it shares, as is typical of adaptations. On the other hand, I also noticed so many differences that it occurred to me, what kind of adaptation is it?

In considering this question, I immediately became aware that I was not well-versed in the meaning of "adaptation." Even though etymologically it derives from Latin *ad* + *aptare*, meaning "to make something apt or adequate," "make something fit," denoting there is a transformation from one side to the other, in this case the modifications to the short story (the "source" text) made by the anime (the "adapted" text) sounded too drastic to justify asserting a simple link between them. Some reshaping is inevitable, but I wondered if there was a limit to the number or kinds of changes a new version might have beyond which it can no longer be considered an adaptation. Perhaps because the student's description of the adaptation lacked fidelity to the original I felt some unconscious resistance to it: even though I had not seen the *anime*, I

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[2] Hutcheon 2006, 177.

reflexively judged it, because it deviated from and somewhat contradicted Akutagawa's classic. In doing so, I realized, I was making the same mistake as criticizing song translations for not keeping to their starting points *ipsis litteris*: a mistake that I had already been aware of by that time.

Then I watched the *anime*. The series title is *Aoi bungaku* (2009); all of its episodes are adapted from Japanese literary works.[3] I still felt uncomfortable with that adaptation even after watching it because the changes it made seemed too extreme. For example, in Akutagawa's short story, the protagonist Yoshihide is a talented but despicable, ill-minded artist; however, in the anime, he is a somewhat altruistic man. Isn't this too great a distortion? Isn't it a parody instead of an adaptation? Or could it be considered both?

In this paper I will follow several lines of inquiry related to adaptation by examining how the original texts' characters are portrayed in the anime series. The works of Hutcheon (2006) and Casetti (2004) served as a theoretical basis for this study, and Thomas Leitch's (2003) article "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory" was particularly useful to forming an understanding of the contemporary notion of adaptation. To start, I considered criticism that generally deals with adaptation from literature to film. Beyond that, I also explored scholarly work focusing specifically on adaptation from literature to *anime*; here I found Cavallaro's (2010) "*Anime* and the Art of Adaptation: Eight Famous Works from Page to Screen" was also useful.

AND SO, THEORY

In the first place, it is useful to reflect on what adaptation is not before trying to define what it is; in other words, adaptation is not simply retelling a story, or repeating a previously defined structure. Linda Hutcheon offers insight into this point in her influential study *A Theory of Adaptation*. The last chapter, in particular, where she says numerous versions of a story "exist laterally, not vertically," offers a concrete change of perspective on the subject; as she writes, "adaptations are derived from, ripped off from, but are not derivative or second-rate" (169). She also says that "not all adaptations necessarily involve a shift of medium or mode of engagement, though many do." She calls fidelity to the prior work "a theoretical ideal, even if a practical impossibility" because of the "reception continuum"

[3] The works are Dazai Osamu's *No longer Human* (*Ningen shikkaku*) and *Run, Melos!* (*Hashire Merosu*), Sakaguchi Ango's *In the woods beneath the cherry blossoms in full bloom* (*Sakura no mori no mankai no shita*), Natsume Sōseki's *Kokoro* and Akutagawa's *The spider's thread* (*Kumo no Ito*) and *The Hell Screen* (*Jigokuhen*).

from which reproductions (not only productions) emanate. One side of this continuum starts from translations and music transcriptions, condensations and restrictions, retellings, and revisions. The other side shows “spin-offs” (for example, bringing a different point of view from some part in the story) or “expansions” (e.g., insertion of new characters). In any case, adaptations would consist of (re-) interpretations and (re-) creations, nurtured with autonomy.

In talking about the “sagas” as she calls Star Wars and Star Trek, Hutcheon also reminds us that an adaptation is not supposed to be a copy:

> It is repetition but without replication, bringing together the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty. As adaptation, it involves both memory and change, persistence and variation. [...] the adaptive faculty is the ability to repeat without copying, to embed difference in similarity, to be at once both self and Other. (173–4)

The second issue is the ways that source texts are selected. Undoubtedly market forces have influence here. However, why are some stories adapted while others are forgotten? The market is undoubtedly not the only factor affecting the choices. An adaptation is an attempt to put readers/spectators/consumers in dialog with the source. There may be reasons beyond the aesthetic pleasure: they may be political, philosophical, even didactical. Nevertheless, the adaptation remains autonomous, in spite of resonating with its source.

