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Rethinking Adaptation: From Fidelity to Cultural Re-Narrativization

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Abstract

This study interrogates the long-standing dominance of the fidelity discourse in adaptation studies, which traditionally evaluates adaptations based on their adherence to source texts. Such perspectives have historically positioned adaptation as a derivative practice, critiquing departures from original narratives. Contemporary scholarship, however, increasingly recognizes adaptation as a dynamic, intertextual process shaped by cultural, ideological, and historical contexts. Despite this shift, much existing research continues to privilege fidelity. Addressing this gap, the present study analyses two case studies: Mulligan's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) and Affleck's *Argo* (2012). The former exemplifies the transformation of a first-person literary narrative into a visually driven courtroom drama, while the latter explores the cinematic reconstruction of historical events. Employing intertextual and audience reception-oriented approaches, the study advances a framework that moves beyond fidelity as an evaluative criterion. It concludes that adaptations should be understood as autonomous cultural artifacts, produced through processes of creative negotiation and re-narrativization across media and historical contexts.

Keywords: Adaptation theory, intertextuality, narrative transformation, cultural negotiation, medium-specific storytelling, audience reception

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Introduction

Adaptation has long occupied a complex position in the field of narrative studies, positioned between fidelity to source material and the creative liberties of re-interpretation. Historically, scholarship in adaptation studies was dominated by "fidelity criticism", a model that evaluated the worth of an adaptation according to its adherence to the original text (Leitch, *Adaptation Studies* 63). This approach privileged textual replication, assuming that deviation implied artistic failure, and tended to relegate adaptations to a secondary or derivative status. However, over the past three decades, this paradigm has been substantially challenged. Contemporary scholars—including Hutcheon, McFarlane (*Novel to Film*), and Cartmell—argue that adaptation is not merely a mechanical transfer of narrative, but a transformative process shaped by the distinctive affordances of each medium, as well as the cultural, historical, and ideological contexts of production (Hutcheon 7; McFarlane, (*Novel to Film*) 16; Cartmell 98). In this expanded view, adaptations are not passive copies but autonomous works in "intertextual" dialogue with their sources and with other cultural forms. Kristeva's notion of intertextuality (in *Desire in Language*), influenced by Bakhtin's dialogism, posits that no text exists in isolation; rather, meaning emerges through an active network of textual relationships (Kristeva, "*Word, Dialogue*" 36; Bakhtin 278). This insight has profound implications for adaptation studies: the adapted work simultaneously recalls its source, converses with other narratives, and addresses its own sociocultural moment (Cutchins 71). From feminist re-readings of Shakespeare to politically charged reimaginings of colonial histories, adaptation has become a site for ideological intervention, enabling creators to foreground themes marginalized in earlier interpretations (Cartmell 112). Parallel to the intertextual turn is the increasing integration of "audience reception theory" into adaptation studies. Hall's encoding/decoding model emphasizes that meaning is not fixed in a text but negotiated by audiences according to their own cultural frameworks (Hall 90). Jenkins extends this notion through the concept of participatory culture, wherein audiences actively reinterpret and expand narratives across multiple media platforms (Jenkins 252). In this light, the significance of an adaptation cannot be reduced to its fidelity; rather, it depends on how viewers engage with it, reinterpret it, and circulate it within cultural discourse. Adaptations thus become dynamic cultural artifacts, re-shaped in each act of reception.

Despite these theoretical advancements, much scholarship and particularly mainstream criticism continues to frame adaptation in terms of fidelity. This ongoing

emphasis presents an opportunity to explore how the language of "faithfulness" can be expanded through perspectives that foreground transformation, cultural negotiation, and audience reception (Leitch, *Oxford Handbook* 67). By engaging with both scholarly and popular frameworks, we can better appreciate how adaptations create new meanings and cultural functions alongside their source texts. This study embraces that opportunity by examining two influential cinematic adaptations, Mulligan's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) and Affleck's *Argo* (2012), through the combined lenses of intertextuality and audience reception. The first case examines Robert Mulligan's adaptation of Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, , which shifts the narrative from Scout Finch's intimate first-person perspective to a more external, visually driven courtroom drama. This transformation foregrounds Atticus Finch's moral authority, reframing the story for audiences in the midst of the American Civil Rights Movement. The second case analyzes Ben Affleck's *Argo*, a dramatization of the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis that blends historical fact with suspense-driven invention, and embeds a reflexive critique of Hollywood's role in shaping political narratives. Together, these examples illuminate how adaptations negotiate between the constraints of medium, the imperatives of genre, and the ideological demands of their cultural moments.

This study employs close textual and cinematic analysis within a theoretical framework grounded in intertextuality and reception theory. It examines narrative structure, visual strategies, thematic reframing, and historical context, while considering audience interpretation. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, emphasis is placed on how mise-en-scène and the absence of Scout's internal voice shift the narrative's moral centre. In *Argo*, the focus is on historical compression, dramatic invention, and meta-commentary on truth construction. Informed by adaptation theory's attention to medium specificity and reception theory's focus on audience agency, the research challenges fidelity as a primary evaluative measure. It positions adaptations as sites of cultural negotiation, emphasizing their role in shaping meaning and advancing debates on authorship, representation, and historical truth. Ultimately, the study reframes adaptation as creative re-narrativization, highlighting their artistic and ideological autonomy.

