

Cult Adaptations: A one-day symposium



Wednesday 25 November 2009

10.00 am - 6.00 pm

Centre for Adaptations

**Campus Centre 2.01, De Montfort University,
Leicester**

Cult Adaptations Symposium Programme

Wednesday 25 November 2009

10.00am – 6.00pm Campus Centre 2.01 / 2.02

Registration from 9.30 in CC 2.01

10.00 – 11.30: Panel one (CC 2.01)

'*Rosemary's Baby*: an artistic dynasty'
Alexandre Tylski (University of Toulouse)

'Fanpires: the utilization of the fan culture in the translation of *Twilight* from text to screen and beyond'
Maggie Parke (Bangor University)

'All her inside is out!': the female monster in film adaptations of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*'
Devon Sherman (Rutgers University)

11.30 – 12.00: Coffee (CC 2.02)

12.00 – 1.00: Panel two (CC 2.01)

'Bringing day to *Night*: the resurrection of *The Night of the Hunter*'
Thomas A. Schwenn (New York University)

'Myths of sacrifice: *300*, Sparta and the 'cult' of democracy'
Stuart Price (De Montfort University)

'"We're trying to get back to normal here": a case-study of David Cronenberg's *A History of Violence*'
David Bishop (Edinburgh Napier University)

1.00 – 2.00: lunch (CC 2.02)

2.00 – 3.30: Panel three (CC 2.01)

'Who will watch *The Watchmen*: towards a sequential hermeneutic chain analysis'
John Quinn (University of the West of Scotland)

'*Spectacle fantastique*: audio-visual technologies and early adaptations of Verne's *De la terre a la lune*'
Brooke McCorkle (University of Pennsylvania)

'The Quatermass Transformation: Monstrous Hybrids and National Identity in the Quatermass Films of the 1950s'
Chris Auld (University of Manchester)

3.30 – 4.00: Coffee (CC 2.02)

4.00 – 5.30: Panel four (CC 2.01)

'From cult to classic: how Mel Brooks adapted *The 2000 Year Old Man* for thirty years and eventually won a Grammy 1961 – 1997'
Alex Symons (University of Nottingham)

'The cult of *Spinal Tap*: reading the mock-documentary as a product of adaptation'
Richard Wallace

'*Inglourious Basterds*: Quentin Tarantino's war 'exploitation' film'
Rebekah Smith (University of Wales, Aberystwyth)

'*Blow Up* by Michelangelo Antonioni: the Swinging Cult'
Vincenzo Maggitti (Stockholm University)

5.30 – 6.00: Plenary discussion (CC 2.01)

Abstracts

Chris Auld, (University of Manchester), 'The Quatermass Transformation: Monstrous Hybrids and National Identity in the Quatermass Films of the 1950s'

The Hammer-produced *The Quatermass Xperiment* (1955, Val Guest) and *Quatermass 2* (1957, Val Guest) were both adaptations of Nigel Kneale's 1953 and 1955 BBC series of the same name. Moving beyond comparisons between the two versions of the narrative, this paper investigates the process of adapting material from one medium to another, from national to international, from British to US financed product. Using Harper and Porter's (2003) discussion of the production circumstances of the Quatermass films, the role of the American financiers in constructing the film versions will be considered, while investigating how the films were viewed contemporaneously in terms of 'national' product, within industrial and critical contexts. The paper combines cultural/historical approach with textual analysis to consider the changes to the Quatermass narratives precipitated by their adaptation from television to cinema screen, focussing on the two 1950s films. It considers characterisation, narrative and cinematic form within the texts that suggest science fiction/horror generic features through a British cultural lens, the uncanny and the gothic elements of the fantastic mode that helps analyse the place of the films within a broader cultural practice. Rather than seeing the adaptation process as a 'reduction' of the originals, this paper considers and investigates the identity and placing of the films within British cultural landscapes. The re-evaluation of critical discourse draws on Higson's rethinking of national cinema and his emphasis on the heterogeneity of both the text and the 'national' (2000). Discussion of the text as hybrid (form, production and genre) and of the heterogeneity of 'national' cinema itself will be addressed, to contribute to a continuing re-assessment of post-1945 British film culture.

