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Storytelling allows for the sharing of ideas and the teaching of ideals across cultures. Common themes can be communicated to a number of audiences through cultural traditions that both show—through theatre, film, television—and tell—through novels, books, radio—human values. Many of these stories and lessons have been told and told again, yet they continue to find a place in our cultural landscape. This occurs through the unique process of adaptation. Adaptation is not a new practice; authors, playwrights, directors, composers, choreographers, and designers have been adapting material since civilizations arose. But this does not mean considering this practice in our own current culture would not reveal new information. Perhaps one of the biggest questions surrounding adaptations is how does an adaptation become topical in current circumstances? Are there things that are not adaptable, and who gets to decide?

Linda Hutcheon’s book, *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), explores these matters by theorizing the adaptive process. Hutcheon argues that all media have an underlying commonality with respect to their role in the process of adaptation, and all genres reveal information about how adaptation functions. This assumption sets up her methodology, which involves “[identifying] a text-based issue that extends across a variety of media, [finding] ways to study it comparatively, and then [teasing] out the theoretical implications from multiple textual examples” (ix). Within the introduction she explicitly states the book is not a series of case studies but rather a comparative analysis of adaptation,
examining a variety of genres such as literature, film, theatre, opera, television, video games, and interactive websites. Her inclusive approach engenders both a fundamental and thorough discussion of the complex concept of adaptation.

Hutcheon defines three modes of engagement that serve as the basis for much of her discussion: “telling”, “showing”, and “interactive” modes. These three modes are then described in terms of “forms”—by which she means genres such as opera, musical theatre, film, video games, and so on—that represent and transfer expression from one mode to another. Adaptive expectations are met because each genre has a set of conventions that make it unique. Each genre therefore deals in different ways with artistic devices such as point of view, interiority/exteriority, time and tense, ambiguity, irony, symbols, and silence.

Hutcheon discusses adaptation in two ways: as a product and as a process. As a product, adaptation cannot remain entirely faithful to its original text, otherwise questions of plagiarism arise; adaptation must differ enough from the original text while still maintaining the source’s fundamental ideas. Hutcheon compares adaptation to language, stating that translations can never be literal because they are taken out of the context of their original language and therefore the primary source has authority and authenticity. Adaptation as a process becomes an act of appropriating and salvaging while trying to give new meaning to a text. Therefore, novelty gives adaptation its value. Adaptations are intertextual and become part of the public history of a story. As a result, all previous adaptations become part of our understanding of all later adaptations.

The book moves on to discuss who adapts, why they do so, and how audiences receive adaptations. The flow of these chapters is elegant in that Hutcheon first discusses the diversity of the often confusing title of the adapter and how they function within the creative team. She argues that the reasons behind why we create adaptations are diverse and can include economics, the building of culture, personal interests, homage, sheer entertainment, and social commentary. She states “[The reasons behind adaptation] should be considered seriously by adaptation theory, even if this means rethinking the role of intentionality in our critical thinking about art in general” (95). Hutcheon argues reasons for adaptations, perhaps more so than in “original” art, must be closely considered by scholars and audiences to uncover the layers that may exist in the (re)presenting of a story. Reasons for creating art are almost as important as the art itself. Subsequently, Hutcheon discusses the relative importance of the context of adaptation in terms of time, space, place, gender, politics, race, and culture. Hutcheon believes that, while these decisions are temporally dependent, external cultural contexts govern how the adapter will present the work to an audience.
She concludes her study by asking two questions. First, What is not an adaptation?, arguing that most re-imaginings in any form—parody, translations, condensation, remakes—are indeed adaptations, while allusion and music sampling or any brief usage of a preexisting text are not. This is met with some disagreement in recent adaptation theory scholarship by Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams who state that music sampling, citing, and quoting are in fact important in adaptation because of their intertextual functions.\(^1\) Secondly Hutcheon asks, What is the appeal of adaptation? She eloquently suggests that while the pleasing nature of repetition and imitation are part of it, the element of change is also paramount to adaptation. She suggests that there is a subversive power in adaptation by which we can change our cultural understandings by altering what we know and expect. She ends the book likening artistic adaptation to biological adaptation and evolution, proposing that for our stories to evolve and be relevant they must adapt.