Theoretical Framework: Moving Beyond Fidelity

The dominance of fidelity criticism in early adaptation studies has been increasingly challenged by scholars who argue that assessing adaptations based on faithfulness to the source text is reductive and outdated (Leitch, *Film Adaptation*). Traditional

views valued adaptations for their replication of narrative, themes, and style, often viewing deviation as failure. While some defend fidelity for maintaining thematic and emotional continuity (Harold 89), this view neglects the intrinsic differences between media. Adaptation is not mere narrative transfer but a transformation shaped by medium-specific constraints and possibilities (Cartmell 98). McFarlane (in *Novel to Film*) notes that film cannot replicate a novel's internal consciousness without significant formal shifts. Instead, adaptations rely on visual, performative, and structural strategies suited to cinematic storytelling. Hutcheon similarly contends that adaptations are not subordinate to their sources but function as autonomous cultural artefacts, engaging in creative dialogue rather than simple reproduction. Consequently, contemporary adaptation theory emphasizes reinterpretation over replication.

Rather than privileging fidelity, scholars now turn to intertextuality as a key framework for understanding adaptation as a dialogic process. Intertextuality, rooted in Saussurean linguistics, was coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s and influenced by Bakhtin's dialogism, which asserts that no text exists in isolation but is instead shaped by a network of textual references, influences, and responses (Saussure; Kristeva; Bakhtin). Adaptation itself is a familiar form of intertextuality, stories reimagined across books, films, plays, and other media (Allen 72). For example, L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) reworks European fairy tale traditions into an American narrative. Bakhtin's theory continues to shape how adaptation is understood today. As intertextual reimaginings, adaptations engage with their sources while entering broader cultural and artistic discourse (Cutchins 72). Hutcheon expands on this, viewing adaptation as an act of re-creation, where adapters modify or subvert source meanings to suit contemporary cultural, historical, or ideological contexts. For instance, shifts in narrative voice or in theme may reflect current sociopolitical concerns. Thus, adaptation becomes a purposeful reinterpretation, shaped by both text and audience. This intertextual approach also enables adaptations to critique or reframe dominant ideologies. Contemporary retellings often highlight previously overlooked themes. Feminist adaptations of Shakespeare, for example, foreground gender dynamics underexplored in the original historical contexts, demonstrating how adaptations serve as spaces for critical engagement (Cartmell 112).

Reception theory further broadens this understanding by shifting attention from the text itself to how meaning is constructed through the interaction between text

and audience (Bennett 128). Hall's encoding/decoding model emphasizes that audiences decode texts based on their cultural frameworks (Hall 90). In adaptation studies, this means that significance is not derived solely from fidelity but from audience engagement and interpretation. Jenkins builds on this through the concept of participatory culture, where audiences co-create meaning across platforms, reimagining narratives through fan fiction, commentary, and other forms. In the era of transmedia storytelling, adaptations evolve continually, shaped by audience reinterpretation and digital circulation (Jenkins 252). Garcia further underscores how reception is historically contingent: a film acclaimed in one era may be received differently in another due to shifting ideologies (45). This is particularly evident in adaptations of politically charged histories. Films depicting colonialism, war, or social justice often reflect the dominant ideologies of the period in which they are produced, not necessarily the time they portray. In this way, adaptations become sites where cultural and historical contexts shape reception and meaning. Incorporating audience reception into adaptation studies allows scholars to move beyond the limitations of fidelity criticism, recognizing that adaptations are not static replicas but evolving cultural artefacts, redefined by the circumstances of their production and consumption. The shift from fidelity to intertextual and reception-based models reposition adaptation as a dynamic, multi-voiced dialogue. Scholars such as Leitch (in *Oxford Handbook* 67), Hutcheon, and Cutchins (73) argue that this broader view enables a richer understanding of adaptation's cultural functions and ideological work. As adaptation increasingly unfolds across digital and participatory platforms, future research must address emerging forms such as transmedia storytelling and interactive media. In this multi-platform era, adaptation is fluid, continually reinterpreted, and shaped by diverse audiences. The following case studies explore these dynamics in practice.

Case Study 1: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) – Visualizing Moral Integrity

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) is a landmark novel that explores racial injustice, moral growth, and the complexities of human empathy through the perspective of a young child, Scout Finch. The 1962 film adaptation, directed by Robert Mulligan, translates this deeply introspective narrative into a visual medium, necessitating significant shifts in storytelling approach, character focus, and thematic emphasis. While the novel is presented through Scout's first-person narration, offering a child's perspective on the racial and social tensions of Maycomb, Alabama, the

film employs a more objective third-person point of view. This change restructures the narrative, altering how themes of racism, justice, and morality are conveyed to a 1960s audience. The adaptation also utilizes cinematography, mise-en-scène, and performance to replace Scout's internal monologue, allowing for a visual interpretation of themes that were explicitly articulated in the novel. Additionally, the film's reconfiguration of key scenes and its heightened focus on Atticus Finch's moral authority reflect contemporary social concerns regarding racial justice during the Civil Rights Movement. By analyzing the film's changes in narrative structure, visual storytelling techniques, and thematic reinterpretations, this case study illustrates how *To Kill a Mockingbird* functions as more than a direct adaptation; it becomes a cultural artifact that engages with its historical moment.