David Bishop, (Edinburgh Napier University), "'We're trying to get back to normal here": A case study of David Cronenberg's *A History of Violence*'

David Cronenberg is arguably one of the world's most acclaimed cult directors, his films renowned for their depictions of body horror and transgressive outsiders. But five years ago he found himself enduring a run of critically acclaimed flops, with each successive failure making it harder and harder to finance his next project. Cronenberg responded with *A History of Violence* (2005), his first Hollywood studio feature since the 1980s. The cult director adapted an obscure graphic novel, yet created perhaps the most mainstream film of his career. But *A History of Violence* may also be his most subversive film, both celebrating and deconstructing the American dream. This paper will offer a case study of the adaptation, comparing the graphic novel by Judge Dredd creator John Wagner and artist Vince Locke with Josh Olson's screenplay. It will examine the cinematic genres and cultural touchstones invoked by the filmmakers, and consider how these enriched a spare, seemingly uncomplicated mainstream thriller. The paper will go beyond the film to examine critical responses, and how they were coloured by attitudes to American foreign policy at the time. Finally, it will look at Cronenberg's role in the cinematic paratexts that preceded and accompanied *A History of Violence*, debating the importance of his cult cache to the film's reception.

Vincenzo Maggitti (Stockholm University), '*Blow Up* by Michelangelo Antonioni: the Swinging Cult'

Blow up by Michelangelo Antonioni still is a striking example of adapting a complex literary text - the short story by Julio Cortázar, constantly shifting from the first to the third person - making it even more complex by moving the story to a different set, the Swinging London of the 1960s, filled with the iconic revolution which were going to set new standards for visibility in the cities. Though Antonioni denied the setting had any relevance in the movie, the adaptation of Cortázar's story brings to the surface what Andrew Sarris called a "conflicting temptations between documentary and decoration" in Antonioni's movie. My focus would be on this 'negotiated' balance in the movie which lies behind the idea of adapting a story whose fictional borders are constantly blurred. The main character, a photographer, is a metaphorical link for both writer and director

and the whole process of adapting comes to resemble that of developing a roll of pictures and looking for details in order to frame a possible 'plot'. I would like to focus also on the link between the shifting voices in the literary text and the shifting perspectives in the movie, also related to the "ways of seeing" that John Berger was going to discuss a few years later.

Brooke McCorkle (University of Pennsylvania), 'Spectacle Fantastique: Audio-Visual Technologies and Early Adaptations of Verne's *De la Terre a la Lune*'

Within his lifetime, Jules Verne's *Voyages Extrordinaires* earned a massive following both in France and abroad, eventually leading to Verne becoming the second most-translated fiction author of all time, behind Agatha Christie. Given such popularity, it seems natural that several of his works were adapted for the stage and early cinema. In this paper, I explore two early adaptations of the 1865 novel *De la Terre a la Lune*, which earned Verne the moniker "father of science fiction." Both Jacque Offenbach's 1875 operetta *Le Voyage dans la Lune* and the 1902 George Méliès film of the same title significantly diverge from Verne's original story; however, all three works share a common focus on technology as spectacle. The novel's climatic scene, in which the daring voyagers are propelled to the moon via cannon, serves as a key point of comparison in the early adaptations. The adaptations absorb Verne's compelling description of sounds and sights in unique manners, emphasizing the spectacle of outer space. In the Offenbach operetta, the fantastic moon setting is aurally adumbrated by a wordless chorus, an uncommon compositional choice at the time that has since pervaded popular culture. The source of the wordless chorus is concealed and its origins unlocalisable; the lunar landscape exists in the mind's eye. In a similar vein, Méliès employed several theatrical tricks, such as falling scenery flaps and trap doors, in his "silent" films. Given Méliès's background it is possible that Offenbach's operetta influenced and perhaps even accompanied the film. Furthermore, the film inverts the audio and visual spectacle; rather than hearing the lunar landscape and imagining its appearance as in the operetta experience, the film's images foreground an imaginary audible, in which brass fanfares and explosions resonate in the mind's ear. All in all, these moments of synesthesia in both the operetta and film coincide with Verne's narrative by highlighting points of intense technological spectacle.