Hutcheon’s book resonates with the work of other adaptation theorists such as Brian McFarlane, Robert Stam, Thomas Leitch, Julie Sanders, and Christine Geraghty, all of whom agree that adaptation is a complex part of any art and it can alter the way in which we view a variety of cultural products.\(^2\) Moreover, Hutcheon’s concise analysis elegantly summarizes the current state of the field of adaptation theory while surveying many different forms of adaptation, something rarely done by the above authors. Like other reviews of Hutcheon’s work, such as that by William Whittington, I agree that “Hutcheon stages a new approach to evaluating the adaptation that considers not only narrative strategies, but also the mediums in which they are presented... Hutcheon moves the argument about adaptation beyond fidelity, which seems primarily invested in chasing loss, into far more productive critical territory.”\(^3\) I agree with Whittington: the book is useful as a primer for those interested in the field of adaptation theory. Furthermore, Hutcheson’s work is unique in its inclusivity of many genres and in that it considers foundational artistic and social elements that transcend many different media types. Whittington also comments that “Hutcheon avoids extended case studies, opting instead for examples drawn

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\(^2\) Thomas Leitch, “Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads” *Adaptation* 1/1 (2008): 63-77, these authors are cited as the leaders of the field.

from many sources in a form of meta-analysis. This approach is simultaneously a strength and weakness.” While the generalized nature of the book is an asset for those in need of groundwork in the newly emerging field of adaptation studies, this characteristic becomes problematic. When Hutcheson analyzes a specific genre, her rather general approach has several drawbacks. This is not to say Hutcheon’s book is wrong in its comprehensive analysis of adaptation, but some of the author’s assertions do not necessarily apply to all art forms, and when analyzing adapted texts we must remember the intricacies that make each genre unique.

This can be seen most clearly when applying Hutcheon’s theoretical construct to an examination of operatic style. Hutcheon categorizes opera in her “showing” category, which does not entirely represent the intensely multifaceted structure of opera where music, visuals, text, and design are all equally important to the production. It is for this reason that its analysis as simply a “showing” mode is inadequate. Consider that opera can also be an “interactive” mode as the music that accompanies the singer, or even instrumental music that takes place during action, is also a means through which to interact with an audience. When considering newer operatic technique—for example Britten’s 1957 interactive opera, Noye’s Fludde—Hutcheon’s discussion of the role of music in any mode of adaptation is limited.

Furthermore, Hutcheon writes that “Lawrence Kramer has argued that it is the music in films that ‘connects us to the spectacle on screen by invoking a dimension of depth, or interiority, borrowed from the responses of our own bodies as we listen to the insistent production of rhythms, tone colours, and changes in dynamics’” (60). Hutcheon acknowledges that music can contribute to the expression of interiority—the expression of internal thought—and points out “that elaborate interior monologues and analyses of inner states are difficult to represent visually in performance, but… sound and avant-garde film devices can work to signal interiority nonetheless.” (58) I agree with Hutcheon’s observation, but music cannot lead the listener to one definitive emotion when used on its own, outside of the accompanying action. It is my belief that music – especially in opera because of its rich dependence on text and staging – has functions beyond those to which Hutcheon draws attention.

In the same chapter, she discusses other devices such as ambiguity, irony, metaphor, silence, and absence that are usually more clearly addressed in showing modes because of their unsatisfying vagueness. Because showing modes—especially film—have a more concrete final documentation, these