Narrative Structure: From Subjective Introspection to Cinematic Objectivity

One of the central adaptive challenges in translating *To Kill a Mockingbird* from page to screen lies in the transformation of its intimate first-person narration into the inherently external logic of cinematic storytelling. In Harper Lee's novel, the events unfold through the retrospective voice of Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, whose childhood lens provides a rich blend of innocence and moral awakening. This narrative structure allows readers to experience racial injustice not only through Scout's naive understandings but also through the adult narrator's retrospective commentary, giving the novel a dual temporality that deepens its ethical inquiry (Lee 30-31). However, Robert Mulligan's 1962 film adaptation necessarily shifts the narrative perspective from this layered interiority to a more conventional third-person cinematic viewpoint. While the film briefly opens with a voiceover from an adult Scout, this device is employed sparingly, functioning more as a nostalgic framing mechanism than a guiding narrative presence. The rest of the film presents events through observational visuals and character interactions, thereby reducing Scout's cognitive role and recentering the moral arc around Atticus Finch. This narrative reframing illustrates what Brian McFarlane (*Novel to Film*) identifies as a medium-specific transformation, wherein the adaptation must negotiate the "transfer of narrational functions" to match the affordances of film (McFarlane, *Novel to Film* 13). Literature, as McFarlane (in *Novel to Film*) emphasizes, can directly render internal thought and commentary, whereas film must rely on performance, mise-en-scène, and cinematography to convey interiority. Thus, the shift from Scout's internal voice to external observation

is not merely an omission but a formal necessity that reorients the viewer's emotional and ethical engagement. The result is a significant ideological shift. Whereas the novel centres on Scout's gradual understanding of racial and social injustice, the film foregrounds Atticus as the unambiguous moral centre. This move reflects what Linda Hutcheon calls "re-creation rather than reproduction", where adaptations reinterpret narrative priorities to fit new cultural and historical contexts (20). Released at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the film's focus on Atticus functions as a cinematic intervention into contemporary discourses on justice, paternal morality, and racial reconciliation (Cartmell and Whelehan 98). Gregory Peck's portrayal of Atticus, who won an Academy Award for Best Actor as Atticus Finch, visually and ideologically anchors the narrative in a liberal humanist framework, presenting a white male lawyer as the moral compass of a racially divided community. This structural reorientation also has implications for audience reception, particularly when viewed through the lens of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory. According to Hall, viewers actively interpret texts through their own cultural positions, rather than passively absorbing intended meanings (Hall 90). In the novel, readers decode the moral narrative through Scout's confused but evolving perception, experiencing the trial and its injustices with her. In contrast, the film positions viewers as external witnesses to clearly delineated moral confrontations, leading to what scholars like Leitch describe as "narrative simplification" that privileges clarity over ambiguity (Leitch, *Adaptation Studies* 64). This change not only alters character centrality but also shifts the film's intertextual dialogue—not with a child's introspective journey, but with broader societal ideals of justice and moral certainty. Furthermore, this restructuring aligns with contemporary scholarship on adaptation's role in cultural memory construction. As Deborah Cartmell argues, adaptations often serve to "canonize" a particular reading of a text, especially when they circulate widely in educational and popular contexts (Cartmell, *A Companion* 142). The film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is frequently included in school curricula, effectively establishes Atticus Finch as a cultural archetype of moral integrity, arguably eclipsing the novel's more nuanced exploration of Scout's cognitive development and Maycomb's complex social stratification. In this light, the adaptation's narrative structure should not be judged by its fidelity to the original but rather evaluated as a culturally resonant reinterpretation shaped by the film medium's constraints and the sociopolitical context of its production. As Hutcheon notes, adaptation is always an "act of double consciousness," simultaneously acknowledging its source while

asserting its own creative autonomy (6). The shift from first-person introspection to third-person cinematic observation is emblematic of this autonomy, signalling not a failure to replicate but a strategic repositioning of narrative authority to serve a new medium and moment.

Visual Storytelling: Cinematography as a Replacement for Internal Monologue

The transition from literary introspection to visual expression in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) represents a central adaptive challenge, particularly given the novel's rich psychological texture. In Harper Lee's text, Scout Finch's internal monologue provides a continuous thread of reflection, irony, and growth, offering readers access to her evolving moral and emotional consciousness. Film, by contrast, cannot directly articulate interiority in the same manner, and as such, must visualize what literature internalizes. As George Bluestone famously argued, cinema is not a language of words but of images, and adaptation is therefore a matter of transformation, not translation (5). The absence of Scout's narrative voice in the film necessitates a different semiotic strategy, one where cinematography, blocking, lighting, and mise-en-scène function as analogues to prose-based introspection. This shift aligns with Brian McFarlane's (*Novel to Film*) distinction between "transferable" and "non-transferable" narrative elements. While events and dialogue may be readily transferred from novel to film, internal commentary and tone often resist direct migration (McFarlane, *Novel to Film* 16–18). In the case of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the film compensates for this loss through carefully orchestrated visual strategies. These choices are not mere technical adaptations but represent ideologically charged reinterpretations, shaped by the film's cultural context and medium-specific affordances.