Maggie Parke (Bangor University) 'Fanpires: The Utilization of the Fan Culture in the Translation of *Twilight* from Text to Screen, and Beyond'

Fantasy literature adaptations are growing in the film industry, and are spanning out of the cult-following genre, particularly since the recent critical success of *The Lord of the Rings* and the popularity of the *Harry Potter* series; but all adaptations are not created in the same way. In this paper, I will explore how online fan cultures are utilized when adapting a popular work of fantasy literature to the screen. If and how the fans are consulted, how the author is incorporated into the adaptation process, if at all, and how that incorporation is advertised to the fans. I will refer to recent fantasy literature adaptations such as *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, *Eragon*, *The Seeker*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, but the majority of my study is on the *Twilight Saga* by Stephanie Meyer. Utilizing my unique knowledge from on set visits, discussions with the filmmakers, and my experiences at worldwide premieres, releases, and fan events, I will illustrate the incorporation of the fan base into the adaptation process and the marketing plan that has assisted *Twilight's* worldwide box-office success.

Dr Stuart Price (De Montfort University), 'Myths of Sacrifice? 300, Sparta and the "Cult" of Democracy'

This paper examines how a particular myth has been generated and adapted for political ends. The subject is the reputation of Ancient Sparta, and the various ways in which - beginning with the behaviour of the Lacedaemonians themselves - a number of contradictory perspectives have gained currency within public discourse. The early renown of the Spartans was based upon their military prowess, their 'laconic' speech, and their frugal lifestyle. Certain aspects of their existence were, though regarded as extreme, thought less

remarkable. Sparta was a slave society, a ruthless hierarchy built on the oppression of a subordinate class - the Helots. This was not particularly disturbing to the Athenians, for instance, whose own 'empire of democracy' was constructed on the division between male citizens and slaves. In more recent times, however, attempts have been made to fashion an image of Sparta that represents it as the most robust champion of Ancient democracy. This perspective appears in the movies *The 300 Spartans* (Mate, 1962) and in *300* (Snyder, 2004). At the same time, as in the case of Miller's graphic novel *300*, homage is paid to a masculine elite, a collective that gains status from violence and ruthlessness. Rather than assume that these modern interpretations are simply confused, this paper asks instead if the contemporary 'cult' of democracy is actually infected by masculine 'virtue', hierarchical power, and myths of sacrifice.

John Quinn (University of the West of Scotland), 'Who Will Watch the Watchmen: Towards a Sequential Hermeneutic Chain Analysis'

The analysis of screenplays can, at best appear to be a quagmire requiring careful navigation, and at worse, a gaping chasm into which one should avoid falling. Indeed the fluid and often illusory nature of the 'blueprint' for the outputs of cinema, television, radio and video games, often prohibits effective study. This can arguably be attributed to the ambiguous nature of the source material, where the screenplay's relationship to the final text can be called into question due to the variables introduced during principle photography. However, when a screenplay is an adaptation of an existing literary work, the possibilities for effective analysis can be seen to open up. What changes are made? Why are these changes made? What impact do these changes have on the narrative presented? This paper intends to propose a method for analysing the changes made in the screen adaptation process from literary text to cinematic text. The paper will concentrate on the adaptation of cult material, where arguably, any narrative changes are scrutinised greatly by consumers familiar with the source material. *Watchmen* (2008), a graphic novel by Allen Moore and Dave Gibbons, originally published as twelve comics (1986-7), had a tumultuous time getting from literary text to screen text. There were three attempts at production prior to the 2009 cinematic production, resulting in three well developed, yet ultimately unsuccessful screenplays. This paper proposes to analyse these two of these screenplays in relation to the source material and 2009 movie. The aim of the paper is to explore how changes in the narrative structure and content in the unproduced screenplays changed the overall tone of the screen story, firstly in relation to the source and secondly, in relation to the successful adaptation. In this light, the paper intends to suggest, from a narrative standpoint, why the unsuccessful adaptations were indeed unsuccessful. The paper intends to do this by using a methodology tentatively named *Sequential Hermeneutic Chain Analysis*. This analysis draws on, and develops, a few of the features of Barthes' (1974) semiotic analysis method outlined in *S/Z*. Namely the process of breaking the narrative down in to arbitrary chunks of surface meaning (in this case scenes or sequences), and exposing the hermeneutic coding at play within those chunks. The paper proposes that we should conceive the text (source, adaptation or film) as represented by a chain of enigmas that combine to form the whole of the narrative. The paper would expose the hermeneutic chains existing in the source, unsuccessful screenplays and final cinematic text; looking at how the changes in the hermeneutic sequences of the unsuccessful screenplays sit in relation to the source and final cinematic text. Ultimately, proposing why those narratives failed.