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4 Ibid.
unclear devices should be addressed to settle any uncertainty the audience may have. Yet, ambiguity in music can lead to different interpretations of emotion depending on our relationship with the musical aesthetic. Using Hutcheon’s example from Britten’s *Billy Budd*, the chords played during Billy’s famous fate scene lead to an ambiguous reading of what happens in the plot. With the music being the only indication of what may (or may not) be happening on an empty stage, we rely on our interaction with the music to help us understand the scenario. This kind of subjective interpretation should perhaps be included in the interactive mode described by Hutcheon because of how one listener’s interaction with sound can differ from another’s, potentially changing an audience member’s perception of what happens at this point in the plot. Instead, she does not actually address this type of interaction in her discussion, and the only reference she makes to it is the acknowledgement that music helps with the emotions of the plot, acting as an accompanying figure, and that ambiguity must be addressed more definitely in a showing mode. Here it seems Hutcheon unintentionally undermines the ability of music to fill the void more effectively. Music is rarely left without accompanying text or action in opera, but when such a thing does occur, much can be learned about the characters, their thoughts, feelings, ambitions, and actions, all of which lie beyond the eye of the audience.

This leads to another problematic element of Hutcheon’s work concerning the question of unconventional modes of showing and the ways in which music, text, and staging interact to create the unique genre of opera. These modes tend to create symbols, something Robert Donington argues is essential to the creation, meaning, and reception of the genre. Hutcheon dances around symbology’s ability to create layered meaning by investigating too deeply the showing modes’ limitations in appropriating literary devices. She says, “Telling is not the same as showing. Both stage and screen adaptation must use... precise people, places, and things – whereas literature uses symbolic and conventional signs (Giddings, Selby, and Wensley, 1990:6).” (43) Hutcheon makes the point that each genre, especially in the performance arts, has many limitations when adapted from another mode or form, but all forms have unique conventions that compensate for these limitations (49). According to Hutcheon, however, certain things do not transfer from one medium to another. This view of theatrical art is challenging because it is too restrictive in its conception of how complex genres such as opera can appropriately function.

Metaphors and symbolic representation are vital to the meanings of opera as seen in the use of leitmotifs and symbolically significant stagings and sets. As much as these literary devices are integral to the “telling” modes, they are equally important for compositional intent and fidelity to the original source and
must also be incorporated into operatic adaptations through symbols represented differently than in telling modes. Hutcheon suggests, however, that a condensation of the original text is always necessary for the adaptation from “telling” to “showing” modes and that some of the meaning or some of the symbolic values will be lost. I agree there is a condensation that takes place during this specific adaptive process, but the structure of the operatic genre and the use of symbology compensates and incorporates some of what might be lost. Donington’s discussion of the totality of symbols in opera suggests symbols are present regardless of intention by the composer or librettist, that audiences will ascribe meaning to all visual and aural images, and that these symbols are constant in meaning across media. As Donnington explains, there are certain expectations within the genre, which – coinciding with the music, text and staging – create a somewhat familiar production. In going to the opera, audiences know the plots will be fantastical, the action fast paced, and the emotional flux in abundance; symbols will creep in. Condensation of an opera plot from a text will inevitably lead to, as Hutcheon suggests, “succinct and forthright” depictions of the plot and characters, but this does not mean, as she further concludes, that they “may seem poorly motivated” (45).

Remembering that music is what makes opera special, the way in which songs function is integral to how one may adapt a text for the operatic stage. The function of an aria is most commonly used to express interior motives, however, Hutcheon criticizes the form because it interrupts narrative flow. She also suggests the interiority approximated through the genre of the aria is not as ‘interior’ as literary interiority, because it is performed and received in an exterior fashion. (56) Hutcheon’s argument misinterprets the genre, because the aria does possess the ability to let the audience into the inner thoughts of the characters, regardless of an aria’s exterior presentation. The function of the aria is essentially interior and works just as soliloquies in novels. Other characters are typically unaware of the exteriority, allowing for the projection of thought to be identical to reading the internal thoughts of a character in a novel. The interiority in literature is made physical through the process of reading and Hutcheon’s idea of interior transfer of thought is seemingly only telepathically achievable.