One of the most compelling examples of visual storytelling replacing narrative introspection is evident in the courtroom scenes featuring Atticus Finch. Here, the film's cinematography deliberately frames Atticus in medium and close-up shots that accentuate his composed demeanor amidst a tense and racially charged environment. These choices elevate him as the visual and moral axis of the story, reinforcing his symbolic role as an embodiment of ethical justice. High-contrast lighting isolates Atticus from his more aggressive or emotionally volatile counterparts, such as Mayella Ewell and the prosecution, thereby coding him visually as a figure of restraint, dignity, and truth. Moreover, blocking and spatial composition are deployed to visualize systemic racism without resorting to expository dialogue. In scenes set

within and around the courtroom, Black characters are frequently placed at a physical remove—most notably in the upper gallery of the courtroom, where they observe the trial from a segregated balcony. This vertical spatial arrangement carries powerful symbolic weight. As Kathryn Kalinak observes, "the positioning of Black spectators as elevated but voiceless mirrors their marginal status in the legal and social systems of Maycomb" (42). These compositional choices not only reinforce the social stratification at the heart of the film's narrative but also function as a non-verbal critique of the racial hierarchies that structure the town's ideology.

Another telling example of visual substitution for prose lies in the representation of Boo Radley. In the novel, Boo exists largely in Scout's imagination until the end, his identity formed through whispered rumours and childhood myths. This internal speculation is deeply personal and filtered through Scout's psychological development. In contrast, the film maintains Boo's mystery visually. He is shown only in fragmented glimpses, shadows, partial silhouettes, or distant movements until the climactic rescue scene. His full appearance coincides precisely with Scout's recognition of his humanity, a moment that encapsulates character development without the use of internal narration. This visual technique aligns with Hutcheon's assertion that adaptation is a process of "repetition with variation", where the adapter re-creates rather than replicates the emotional function of the source text (8). In this instance, the viewer experiences a mirrored emotional arc not through Scout's inner thoughts but through the film's controlled revelation of Boo's image. Additionally, the film's use of light and shadow, particularly in scenes involving Tom Robinson and Boo Radley, reflects a broader aesthetic commitment to moral chiaroscuro, where ethical ambiguity and clarity are rendered visually. In several sequences, the courtroom itself becomes a moral stage, with the positioning of characters and the use of naturalistic lighting contributing to a visual dialectic between justice and prejudice. Viewed through the lens of audience reception theory, these strategies are far from neutral. As Stuart Hall reminds us, meaning is not embedded in the text but negotiated by viewers through culturally shaped frameworks (92). Thus, the film's visual emphasis on Atticus, segregation, and Boo's revelation is not only a means of narrative economy but a way of guiding audience interpretation, reinforcing particular ideological readings at a time when American society was confronting its own racial contradictions. In this way, the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) illustrates how adaptation is a site of visual and ideological re-articulation. The film does not simply translate Lee's prose into images but reimagines the act of storytelling itself, leveraging the

affordances of cinema to externalize moral struggle, racial injustice, and personal growth. Its visual language becomes an intertextual dialogue with the source material—one that speaks in silence, shadow, framing, and gaze.

Reinterpreting Racism and Justice for a 1960s Audience

From an intertextual and reception-based perspective, film adaptations are not static transpositions of literary texts but dynamic cultural responses that speak to the ideological climates of their time (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 36; Cutchins 71; Hutcheon 8). *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), released at the height of the American Civil Rights Movement, occupies a critical position as both a cinematic adaptation and a historical intervention. While Harper Lee's novel already grapples with the complexities of racial injustice, filtered through Scout's evolving consciousness, the film reorients its thematic emphasis, foregrounding Atticus Finch as a liberal moral paragon and simplifying the novel's more nuanced treatment of race and systemic oppression. This shift is evident in one of the film's most climactic moments: Atticus's courtroom summation. In the novel, this speech is mediated through Scout's limited understanding—she recalls his words but also conveys the surrounding confusion, tension, and community response through the lens of a child. This filtered narration preserves a sense of emotional ambiguity and interpretive distance (Lee 204–06). By contrast, the film presents Atticus's speech in full, without narrative mediation. The camera lingers in a series of slow, solemn close-ups, visually aligning the viewer with Atticus's ethical stance. His argument is framed not as one viewpoint among many but as the unequivocal voice of justice. This formal and ideological restructuring reflects what Linda Hutcheon terms the "re-creation of meaning to suit new cultural contexts" (16). In adapting the novel to the screen in 1962, director Robert Mulligan and screenwriter Horton Foote repositioned Atticus as the embodiment of mid-century American liberalism—a father figure not only to Scout and Jem but to an American audience grappling with desegregation, sit-ins, and civil disobedience. Gregory Peck's portrayal of Atticus, with his calm demeanor and unwavering dignity, becomes an icon of white moral heroism, aligned with the liberal desire for racial justice through legal integrity and personal virtue.