Thomas A. Schwenn (New York University), 'Bringing Day to *Night*: The Resurrection of *The Night of the Hunter*'

"It's really a nightmarish Mother Goose story" –Charles Laughton, director. Given the above description, any initial box office success for Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955) was likely to be limited. Viewing the film and placing it in the context of the film industry and mid-1950s America supports this. The film is a dark, harrowing tale of a "wolf in sheep's clothing," out on a murderous pursuit of two children who know the secret location of ten thousand dollars. It is a mixture of harsh Depression-era life, Expressionism, fairy tale, and horror, all of which could not have been more out of place in the Eisenhower America of *Lady and the Tramp*, *Oklahoma!*, and *Guys and Dolls* (all 1955). However, the film, based on a critically and commercially popular novel, compared in respected outlets such as *Time* and *The New York Times* to Marie Belloc Lowndes' *The Lodger* (1913) and passages by Mark Twain, was produced by successful theater producer Paul Gregory,

directed by award-winning actor Charles Laughton, featured two noted stars of the day, Robert Mitchum and Shelley Winters, and in a supporting role, featured one of the more significant parts for silent film star Lillian Gish since the beginning of the sound era. The distributor, United Artists, thought enough of the film to release it nationwide, instead of gradually building up word of mouth. These elements would not however, transfer to commercial success. Contributing to its dismal box-office release was the lack of visibility for its first-time director, the notorious reputation of its star, an indeterminate genre position, use of unknown child actors in pivotal roles, and finally, its harsh treatment of religious zealots. Ironically, some of these very features later served to resurrect the film, including the cache of a dignified actor's lone directorial project and Mitchum's rising iconic status through the years. In addition, the film had a substantial effect on noted film critics such as Pauline Kael, Robin Wood, Roger Ebert, Andrew Sarris, filmmaker and critic Francois Truffaut, and filmmaker Martin Scorsese. Their various praise and homage, led to subsequent references of *Night of the Hunter* in later high-profile releases, such as *Cape Fear* (1991) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989). After exploring the reasons behind its disappointing release, which I argue put it in position for revival, and then illustrating the role these noted critics and filmmakers had in renewing interest in *The Night of the Hunter*, I hope to shed light on how the film was elevated to a status as a "culturally, historically, and/or aesthetically important work" with its selection to the Library of Congress' National Film Registry in 1992. While many great films ignored upon initial release fade from public view, Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* has appeared not only to have survived its tepid initial reception, but has actually surpassed many of the successful films which it was released alongside.

Devon Sherman (Rutgers University), "All her inside is out!": The Female Monster in Film Adaptations of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*'

While in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, Victor never allows his female monster to live, she has drawn breath in many films. Despite only possessing a brief scene in the novel, she seems to hold a particularly strong attraction for filmmakers. Upon application of film theory to the text, one can see why. Shelley's novel engages both Julia Kristeva's abject (and more specifically, Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine) and Laura Mulvey's object, two feminist film theories that might seem to be at odds. However, Shelley's female monster manages to embody both, and so, as a filmic subject, provides rich material for filmmakers to explore (or attempt to evade) both modes of representation for women on film, and the challenge of sustaining both simultaneously. In this paper, I intend to examine how in cult film in particular, filmmakers attempt to summon this complex, boundary crossing abject-object, but undermine their own efforts, ultimately unable to maintain her. Taking three cult films as my examples, *Andy Warhol's Flesh for Frankenstein* (Morrissey 1974), *Frankenstein Unbound* (Corman 1990), and *Bride of Reanimator* (Yuzna 1990) I hope to explore how each film plays with a transgressive desire for the abject. *Andy Warhol's Flesh for Frankenstein* unabashedly revels in the abject and transgressive desires. However, in this film, in which object-desire is relocated onto the male body, the female monster is relegated to the realm of abjection, overshadowed by her male counterpart. She does not desire, and is not desired. In *Frankenstein Unbound*, Corman engages with an inherently rebellious element in the abject – it challenges the male, symbolic gaze. Corman's monster takes her own life, refusing to be abject or object. It is *Bride of Reanimator* that seems to maintain the abject-object most fully, but only by way of the complicating element of humor, thereby defusing her threat while simultaneously allowing it to be sustained. In animating this figure from the past, all three films work to question the status of women in mainstream narrative cinema, and they build a mutation upon their textual source that has become a part of the myth – the bride.

