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**THE IMPACT OF THE CULTURAL CONTEXT  
ON CHARLES DICKENS'S FILM/TELEVISION SERIES  
ADAPTATIONS**



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DEDICATION  
For SLAVIC,  
ANTONIA and REMUS



## FOREWORD

*The Impact of the Cultural Context on Charles Dickens's Film/Television Series Adaptations* is the fruit of a profound research and of solid personal reflections. It combines the minute definition of the theoretical concepts with the original analysis of the selected adaptations. The paper is based on an extremely ample bibliography, which is used with discernment and academic accuracy. We can say that it represents a remarkably important contribution to the development of the theoretical and applied studies of film adaptations and film studies in Romania. (Ph.D. Professor Monica Bottez, University of Bucharest)

The paper represents a very personal and original approach to the central questions in adaptation theories; it is outstanding not only through the complexity of the subject matter, but also through the novelty of the theoretical and critical perspectives it employs. The research moves the focus on the importance of the social and cultural context of the adaptation process and of the reception moment, as well as on understanding the process of adaptation as cultural translation, with ethical and sociological implications. An extremely important contribution is the transfer of the discussion from a strictly Anglo-Saxon cultural context to a global one, which includes adaptations produced by RAI Television, for example, and the sociological interviews that test the Romanian reaction to adaptations. The whole approach is characterized by the prowess of the questions it raises, by the freshness of the personal reading of the analyzed film texts. The paper represents a valuable and original contribution to the study of Dickens's presence in media, of recreating his novels (which Walter Benjamin calls after life/Fortleben) on the big screen, but also in television productions. The research is based on a vast and updated bibliography and is written in a nuanced English language. (Ph.D. Professor Mădălina Nicolaescu, University of Bucharest)

A courageous paper in terms of its approach, it is remarkable for the vastness and diversity of the information, the author's solid erudition, which has led her to pertinent choices regarding the bibliographical references. The

seriousness with which this difficult and delicate subject is approached, the richness of information, the depth of the analysis and, why not, the open ending, generating multiple questions, recommend the paper as a very solid contribution to the theory of the genre, written with elegance and intellectual suppleness. (Ph.D. Professor Victor Olaru, University of Craiova)

*The Impact of the Cultural Context on Charles Dickens's Film/Television Series Adaptations* is an extremely complex scientific analysis, in which the author stresses the necessity and the theoretical and practical approach to the activity of adapting a film. It is built along guidelines of substance with reverberations outside Dickens's text, such as the way of adapting - fidelity or distance - what is deleted and what is preserved of the adapted literary work and how the producers manage to reach their goals. The author fully succeeds in achieving the proposed objectives, that is of synthesizing the way in which adaptation becomes today one of the most important way of semantic transfer. The domain of this research is extremely complex, vast, profoundly individualized and personalized, and the adapted literary constructions defiantly hybrid, which makes the author arm herself with synthetic and analytic determination. The result is a thesis conceived and built almost without reproach, in a professional English. It is written with extreme seriousness and scrupulosity, it is well-founded by fully and professionally mastering the reins of the scientific demonstration, offering the researcher or the reader a challenging logical construction, which is judiciously built, well-supported, exemplified and written in an extremely attractive way, proving the author's skill as a good communicator. The paper also benefits from a substantial bibliographical list made up of modern works, of high theoretical value, proving once again the vastness and the depth of this research, founded on a rigorously scientific basis. (Ph.D. Assoc. Prof. Adrian Radu, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca)



## ABSTRACT

Up until then, whenever anyone had mentioned the possibility of making a film adaptation, my answer had always been, “No, I’m not interested.” I believe that each reader creates his own film inside his head, gives faces to the characters, constructs every scene, hears the voices, smells the smells. And that is why, whenever a reader goes to see a film based on a novel that he likes, he leaves feeling disappointed, saying: “the book is so much better than the film”. (Coelho, 103)