However, this reframing has drawn sustained critique from scholars who argue it flattens racial complexity. Noah Berlatsky contends that the film's focus on white allyship marginalizes Black agency, especially in the portrayal of Tom Robinson, whose voice is limited to a brief testimony and whose presence is defined largely

through Atticus's advocacy (Berlatsky 78). This reflects a broader pattern in mid-century liberal cinema, where white protagonists are cast as moral saviours of oppressed communities, thereby recentralizing whiteness in narratives about racial justice (Guerrero 44–45). From a reception theory perspective, this emphasis on Atticus as a moral beacon aligns with audiences' desire for ethical clarity amid social unrest. Hall's encoding/decoding model helps explain the film's varied reception—some viewed it as a critique of racism, while others embraced it as a reassuring affirmation of liberal values (91). Its moral clarity appealed to mainstream viewers confronting racial inequality, but as Leitch notes, such clarity can obscure the novel's deeper systemic critique (*Adaptation Studies* 68). The adaptation reframes racism from a pervasive societal pathology to an isolated courtroom injustice, risking over simplification. In the novel, Maycomb's racism is diffuse, expressed through social codes and silence; the film narrows this to a legal drama, aligning with American genre conventions. This "comfort of genre containment," as Stam describes, renders complex issues into familiar tropes (*Literature through Film* 55). Yet the film's value lies in this very tension—between ideological preservation and transformation. It recasts Lee's introspective ambiguity as cinematic moral authority, exemplifying adaptation as cultural negotiation shaped by its historical moment. Its continued relevance, amid ongoing debates on allyship, representation, and systemic injustice, attests to both the adaptability of Lee's narrative and the evolving interpretive frames through which adaptations are received.

Case Study 2: *Argo* (2012) – Fictionalizing History for Suspense

The 2012 film *Argo*, directed by Ben Affleck, presents a dramatized account of the CIA's covert operation to rescue six American diplomats from Tehran during the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979. Based on real events, *Argo* adapts historical material into a cinematic narrative, yet its storytelling choices involve significant alterations of historical facts for dramatic effect. This adaptation process raises key questions about the ethics of historical representation, the function of Hollywood meta-commentary in shaping audience perception, and the film's engagement with American political ideology. While *Argo* is ostensibly grounded in reality, its manipulation of historical details prioritizes suspense and spectacle, positioning the CIA's efforts as a high-stakes thriller rather than a diplomatic maneuver. At the same time, the film actively engages with Hollywood's role in myth-making, incorporating self-referential commentary on the construction of fiction and reality within the film industry. By portraying the creation of a "fake science-fiction movie"

as a cover for the CIA's operation, *Argo* playfully acknowledges the artifice inherent in both espionage and filmmaking. This reflexivity complicates its status as a historical adaptation, blurring the line between documentary accuracy and cinematic invention. Furthermore, *Argo*'s depiction of American heroism has sparked debate regarding its political implications, while some critics view it as a reinforcement of American exceptionalism, others argue that its self-conscious engagement with storytelling undercuts simplistic nationalist narratives. This case study examines how *Argo* alters historical facts for dramatic effect, explores its use of Hollywood meta-commentary, and evaluates its broader political significance.

Altering Historical Facts for Dramatic Effect: Narrative Fiction and the Politics of Historical Adaptation

Argo (2012), directed by Ben Affleck, is frequently cited as a quintessential example of how historical adaptations reshape factual events for cinematic impact. While the film is marketed as a dramatization of the covert CIA mission to rescue six American diplomats during the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, it takes substantial liberties with historical record. This divergence is not accidental but rather reflective of what Hutcheon terms the adaptive impulse to reshape source material for new ideological and narrative purposes (118). In doing so, *Argo* becomes a case study in how film as a medium reconstructs memory, transforming complex historical realities into suspense-driven cultural myths. The most overt instance of this transformation is the film's climactic airport sequence. In reality, the American diplomats passed through Tehran's airport without incident; the operation was executed smoothly, with no last-minute confrontations. However, *Argo* replaces this historical calm with a high-stakes, adrenaline-fueled chase scene, complete with Iranian guards racing down the runway and interrogating passengers moments before take off. This sequence, though entirely fictional, serves a dual function: it satisfies the spectacle-driven conventions of Hollywood thrillers, and it reinforces a triumphalist narrative of American ingenuity under pressure. As Cutchins et al. note, such embellishments exemplify the adaptive process as a negotiation between historical fidelity and audience expectation—a balance that often tips toward drama over documentation (35). This decision also speaks to medium specificity. In adapting historical events into a cinematic framework, filmmakers often amplify tension and conflict to align with visual and emotional pacing. Linda Hutcheon emphasizes that adaptations "signal their status as second without being secondary," and that deviations from fact often serve to mediate cultural memory more effectively for

contemporary audiences (93). The airport escape scene, while factually inaccurate, becomes emotionally "true" within the logic of the film's suspense genre, a trope familiar to audiences conditioned by espionage thrillers and Cold War cinema.