Are there limits to the freedom of the adapter? If so, what are they? One way of approaching this topic is by investigating the works’ purposes. This is what Thomas Leitch does in his “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory” (2003). In response to Seymour Chatman’s “What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (and Vice Versa)” (1980), where he argues that “novels and films are suited to fundamentally different tasks” (assertion and depiction, respectively), Leitch takes another view. He reminds us that, although

> novels and films may seem at any given moment in the history of narrative theory to have essentially distinctive properties, those properties are functions of their historical moments and not of the media themselves…. Instead of saying that literary texts are verbal and movies aren’t, it would be more accurate to say that movies depend on prescribed, unalterable visual and verbal *performances* in a way literary texts don’t. (153–154)

While Leitch discusses books and film in this passage, his reasoning also applies to literary works and *anime*. But when it comes to *anime*, there are many peculiarities to be observed. Cavallaro mentions some of their common strategies, like frame sliding, fade-in/fade-out, lines and color splashes in the backgrounds, and many others (16). Some of these techniques aim to give a sense of movement; some convey deep emotions or tense happenings in the story. These resources are inherent to a specific medium—the *anime*—in contrast to the literary works that dialogue with it. The vibrant background color splashes of *anime* are an example of a technique used in the episode *Hell screen* of *Aoi Bungaku* at the end when the protagonist paints his daughter being burned.

Summing up, differences between the genres (or media) are a readily apparent indication that a given work and its adaptation(s) need to be considered independently. Cavallaro writes that "the significance of a text does not solely reside with its essence but also with the expressive vehicles and adaptive situations in which it is inscribed at any one point in time" (3).

Casetti (2004) also mentions such formal aspects as the common starting point for analyzing the relationships between literature and film, approaching them as "modes of expression." He suggests considering audiovisual and literary texts as specific genres or "as discursive formations which testify to how society organizes its meanings and shapes its system of relations." In other words, he advocates the understanding of adaptation as the "reappearance of discourse": it does not have to do with a work repeating another; for him, it does not imply re-reading or re-writing; it is just

> the reappearance, in another discursive field, of an element (a plot, a theme, a character, etc.) that has previously appeared elsewhere. A reappearance is a new discursive event that locates itself in a certain time and space in society, one that, at the same time, carries within itself the memory of an earlier discursive event. (82)

As for the preconceived idea of fidelity to the source text, Leitch says it is fallacious and does not serve to evaluate any work of adaptation. As he explains, this is because such fidelity is "unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense"; he compares adaptations to language translations, declaring "the source texts will always be better at being themselves" (161). Nevertheless, something needs to be clarified here: an attempt at fidelity should not be judged either. If the lack of

fidelity to its source is not to be used to undervalue an adaptation, neither is the endeavor of following it as closely as possible. In other words, fidelity is not a suitable criterion for evaluating adaptation.

Moreover, there is the matter of originality. Could not an adapted story be considered original, if we take into account innovations in the adaptation process? What if a given story dialogues not only with one other story, but with many? Where is the starting point—and is there only one? As Leitch writes, "each individual adaptation invokes many precursor texts besides the one whose title it usually borrows" (164).

When researching *The Hell screen*, it was interesting to find out that Akutagawa's short story was itself a reworking of another text: one of the tales of the thirteenth century *Uji shūi monogatari*.[4] In the story, a painter escapes a fire in his own house, but instead of trying to help his wife and children who were inside the house, he starts painting it. His neighbors criticize him, but he does not care and considers them unable to understand his art.

From literature to literature and then from literature to *anime*, the stories I read following the question of adaptation made me wonder a little about art's language(s) and the responses to it. If we compare Akutagawa's work with *Uji shūi monogatari*'s stories, we will find different style, sources and purposes, especially when we take into account the didactic character within the older. The protagonists of both short stories have a lot in common but keep, of course, some peculiarities. The painter in the thirteenth-century text was not moved at all by his neighbors, yet the painter of Akutagawa's text commits suicide. Akutagawa himself struggled with his own understanding of art in such a turbulent world. Of course, paying attention to the contexts in which these works were born is necessary. Moreover, adaptation is one of the forms through which art continues developing, for adaptation is essentially *recreation* and does not have to do with *repetition*.