Rebekah Smith (University of Wales, Aberystwyth), 'Inglourious Basterds: Quentin Tarantino's war "exploitation" film'

In 2008, Quentin Tarantino announced at the Cannes Film Festival that he was going to finally make his 10 years in development 'Dirty Dozen men on a mission movie'. It was going to be a war film called 'Inglorious Bastards.' Tarantino had permission to borrow the title of Enzo G. Castellari's 1978 film. However, he stressed that his version was not going to be a remake. The title then changed slightly, as he substituted the a for an e, becoming 'Inglourious Basterds'. The finished product, which premiered at this year's Cannes Film Festival on

May 27th, was not what the press had expected. They were hoping for a deep, *Jackie Brown*-esque character study. *Basterds* is the opposite of this, as instead Tarantino re-writes history to tell a fantasy story about how cinema saves the world. During an interview with *Sight and Sound*'s Ryan Gibley, Tarantino claims that it is a film about language. *Basterds* is divided up into 5 different chapters; 1. 'Once Upon A Time in a Nazi Occupied France' 2. 'Inglourious Basterds', 3. 'German Night in Paris', 4. 'Operation Kino' and 5. 'Revenge of the Giant Face'. The mise-en-scene of each chapter has a different feel to it - which Tarantino acknowledges. He explains that Chapter 1 resembles a Western, Chapter 2 is more like a Spaghetti Western, Chapter 3 a mini French movie, Chapter 4 a 1960's 'bunch of guys go to war' movie and Chapter 5 is where everything from the previous chapters comes together and it becomes an adventure film. However, although Tarantino claims that chapter 2 is more of a Spaghetti Western, (which I agree with), my presentation will perform an analysis of a significant sequence from this particular chapter in order to argue that Tarantino has not abandoned his passion for Grindhouse cinema, as this particular part of the film has adapted and reworked a range of different exploitation film aesthetics.

Alex Symons (University of Nottingham), 'From Cult to Classic: How Mel Brooks Adapted *The 2000-Year-Old Man* For Thirty Years, and Eventually Won a Grammy 1961 – 1997'

Recent studies have identified the impact of adaptations on the memory of their respective source texts. For example, Sarah Cardwell has examined the way contemporary adaptations of Jane Austen's 'classic' novels as primetime TV shows have re-popularised Austen's original works. Furthermore, these repeated adaptations together make for a cultural experience that is greater than the sum of its parts - something Cardwell describes as the "meta-text." To study this further, Mel Brooks is a useful case. Whereas Cardwell examined the way TV producers have adapted the work of others - and so, inadvertently created this phenomenon - this paper alternatively examines the way Mel Brooks has repeatedly adapted his own project, thus making a 'meta-text' all of his own. It is my suggestion that by adapting his own two-man act *The 2000 Year-Old Man* in various different media over thirty years, Mel Brooks has managed to elevate his 'cult' performance piece to the status of a celebrated comedy 'classic.' Mel Brooks started out performing *The 2000-Year-Old Man* at dinner parties, and then as a 1961 audio record with Carl Reiner. While *Time* described the first 'cult' record as "a campus favorite," it was only in 1997 that a new version earned Brooks a Grammy. Over the years in between, however, Brooks adapted his act for new audiences, and in the process associated it with iconic personalities and shows. These adaptations included Brooks performing 'adlib' on *The Dick Cavett Show* (1970), and even performing in partnership with a live audience of British celebrities in the variety programme *An Audience With Mel Brooks* (1983). More recently, Brooks revived the skit again as part of his 1995 cameo in *The Simpsons*. I would suggest it is only through the combined memory of all these eclectic adaptations merged together that Brooks's 'cult' *2000 Year Old Man* earned its notoriety as a 'classic' of American comedy.