In addition to dramatizing events, *Argo* alters the distribution of historical credit. The film centralizes the role of CIA agent Tony Mendez (played by Affleck), marginalizing the pivotal contributions of Canadian officials, particularly Ambassador Ken Taylor. Historical records confirm that Taylor provided logistical support, shelter, and diplomatic coordination, and Canadian sources have voiced strong objection to their underrepresentation in the film. While the end credits briefly acknowledge Canada's involvement, the narrative arc remains firmly centered on Mendez, reinforcing a distinctly American heroic mythology. This narrative reframing reveals what Robert Burgoyne calls the "nationalist impulse" in historical film, wherein collective memory is reshaped to align with dominant ideological narratives—here, American exceptionalism and CIA competence (61). By structuring the story around Mendez's lone-wolf bravery, *Argo* substitutes a collaborative international effort with an individualized, state-centred resolution, consistent with traditional Hollywood depictions of American heroism. Moreover, the film flattens the political complexity of the Iranian Revolution, rendering Iranian revolutionaries as an anonymous, threatening mob. While *Argo* briefly references U.S. involvement in the 1953 coup that reinstated the Shah, it largely avoids deeper inquiry into Iranian grievances, instead reducing the antagonists to shadowy forces of anti-American hostility. In *Argo*, this simplification aids narrative efficiency but undermines historical nuance. From an intertextual standpoint, *Argo* also engages in meta-commentary on the art of deception, positioning both espionage and filmmaking as forms of narrative construction. The fake sci-fi film within *Argo* becomes a metaphor for the film itself: a fabrication that persuades through affect rather than accuracy. This self-awareness does not neutralize its ideological implications, but it highlights the constructed nature of both cinematic and political storytelling. *Argo* exemplifies how adaptation serves as cultural negotiation, where factual distortion is not an error but a method of aligning historical events with prevailing cinematic and national ideologies. While the film succeeds in dramatizing a compelling narrative, it does so by selectively amplifying American heroism and minimizing complex geopolitical truths. This adaptive strategy is not unique to *Argo*, but it underscores the broader stakes involved in transforming history into spectacle.

Hollywood Meta-Commentary and the Self-Awareness of Adaptation

A defining feature of *Argo* (2012) is its reflexive commentary on the artifice of storytelling itself. The film's central premise, the fabrication of a fake science-fiction movie used as a cover for a covert CIA operation, functions not only as a clever narrative device but also as a sophisticated meta-commentary on both the cinematic and political mechanisms of deception. This dual narrative strategy situates *Argo* within the tradition of self-aware adaptation, where the act of constructing fiction becomes the very subject of representation. The juxtaposition of CIA strategists orchestrating an international rescue mission with scenes of seasoned Hollywood producers concocting a phony film-project foregrounds the symbiotic relationship between narrative control and ideological power. As Stella Bruzzi argues, *Argo* "collapses the boundary between fiction and documentary, real and staged," thereby prompting viewers to reflect on the performative parallels between espionage and filmmaking (14). The character of Lester Siegel (Alan Arkin), a jaded Hollywood producer, embodies this dynamic. His quip, "If I'm doing a fake movie, it's going to be a fake hit!", underscores the shared logic of believability in both covert operations and cinematic production: success depends not on truth, but on narrative plausibility. This self-referential logic speaks directly to concerns raised in contemporary adaptation studies about the ethics of historical representation. Hutcheon's notion of adaptation as an "intentional act of repetition with variation" is particularly apt here. *Argo* intentionally repeats historical events, but with substantial alteration, stylization, and dramatization (7). Its meta-cinematic structure draws attention to its own contractedness, thereby blurring the line between adaptation and invention. In doing so, it embodies what Thomas Leitch refers to as "adaptation as commentary," wherein films use their source material to engage with broader discourses about authenticity, authorship, and narrative authority (*Adaptation Studies* 67).

The film's visual and aesthetic strategies also reinforce this reflexivity. *Argo* adopts a visual style that pays homage to the 1970s political thriller, echoing films like *All the President's Men* (1976) and *The Parallax View* (1974). Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto's use of grainy film stock, handheld shots, and desaturated colour palettes lends *Argo* a period-authentic, documentary-like texture. This visual coding situates the film within a self-aware cinematic lineage, reminding viewers that what they are watching is not an objective account of history, but a genre-inflected representation of the past (Naremore 26). Thematically, this meta-layered structure positions *Argo* within a broader intertextual dialogue—not only with the real-life

hostage crisis but with Hollywood's history of mythmaking. The fake movie titled *Argo*, a fantastical sci-fi tale, becomes a metaphor for the larger cinematic apparatus, wherein fabricated narratives serve geopolitical and cultural functions. By embedding a fictional film within its plot, *Argo* literalizes what adaptation theorists describe as "texts within texts," creating a recursive narrative loop that dramatizes the process of adaptation itself (Stam, *Literature through Film* 64). Moreover, the film implicates the audience in this process of myth construction. Viewers are invited to suspend disbelief, not only in the film's internal story, but also in the film's own adaptation of history. As audience reception theorists like Stuart Hall argue, this invitation is a form of ideological encoding, where narrative techniques shape how viewers decode historical memory (Hall 91). The film's reflexivity does not dismantle its ideological framing; rather, it subtly legitimizes its distortions by acknowledging them, thus positioning itself as both a historical thriller and a critique of historical thrillers.

Yet, this self-awareness raises a key ethical question: Does reflexivity absolve the adaptation of its ideological simplifications? As Bruzzi notes, *Argo* "simultaneously reveals and conceals," offering a stylized transparency about its artificiality while still reaffirming dominant narratives about American heroism and intelligence superiority (18). The film critiques the machinery of Hollywood even as it indulges in its narrative conveniences, crafting a cinematic sleight-of-hand that both entertain and instruct. In this way, *Argo* does not simply adapt historical material; it interrogates the very act of adaptation, using its self-referential structure to reflect on how stories, whether covert operations or cinematic spectacles, are constructed, circulated, and consumed. Its layered commentary on storytelling becomes part of its cultural impact, inviting audiences to reflect not only on what they see, but on how and why they see it.

Political Impact: Reinforcing or Critiquing American Heroism?