This is how Paul Coelho spoke about the film adaptation of literature, before the adaptation of his famous novel, *The Zahir*, in 2014, and the deconstruction of such convictions was the first intention of this thesis. Nevertheless, I have arrived at the conclusion that his statement is partly true, as there is no definitive theory of adaptation. On the other hand, in trying to find answers to the many questions linked to film adaptations of literature, mainly why so many adaptations of novels continue to appear, especially of Dickens’s works, and what determines an adaptation to be a success or, on the contrary, a failure, I have focused my analysis on the input of the authors of the adaptations and on the receptor culture, which I consider to be the keys in trying to solve some of the mysteries of adaptations. This project addresses the problematic issues of adapting the canonical literature crossculturally and intertemporally, and it is not the simple investigation of what is lost or gained during the adaptation process. The omissions, alterations and additions that the filmmakers operate on the source-text, which are techniques belonging to the cultural translation, offer a rich research ground and I have arrived at possible answers, both theoretical and practical, without claiming to have the definitive answer to the problematics of adaptation. Dickens was not an arbitrary choice, as he subsumes the major trends in film adaptation, and most of his adaptations are successful. The discussion is concerned with film and mini-series adaptations of Charles Dickens’s novels, very distant in time and space, taking into consideration the thematic appeal of the canonical novel to the viewers of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, followed by a close analysis of the filmic text in relation to the source text through the lenses of cultural translation and intertextuality.



## INTRODUCTION

- 1. The Topicality of the Subject**
- 2. The Relevance and Motivation of the Research at the National Level**
- 3. The Premises and the Objectives of the Research**

### **1. The Topicality of the Subject**

After more than a century of cinema, film industry is in a continual and substantial change, not only from a technological point of view, but also from a stylistic one, but after more than 100 years, mainstream movies still tell and retell literary stories, as statistically 85% of Oscar-winning movies, 95% of TV mini-series and 70% of television films are adaptations. Adaptation has always been central to the process of film-making; the history of film-making itself starts with Charles Dickens's literary works adapted into silent movies. Among the first silent movies, there are an adaptation of the novel *Bleak House* and one of the short novel *A Christmas Carol*, in 1901, and from that moment on, he became the author with most adaptations ever, maintaining his dominance into the cinema's second century. We are looking forward to watching the latest *David Copperfield* adaptation which is to be released in 2019. Even before the sound film appeared, there were almost 100 cinematographic adaptations of Charles Dickens's novels.

It seems unthinkable for us now, but at the beginning of the eighteenth century, English novels were on a lower level than historical and biographical works and the reading of sermons was clearly favoured. The readers' expectations were fulfilled by the authors, who provided in their works honesty and truth. They were very much indebted to Aristotle who believed that art should imitate life, in *The Poetics*, where he comments on tragic drama. During the nineteenth century, in English literature, the fine line between art and life began to disappear. Early in the twentieth century, films were dramatizing Biblical stories, famous fragments of Shakespeare or Dickens' *A Christmas Story* and great scenes of *Bleak House*. Everything seemed adaptable and the audience's expectation was clearly in favour of fidelity.

There are many reasons for the huge success of Dickens's novels for film adapters and audience. The most evident of these reasons is the great popularity of Dickens's literature with the public from all over the Globe. Besides, Dickens was hugely adapted for the stage; there had been an enormous number of stage adaptations prior to film or television adaptations. And probably, the most important reason in Dickens's case, the specificity of his narrative, which made the Soviet film director theorist Sergei Eisenstein, considered a pioneer in the practice and theory of montage, notably famous for his silent movies at the beginning of the twentieth century, say that such a novelist as Dickens could have invented the fundamentals of cinema (Eisenstein, 200). The directors' desire to help the readers see what they imagined when reading the novels and the illustrations that accompanied the original texts at their publication are other two reasons for which Dickens was internationally adapted.

The phenomenon of adaptation in connection to the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel is not specific to film industry, as Dickens's writings were also reproduced by his contemporaries and extensively staged:

One of the most popular — and sensational — melodramas on nineteenth-century British stages was not an original play, but an adaptation or series of adaptations of Dickens's second novel, which continued to be a best-seller long after the author's death in 1870. (...) By the end of 1838, scarcely six weeks after volume publication, *Oliver Twist* had been staged by six different theatres in London.