COMPARING AKUTAGAWA'S "THE HELL SCREEN" AND THE ANIME *HELL SCREEN*

The protagonist in Akutagawa's "The Hell Screen" is a talented painter named Yoshihide, who is employed by Lord Horikawa. The story's narrator, a servant, describes him as "a sinister-looking old man, all skin

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[4] There are many other works adapted from Akutagawa's "The Hell Screen," like the homonymous *kabuki* play by Mishima Yukio and the *jidaigeki* movie produced in 1969 by the Tōhō Company, just to cite some. Including them in a comparative analysis would demand a bigger effort, subject to a broader project, out of the scope of a simple essay.

and bones," "extremely mean in nature." Because of his red lips that "reminded one of an uncanny animal-like mind," and that he was "like a monkey in appearance and behavior" (32), Lord Horikawa's young son named his father's tame monkey "Yoshihide." Yuzuki, the painter's daughter, protected the monkey from the lord's son, who tormented it; when he criticized her for doing so, she responded that she pitied the monkey because it bore her father's name. The monkey and Yuzuki became friends and this caught the attention of Lord Horikawa himself, who called them into his presence.

The servant-narrator picks up Yoshihide's story of being continuously despised despite his talent as a painter. A monkey, we would say. "he was not only mean to look at," he had also bad habits, like being "stingy, harsh, shameless, lazy, and avaricious," and the worst of all, he was arrogant. His paintings have the reputation of being "unpleasant and uncanny," with something evil about them. He was "boastful of his own perversity." The only trace of kindness in him could be found in the love he had for his daughter, Yuzuki. He asks the Lord Horikawa to release Yuzuki from his service, but the lord refuses, for Yuzuki was his favorite. Yoshihide continues to ask him to free her numerous times, but Lord Horikawa becomes angry and asks him to paint a picture of hell on a screen.[5]

In Akutagawa's account, "it was to this very hell in his picture that Yoshihide, the greatest painter in Japan, had condemned himself," becoming obsessed with the task for five or six months. When he can no longer postpone sleep, he has a nightmare in which an evil spirit disturbs him; he calls: "(c)ome to hell. In hell my daughter is waiting for me," following these words later with: "I'll be waiting for you, so come by this carriage… Take this carriage to hell." Meanwhile, Yuzuki stays at the Lord Horikawa's house; before long, the servant narrator explains, the monkey comes to ask him for help. Mystified, the narrator follows the monkey, only to find a terrified Yuzuki, fleeing one of the rooms. Obviously, she had been raped; we understand it was by Lord Horikawa.

As Yoshihide cannot paint something that he has not seen, in order to complete the scenes of hell, he starts torturing his apprentices so he can use them as models. When he brings the screen to Lord Horikawa, Yoshihide says it will only be complete if he can burn a person alive in a

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[5] As Hirasawa (2008) notes, screen paintings of hell were commonly used during Butsumyō-e (仏名会), or "rituals for expiating sin." Once a year, the ceremony was executed at the imperial palace; participants came to see the scenes painted on the screen and to feel repentance from their sins. It is not clear when this practice started, but it was already in use during the Heian period; a hell screen is mentioned in Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book* (Makura no sōshi).

carriage so that he could paint it. The lord provides the carriage and the person: as he himself explains, she is a woman criminal, who will have "her flesh roasted and her bones scorched, and… she will writhe in dire agony to death." He tells Yoshihide that he will see "her snow-white skin burned and charred," and "her black hair dance up in the infernal sparks of fire." The lord is "shaking his shoulders in silent laughter," confident that the sight would be preserved for posterity. After Yoshihide realizes that the girl inside the carriage is his daughter, he is first stricken with horror then is overtaken by a supernatural strength and starts sketching the scene on paper. Suddenly people around notice that the monkey is with Yuzuki inside the carriage. Everyone is horrified both by the sight of the carriage in flames and Yoshihide's stillness in painting it. After finishing the screen, Yoshihide hangs himself. The story ends as follows:

> His body remains buried in the corner of the ruins of his house. However, with the passage of the scores of years, wind and rain have worn out the tombstone marking his grave, and overgrowing moss has buried it into oblivion.