Ben Affleck's *Argo* (2012) operates on multiple narrative and ideological registers, positioning itself as both a celebration of individual heroism and a subtle interrogation of national mythmaking. At first glance, the film appears to follow the conventional arc of American triumphalism: Tony Mendez, a solitary CIA operative, devises and executes a brilliant rescue under the radar of an indifferent bureaucracy. The climactic sequence, replete with suspense, last-minute border checks, and a plane taking off as armed guards give chase, conforms to Hollywood's established grammar of the underdog victory. The standing ovation Mendez receives from his peers, followed by his quiet return to family life, completes a redemptive arc of personal sacrifice and patriotic success. Such a narrative reinforces what Robert Burgoyne identifies

as "the mythic structures of national cinema," particularly those that elevate U.S. intelligence institutions as bastions of ingenuity and moral resolve (14). However, beneath this façade of conventional heroism lies a more ambivalent ideological critique. *Argo*'s reflexive acknowledgment of its own artificiality, its fake movie within a movie, complicates any straightforward reading of Mendez as an unambiguous national saviour. The metafilmic structure foregrounds the constructedness of historical representation, inviting viewers to reflect on how state-sanctioned narratives often rely on the same techniques of scripting, staging, and spectacle employed by Hollywood cinema. As Hutcheon argues, adaptation is not merely about retelling stories but about "positioning them ideologically" within specific cultural moments (149). The character of Lester Siegel, with his cynical quip-"If I'm doing a fake movie, it's going to be a fake hit!"-acts as a stand-in for the film's broader thesis: successful narratives, whether geopolitical or cinematic, requires belief in the illusion.

This dual function of *Argo*—as both spectacle and critique—embodies what Stam calls the "double-voiced discourse" of adaptation, wherein a film can reinforce dominant ideologies while simultaneously exposing their artifice (*Literature through Film* 71). On one hand, *Argo* valorizes Mendez as a figure of exceptional courage operating in a world of bureaucratic cowardice, reflecting post-9/11 anxieties about state failure and the desire for competent individual action. On the other hand, the film subtly undermines its own heroic structure by showcasing the institutional indifference of the CIA, its delayed approval processes, and its reliance on deception to accomplish its goals. The depiction of Mendez's superiors as obstructive or disengaged gestures toward a critique of governmental dysfunction, echoing the contradictions within national security discourse.

The closing sequence of the film is particularly telling. After returning home, Mendez stores the fabricated *Argo* script in a box, along with his other government memorabilia. This act, subdued and wordless, functions as a symbolic meta-closure, drawing attention to the transient and constructed nature of both the rescue mission and the film itself. Rather than ending with a flag-waving celebration, the film closes on a note of self-aware mutability. As Slavoj Zizek might suggest, the film offers a form of "ideological cynicism," acknowledging its distortions in order to reinforce belief in its emotional truth (29). This move enables *Argo* to have it both ways: it critiques the machinery of mythmaking even as it deploys it to emotionally satisfy its audience.

In contrast to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, where adaptation shifts from Scout's introspection to Atticus's public morality, *Argo* illustrates how historical adaptation reshapes cultural memory by reframing real events through genre conventions. Rather than offering a documentary-style recounting of the Iranian hostage crisis, the film adopts the structure of a Cold War thriller emphasizing suspense, moral clarity, and individual heroism. This genre alignment is not just aesthetic but ideological, simplifying geopolitical complexities into clear moral binaries. *Argo* thus exposes the limitations of fidelity criticism in assessing historical adaptations. While critics may lament its factual deviations, contemporary theorists argue that historical narratives, like literary ones, are mediated by ideology, memory, and audience expectation (Leitch, *Adaptation Studies* 60; Hutcheon 121). The film's choices minimizing Canadian involvement, exaggerating the final escape, and caricaturing Iranian antagonists, serve both dramatic and political aims, reinforcing American moral centrality despite prior complicity in Iran's political upheaval. In this light, *Argo* is less a distortion of history than a cultural artifact that reinterprets it. Its meta-narrative structure, stylistic homage to 1970s thrillers, and critiques of bureaucracy and narrative construction illustrate how adaptation becomes a form of ideological negotiation. As Hutcheon and Stam suggest, adaptations of historical material are inherently interpretive, shaped by the cultural needs and anxieties of their time. Situated within post-9/11 tensions and lingering distrust in intelligence institutions, *Argo* functions as both a reaffirmation and a reimagining of American heroism.

Medium-Specific Challenges in Adaptation

Adapting narratives from one medium to another poses significant challenges, shaped by the unique conventions and constraints of each format. One of the most prominent issues is narrative condensation when transitioning from literature to film. Novels often feature complex plots, detailed character development, and extensive internal monologues that must be compressed to fit the typical runtime of a film (90 to 150 minutes). This compression requires careful selection and prioritization of elements to retain the story's core while maintaining cinematic appeal. For instance, Mulligan's film *To Kill a Mockingbird* condenses Harper Lee's novel by focusing on the courtroom drama and Atticus Finch's moral stance, omitting much of Scout's reflective perspective (Cartmell 142). Conversely, television series, for instance, often allow for greater narrative breadth than films, enabling more comprehensive explorations of character and setting. HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), adapted from

George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, extends and sometimes even diverges from the novels, incorporating additional subplots and character arcs that could not have been explored in a single film adaptation (Bordwell 89). The challenge of condensation versus expansion also raises ethical questions about fidelity to the source material. Some argue that significant omissions compromise the original's integrity, while others view adaptation as an inherently transformative process, where effectiveness within the new medium outweighs strict adherence (Leitch, *Adaptation Studies* 67). This highlights the fluidity of narrative forms, as the same story can manifest differently depending on medium-specific requirements.