(Allingham, [victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/olivertwist/adaptations](http://victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/olivertwist/adaptations))

This is confirmed by Juliet John, in her book *Dickens and Mass Culture* (2010), showing us Dickens as a businessman and describing a Victorian Dickens-industry, which was in part created by Dickens himself. Occupying “a threshold position in Cultural History” (John, 158) Dickens is “both commercial and uncommercial”, “both modern and nostalgic” (John, 31), and his key role in mass culture is generated by his quality of “portability”, in Juliet John's words, i.e. “the fact that his novels and indeed his image travel across various media and national boundaries” (John, 15). As

Grahame Smith argues, Dickens dreamt cinema (Grahame Smith, *Dickens and the Dream of Cinema*), enabling the emergence of new media technologies, which, in turn, were eager to take advantage of their connection with the “Dickens” brand.

The outstanding proliferation of versions of Dickens’s novels during his lifetime contributed to his own success, while the nowadays film adaptations redirect the viewers’ attention to his texts; as Glavin explains, “Dickens’s fictions don’t generate Dickens films. Just the reverse: it’s those adaptations, for the big screen and the small, that generate whatever possibilities remain for reading the fiction” (Glavin, 2003:5).

The way in which the cultural context has influenced film and TV series adaptations of Charles Dickens’s novels has not constituted yet the object of any research, being mentioned very briefly in a few works in the domain, with the specification that there is no methodology in this area. As stated in the title of this project, the novelty of my research consists in viewing the adaptations not only as independent creations, but also the “children”, the offspring or product of their times. This is intended to be an interdisciplinary research of literary theory, anthropology, cultural studies with the spatio-time shifts, social history and adaptation, translation and film studies. The simple accounting of what has been lost or gained in the adaptation process is not the purpose of this thesis, instead I intend a close analysis of what the authors of the adaptation, the interpreting third party, have wished to suggest by the alterations they made to the source text.

## **2. The Relevance and Motivation of the Research**

This project of research is basically motivated by the intention to highlight the changes in the way of perceiving the adaptations by the theoreticians in the domain, by the film critics and the general public, and how these shifts have affected the adapters’ work, also taking advantage of my own observations made as a film translator in the Department of Film Translation and Adaptation of the Romanian Public Television in the last 20 years, linked to the variations I have noticed in the adaptations of the beloved novels which I read, reread and studied during the university years. The personal empirical observations, as a result of the research I was involuntarily

making in the field, were the catalyst of the investigation of the critical and methodological approaches which exist in adaptation studies. I wanted to discover the mechanisms behind what I clearly perceived as independent products and not mere versions of the adapted text and this pushed me in an 80-year old history of adaptation studies.

Noticing, first and foremost, the ever-changing relationship between text and screen, along the years, the media and cultures, this project has been intended as a study of this dynamics, in order to bring refreshing interpretations to the problems that have been haunting the domain of adaptation studies. After studying the various approaches to the process of adaptation and trying to apply them to Dickens's adaptations, in order to understand its mechanisms, it was impossible to limit my interpretation to the contemporary grids. The ruling out of the fidelity theory, motivated by many specialists, among whom the American film theorist Robert Stam, marks a turning point:

The shift, in adaptation from a single track, uniquely verbal medium such as the novel to a multi-track medium like film, which can play not only with words (written and spoken) but also with music, sound effects, and moving photographic images, explains the unlikelihood and I would suggest even the undesirability, of literal fidelity. For all these reasons, fidelity in adaptation is literally impossible. A filmic adaptation is automatically different and original due to the change of medium. (Stam in Naremore, 56)

Thus, it cannot be the only criterion in recognizing an adaptation as such, i.e. as an individual work of art, because there are unavoidable connections with their literary source texts, beside their inextricable links to their authors and contexts of creation and therefore the notion of the fidelity of an adaptation applies to more elements than simply the source text. The medium-specific theory, with its focus on the uniqueness, distinctiveness of each adaptation, is very restrictive, as it does not take into consideration important notions in adaptations, such as fidelity and intertextuality.

On the other hand, a very important aspect that motivated this research was the observation that the critics' and viewers' perception of the classic-