Other musical forms common to opera can also be used to express meaning, such as the chorus’ ability to comment on characters’ emotions and the truth of the plot. The chorus can also comment on characters’ motivations, emphasizing their intentionality, as in Monteverdi’s Orfeo, or giving further perspective to the plot, as the chorus of the Hebrew slaves does in Verdi’s Nabucco. The chorus also creates the ability for main characters to continue with action while intentional expression is covered by the chorus, alleviating some of
the pressures arias have on narrative. Hutcheon spends most of her limited
discussion on special operatic form, condemning its ability to halt narrative flow,
but the musical forms with which she takes issue are actually functional in
helping the adapted text present the narration in different ways that perhaps
allow for a more accurate “showing” of the story.

Outside of musical function, specific characters express their motivations
and ambitions via voice type. Archetypes in the theatre and in voice types also
help to provide dimension to a character that would otherwise be explained
through words in a text-based art form. For example, the ingénue in opera are
most commonly the main female protagonists with a certain innocence and
naivety not matched by any other character type. The ingénue is also often a
soprano, giving the voice type a learned characterization. Other voice types
provide different qualities to their characters. For example, Bizet’s Carmen uses a
mezzo-soprano as the lead female protagonist. She is not an ingénue and is seen
as an “other” due to her heritage, demeanor, and most importantly—her voice
type.

Moreover, opera as a product has drastically changed since the publication
of Hutcheon’s book. A more holistic view of the evolution of opera brings me to
how opera is currently being adapted for audiences worldwide. With the advent
of the Metropolitan Opera’s international live HD broadcasts in 2006—the same
year Hutcheon’s book was published—new levels of adaptation may be reached.
Paul Heyer discusses issues of media perception in his article titled “Live from
the Met: Digital Broadcast Cinema, Medium Theory, and Opera for the Masses”
giving a fresh perspective to how opera is generated in various media for
distribution. It is because opera is an expensive art form to produce that it
becomes difficult for many people to access it because of geographical and/or
monetary restrictions. It is for this reason the MET began to broadcast operas via
the silver screen.

The medium has met much criticism as some, including Heyer, believe
the televisual aspect changes the way opera is viewed. Hutcheon brings attention
to this point in suggesting that the camera lens forces a specific viewing of the
production, causing yet a different kind of adaptation of the story. However,
Heyer argues that this type of production is a new type of medium—not
adaptation—and Hutcheon fails to address this in her book. The new medium
straddles both the recording arts and the theatrical arts and Heyer calls it Digital
Broadcast Cinema (DBC). It not only encompasses opera, but also plays, and

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5 Paul Heyer. “Live from the Met: Digital Broadcast Cinema, Medium Theory, and Opera
guided art gallery exhibitions. Heyer points out that “the process of adaptation must bend a narrative toward the strengths of the new medium.”

While Heyer’s article is muddled elsewhere by weak arguments and otherwise dismissible points, the fact that a new “showing” mode now exists is integral to how we proceed with studying adaptation within opera, and more generally how opera is changing as a medium to reach a larger and younger audience. It is because of the constantly changing presentations of opera that it becomes difficult to define how adaptation functions within the larger, more encompassing definitions of the genre. Genre theorists, opera scholars, and adaptation theorists need to work together to properly explain how this phenomenon works within newer forms of opera. Hutcheon’s theory of adaptation is too naïve for this type of mega-genre and has now become outdated. That being said, the MET’s broadcasting only began the year Hutcheon’s book was published so it is hard to know how Hutcheon feels about DBC and these operatic adaptations.

Overall, Hutcheon’s book gives the reader the essentials of adaptation theory. However, the book is perhaps insufficient for those looking to consider adaptation within any specific genre, especially opera. This is due to the generalized approach Hutcheon takes to adaptation, which then forces her to address many different genres within the confines of her study without ever being able to deeply assess the functions and development of just one. Academic areas, including music, dance, theatre, and film would be wise to incorporate adaptation studies as a subgenre of their own fields so as to properly understand how this phenomenon works in their respective art forms and how changing forms of the genres function as adaptations themselves. It is because of Hutcheon’s vast knowledge in both fields of adaptation theory and opera that I would be interested to see how Hutcheon would describe the functions of this artistic phenomenon within the ever-changing realm of opera.

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6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.
For further reading