Another critical challenge is the shift from textual to visual storytelling, which alters how narratives are conveyed and experienced. Literature relies on language to provide internal monologue, exposition, and thematic insight, while film communicates through visuals, sound effects and performance. This shift necessitates creative strategies to externalize internal thoughts and abstract ideas. For example, *Argo* (2012) uses visual cues, such as lingering shots and body language, to convey Tony Mendez's internal conflict, avoiding explicit verbal narration (Bruzzi 14). Visual techniques such as montage allow filmmakers to convey complex themes efficiently. In *Schindler's List* (1993), the iconic red coat symbolizes lost innocence amidst the brutality of the Holocaust, leveraging visual metaphor to evoke emotional responses (Eisenstein 45).

The rise of interactive media and transmedia storytelling introduces new paradigms for adaptation. Unlike traditional literature or film, video games and transmedia projects enable nonlinear storytelling where audiences shape the narrative. In video games like *The Witcher* series, players' choices influence the storyline, adding layers of complexity that challenge conventional adaptation models (Jenkins 252). Transmedia storytelling, as seen in franchises like *The Matrix* (1999-present) and *Star Wars* (1977-present), extends narratives across films, TV shows, comics, and video games, challenging the notion of a singular authoritative medium (Ryan 98. Television adaptations, such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–Present), benefit from serialized storytelling, allowing deeper thematic exploration and character development compared to single-feature films (Bordwell 156). However, long-form narratives risk losing audience engagement due to the extended commitment required. The convergence of media forms in the digital age is reshaping how narratives are structured and interpreted. As storytelling becomes increasingly participatory and multimedia-driven, traditional distinctions between literature, film, and interactive

media are blurring. Adaptation studies must evolve to address the dynamic nature of modern storytelling, recognizing how each medium shapes audience engagement and narrative meaning. Ultimately, adaptation challenges reflect the transformative nature of storytelling itself, as narratives evolve to fit the affordances and limitations of their respective mediums. This evolution necessitates both creative ingenuity and a nuanced understanding of how audiences interact with stories in diverse formats.

Conclusion

This study set out to move beyond fidelity as the primary evaluative measure of adaptation, instead conceptualizing adaptations as dynamic sites of cultural negotiation shaped by audience reception, historical context, and ideological framing. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of intertextuality and reception theory, it reframed adaptation as an act of creative re-narrativization rather than replication. Through close textual and cinematic analysis of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) and *Argo* (2012), the research demonstrated how adaptations not only reinterpret their source material but also engage actively with broader sociopolitical, cultural, and artistic discourses. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the shift from Harper Lee's first-person literary narrative to a predominantly third-person cinematic form necessitated structural and thematic recalibration. The film's use of mise-en-scène, framing, and selective voiceover transformed the moral centre from Scout's evolving awareness to Atticus Finch's emblematic integrity, offering audiences a more immediate and didactic engagement with racial injustice, resonant with the Civil Rights era. In contrast, *Argo* illuminated how historical adaptations navigate the interplay between factual accuracy and cinematic suspense. By altering key events, compressing timelines, and amplifying tension, the film heightened its dramatic appeal while reframing historical memory to foreground American heroism, yet its self-aware Hollywood meta-commentary complicated a purely nationalist reading, highlighting the constructed nature of both espionage and cinema.

The study finds that shifts in narrative perspective can fundamentally reorient a work's moral and thematic centre, while historical alterations in adaptation often serve both dramatic imperatives and ideological aims. These patterns reveal that adaptive changes are not merely aesthetic choices but deliberate interventions in cultural meaning-making. The case studies collectively demonstrate that adaptation is an interpretive and transformative process shaped by medium specificity, sociopolitical context, and anticipated reception, and that evaluating adaptations solely through fidelity obscures their potential for cultural negotiation and ideological critique.

The findings provide scholars with a framework for moving beyond fidelity-centric critiques, offer practitioners insights into the creative and ethical stakes of narrative transformation, and invite audiences to approach adaptation as a vital mode of contemporary storytelling.

However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Focusing on two prominent, critically acclaimed Western-produced films limits the cultural and geographical scope of the findings. The exclusive attention to literary and historical adaptations leaves unexplored other forms such as stage-to-screen, game-to-film, and transmedia franchises. Additionally, the study does not empirically measure audience reception, which could further illuminate how different publics decode adapted narratives across cultural and temporal contexts. There is also scope to explore how production histories, industrial constraints, and collaborative authorship shape adaptation choices in ways that extend beyond textual analysis. Future research could extend this framework to adaptations from non-Western contexts, compare cross-cultural reception patterns, and examine how emerging forms like streaming-based serial adaptations, interactive media, and AI-generated narratives challenge traditional notions of source, authorship, and audience engagement. Such inquiries could deepen understanding of adaptation as a global, participatory phenomenon that continually redefines cultural memory and identity. In an era defined by media convergence, globalized audiences, and participatory engagement, rethinking adaptation as a transformative and culturally embedded process remains essential to understanding its artistic, ideological and political significance.

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