Alexandre Tylski (University of Toulouse), '*Rosemary's Baby* : An Artistic Dynasty'

Most of Roman Polanski's feature films have been novel adaptations – including *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Tenant* (1976), *Tess* (1979), *Bitter Moon* (1992), *The Ninth Gate* (1999), *Oliver Twist* (2005) or *The Ghost* (2010). From the original novel by Ira Levin (1967) to its Hollywood adaptation (written and directed by Polanski), *Rosemary's Baby* remains as a faithful and cult adaptation. The audience's irrational responses to the film could almost be considered as cult re-adaptations. Most of the spectators believed they saw the baby at the very end of the film. Others, including officials, violently loved or hated the film because of its satanic content – according to 1968 reports until today's web sites. The popular and academic triumph of *Rosemary's Baby* led to a wave of hundreds of satanic films in the 1970's (*The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, etc.), as well as dozens of non official sequels or re-adaptations throughout the decades, such as *The hand that rocks the cradle* (Curtis Hanson, 1992) or *The Forgotten* (Joseph Ruben 2004). There also have been official variations based upon the original material, including one official sequel made for television called *Look What's Happened to Rosemary's Baby* (Sam O'Steen, 1976) and one official novel sequel intitled *Son of Rosemary* (Ira Levin, 1997). Michael Bay also evoked recently his intention to produce a new adaptation of the 1967 novel which has led to an immediate and wide discontent from the Internet community. The project is now in stand by. In any case, *Rosemary's Baby* has become an artistic dynasty through the years, an inexhaustible source leading to the

recent birth of a rock n'roll group in France called *Rosemary's Baby* – another kind of artistic baby and cult adaptation.

Richard Wallace, 'The Cult of Spinal Tap' – Reading the Mock-Documentary as a Product of Adaptation'

This paper will examine the cult status of the mock-documentary, in particular the film *This is Spinal Tap* which has become one of the most important cult films of the past thirty years. *Spinal Tap's* position as a cult text stems largely from its subject matter, which adapts the genuine narratives, and cinematic depictions, of real bands for parodic ends. This paper's central argument is that the film's cult status results from an intense relationship between a limited number of viewers and the film's form and mode of adaptation. The faux documentary style creates an immediate dichotomy between those that read the film *as* documentary and those that can see past the facade and begin to read the film as parody, decoding the detailed historical and filmic references located within. It is this active engagement with the text that forms the basis for the so called 'Cult of *Spinal Tap*' because the number of viewers who have access to all of the information necessary for a comprehensive reading of all of the reference points is limited. This results in a reasonably small community of readers who are not only able to see past the documentary facade but are also able to recognise that the humour in the film is created by the transformation of other sources, as opposed to just being amusing on their own terms, and it is the spotting of the parodic targets that form a major aspect of the cult experience. The fact that these reference points are distilled into another form which is itself presented as documentary 'fact' extends the cult fascination with *This is Spinal Tap* beyond the scope of the initial cinematic text. By posing as a documentary text the film playfully challenges the audience's conception of reality, one of the film's most fascinating elements, however there is much greater slippage between fact and fiction when we take into account *Spinal Tap's* existence as a real band in its own right, outside the bounds of a cinematic framework. This results in a scenario in which the cult surrounding the film takes on several different forms; one which engages in a deliberate and detailed identification of all of the initial reference points, one which negotiates the adaptation and distillation of real bands into a fictional entity that appears real, and a third which addresses this once fictional, but now genuine, band from the position of a music fan, and often all three simultaneously. *This is Spinal Tap*, and the mockumentary film in general, therefore produces a small group of highly perceptive readers who engage actively with a part real, part fictional entity which exists primarily as a collection of adaptations of other, pre-existing sources and is read and understood through the method in which these adaptations have been made.