The hell screen in the *Aoi Bungaku anime* episode is quite different, and leads to a different result. Both the meaning of "hell" in the *anime* and also the characters diverge from those in Akutagawa's short story. In the *anime*, Yoshihide is not a disgusting figure or an arrogant man; he does not resemble a monkey but a hero. He is empathic with people, especially his daughter; while both works present Yoshihide as caring for Yuzuki, his attachment is more evident in the *anime*. In the anime, the most selfish and megalomaniacal character is Lord Horikawa. He demands a wonderful painting by the most talented painter for his own mausoleum; he wants Yoshihide to paint his beautiful perfect domain so he can continue reigning after he dies.

In the anime, Yoshihide thinks deeply about his art. Hands stained with red paint (an unsubtle reference to blood), he feels sympathy for those around him because he sees the way the lord treats his people: when they are drowning near his ship, he has them killed; he builds new storehouses with *hito bashira* (people buried alive in order to strengthen the building); he sees his people dying of starvation but does nothing to help. This is the hell Yoshihide is painting in the *anime*, and he decides this is going to be his last painting.

Hell in the *anime* version is supposed not to frighten or move people to penitence; rather, its purpose is to arouse compassion for suffering and inspire reflection about totalitarian rule. No country names are cited, but

the content is undoubtedly political. The lord in the *anime* resembles an infantile bossy ruler who does not accept being challenged or disobeyed.

When the lord sees the painting, he becomes angry. How dare Yoshihide? The lord turns to the daughter and asks why she did not stop him. She bravely stands up for her father, saying that he just did what the lord had asked him to—paint the domain as it is—and both he and she are ready to die for that painting.

Yoshihide continues his painting, but as in the short story, he needs something else to make it complete; after all, he cannot paint what he has never seen. He wants to paint someone burning in hell, but supposes that this is impossible! The Lord helps him, claiming to show him a woman criminal being burnt in a carriage, but as we know, it is really Yoshihide's daughter. Her sin was to refuse to do what the lord wanted, but here in a different sense than in Akutagawa's short story. The lord is pleased with the horrifying scene, as in the short story, and Yoshihide, in a supernatural twist, goes for the challenge and starts painting. The *anime* does not show him killing himself, but lying on the ground of the mausoleum. The scene is predominantly painted in shades of red, except for the daughter with her snow-white skin and black hair flying in the flames.

The role of art in the *anime* is determined by a sensitive, caring Yoshihide; it is not a matter of what one is allowed to paint (as in the previous works), but what one has to paint; it is a mission to accomplish, it is the purpose of the artist himself. In both renderings, the lord is depicted as a cruel, vengeful man for whom art is something to be ordered and demanded. However, in the *anime*, art is connected to people, a response to their experiences and a portrait of their situation as the artist sees them.

CONCLUSION

The substantial differences between the short story and the *anime* versions of "The Hell Screen" offer compelling insights into adaptation. They also make us reflect upon the role of art and creation more deeply and broadly.

When searching for a theory of adaptation, Leitch's fallacies were the starting point from where I put some pre-established ideas about the subject to the test. Hutcheon's fundamental "A Theory of Adaptation" was definitive in understanding the characteristics of an adapted work and in elaborating better what (not) to expect from it. Casetti and Cavallaro presented thought-provoking views mainly on form. The research continues seeking other detailed studies on the adaptation from literature specifically to *anime*.

As for the role of art and creation, its nature is manifested differently in the *Uji shūi monogatari,* from which Akutagawa got his inspiration in his own short story, "The Hell Screen," and the *anime*, and also in the other adaptations (film, kabuki play, and others that might appear). As artworks, they dialog with various circumstances and people in different settings and purposes. When thinking of adaptation as a tool for making art, there is one thing we may have as certain: burnt and reborn, stories will keep moving, for they are dynamic, insistently alive.

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